

## Britain Retreats from a Jewish Home (1939)

“His Majesty's Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs.”

1939 British White Paper

### What was the 1939 Palestine White Paper, and what was its primary objective?

Issued in May 1939 after the Arab Revolt, the White Paper recast British policy in Mandatory Palestine. Its declared aim was a **unitary, independent Palestinian state within ten years**, governed jointly by Arabs and Jews, with Britain guiding the transition. To make that outcome possible, it sharply **restricted Jewish immigration and land purchase**, shifting away from earlier interpretations of the “Jewish National Home.” Strategically, London sought to quiet Palestine, mollify Arab opinion, and secure imperial routes and oil on the eve of war with Germany. The paper thus paired constitutional promises to Arabs with limits designed to cap Zionist demographic and territorial growth.

### Which events and commissions led Britain to abandon partition?

The **Peel Commission (1937)** proposed partition as the least-worst answer to irreconcilable national claims. Arabs rejected it outright. The **Woodhead Commission (1938)** then found partition **impracticable** without mass transfers, heavy garrisons, and prohibitive cost. In November 1938 the government formally dropped partition, citing political, administrative, and financial obstacles. The **London Round-Table Conference (early 1939)** attempted a compromise but deadlocked over immigration, land, and sovereignty. With revolt still simmering and war looming, London concluded it could not coerce partition into existence. Cabinet therefore turned from drawing borders to designing a single state with protected minorities and managed immigration.

### What policy approaches were debated before the White Paper?

Three lines competed. **Partition under the Mandate**: maintain the Mandate temporarily, then divide Palestine; it lost support after Woodhead's negative findings. **Dominion-style or binational state**: extend the Mandate while building self-governing institutions, or craft a unitary state with shared power; Malcolm MacDonald advanced this during the London talks. **Arab-majority state with curtailed Zionism**: drastically limit immigration and land sales, promising Arabs eventual control; the Foreign Office increasingly favored this to secure the wider Middle East. The White Paper fused the latter two: a single Palestinian state in a decade, tight immigration and land controls, and British stewardship during transition.

### Which departments and officials shaped the White Paper, and why?

By 1938–39 the **Foreign Office** dominated policy. **Halifax** and **Chamberlain** prioritized war

preparations, fearing Arab hostility, Axis exploitation, and risks to **Suez** and oil. The **Colonial Office**, under **Malcolm MacDonald**, moved from partitionism toward a practical settlement that ended revolt and stabilized administration. The **War Office** urged pacification to conserve forces for Europe and deter Italian or German intrigue. Convergence followed: appease Arab opinion, cap immigration, and promise independence under safeguards. Cabinet consensus held that placating the Arab world best served imperial defense, even at the political cost of disappointing Zionist expectations built up since 1917.

**What were the White Paper's three main provisions, and how did they reverse policy?**  
First, **no Jewish state**: Britain declared it “not part of [its] policy” that Palestine become one; instead, independence within ten years with Arabs and Jews sharing government. Second, **immigration caps**: 75,000 Jewish immigrants over five years, then cessation unless Arabs consented—replacing “economic absorptive capacity” with political veto. Third, **land-transfer restrictions**: sweeping limits and prohibitions on sales to Jews in most districts. Together these measures curbed Zionist demographic growth and territorial consolidation. The package reversed earlier permissive practice, reshaping the Mandate from facilitating a national home's expansion to managing coexistence en route to a unitary state.

#### **How did Britain justify the policy, and what drove it in reality?**

Publicly, London invoked **fairness** and the Mandate's **dual obligation**: protect the Jewish National Home while safeguarding Arab rights and honoring wartime pledges to Arabs. Language stressed balance, minority protections, and an orderly path to independence. Privately, strategy ruled. With war imminent, ministers judged Arab conciliation essential to **imperial security**: quiet the Levant, shield Suez, protect oil, and deny Berlin and Rome a grievance to exploit. The White Paper was thus realpolitik dressed as equilibrium—offering Arabs decisive concessions on immigration and land while promising Jews civil protections but no sovereign pathway, unless Arab consent materialized later.

#### **7) How did Jews, Arabs, and the international community respond?**

**Zionists** condemned the paper as betrayal and a “death sentence” for European Jews, launching protests, civil disobedience, clandestine immigration, and later armed resistance—summed up in the slogan: fight the war as if no White Paper, and the White Paper as if no war. The **Arab Higher Committee** publicly rejected it as insufficient; yet many **Arab governments** tacitly welcomed the curbs and Britain's independence pledge. The **Permanent Mandates Commission** judged the policy inconsistent with prior Mandate interpretation, but Britain insisted circumstances required a new reading. Practically, the paper helped quiet the Arab arena as Europe slid into war.

#### **8) What was the White Paper's long-term legacy and outcome?**

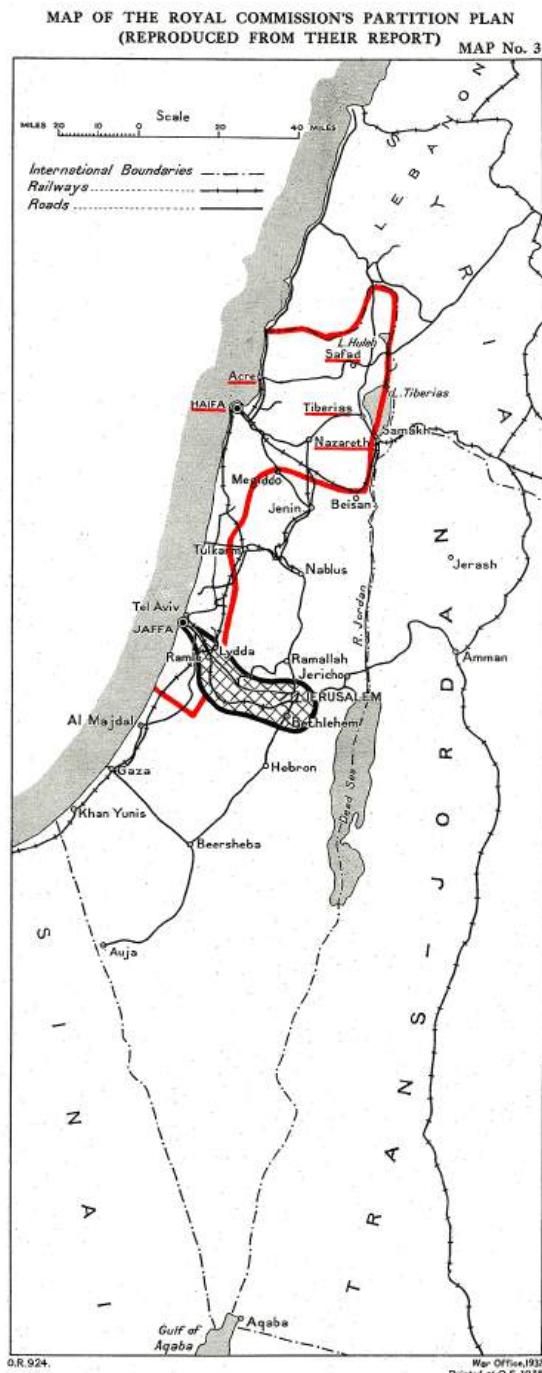
Short term, the policy aided wartime stability in the Arab world, but its **immigration ceiling** during the Holocaust scarred Zionist-British relations irreparably. Enforcement proved uneven; clandestine arrivals and confrontations multiplied. After 1945, revelations of genocide, renewed

violence, and **U.S. pressure** made the White Paper untenable. Labour ministers edged away; by 1947 Britain referred Palestine to the **United Nations**, effectively abandoning the framework. The **UN Partition Plan (1947)** superseded London's unitary vision, and the Mandate ended in war. Historians generally view the White Paper as strategic triage: a wartime expedient that traded credibility with one side to steady a wider imperial front.

## Timeline

- **1917: Balfour Declaration**—Britain backs a **Jewish National Home** in Palestine.
- **1922: League Mandate** incorporates Balfour; **Churchill White Paper** says “national home” ≠ Jewish state and pledges safeguards for Arabs.
- **1936–1939: Arab Revolt** amid rising Jewish immigration; Britain confronts a security and legitimacy crisis.
- **1937: Peel Commission** finds aims **irreconcilable** and recommends **partition**; Cabinet accepts “in principle.”
- **Late 1937–1938: Halifax memorandum** and Foreign Office push **Arab-first strategic policy** as war in Europe looms.
- **1938: Woodhead Commission** deems partition **impracticable**; Government **abandons partition**.
- **February–March 1939: London (St. James's) Conference** collapses—Arabs demand immigration halt/Arab state; Zionists demand continued immigration and no minority status.
- **April 1939:** Chamberlain signals tilt: if one side must be offended, **prefer Arab goodwill**.
- **May 17, 1939: White Paper (Cmd. 6019)**: rejects a Jewish state; promises a **binational** independent Palestine within 10 years; caps Jewish immigration at **75,000 over five years** then halts without Arab consent; **restricts Jewish land purchases**.
- **May 18–23, 1939:** Jewish **general strike** and protests; Parliament **approves** the White Paper; **Churchill and Lloyd George** oppose.
- **June 1939:** League **Mandates Commission** says the White Paper **violates the Mandate**; Britain proceeds.
- **1939–1945:** WWII: Yishuv stance—“fight the war as if no White Paper; fight the White Paper as if no war”; land-sale bans (from **1940**) enforced.

- After 1945–1947: Labour **disavows** the policy; illegal immigration surges; **Britain refers Palestine to the UN (1947)**, effectively ending the White Paper line.



*Peel partition map, 1937.*

## Palestine

Memorandum to the Cabinet by Anthony Eden  
Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

November 19, 1937

1. The Secretary of State for the Colonies bases his paper (C.P. 269)<sup>1</sup> on the view that we are precluded by our original acceptance of the principle of partition<sup>2</sup> from considering any alternative solution (paragraph 11). He recommends therefore that, even if the co-operation of Arabs or Jews is not forthcoming, the policy of His Majesty's Government should be "to proceed nevertheless with the partition of the country" (Appendix I, paragraph 5). The functions of the new Commission<sup>3</sup> would be strictly confined to working out a scheme of partition, and it would "not be within its province to consider evidence or representations not relevant to that proposal" (Appendix I, paragraph 6). I feel bound to point out that, if this policy is adopted, the consequences may be most serious from the international point of view<sup>4</sup>, which most affects my responsibility.
2. Mr. Ormsby-Gore<sup>5</sup> proposes that Arab opposition to our policy should be dealt with by treating the problem from a purely Palestinian angle, and making it clear that we propose to "deal with the Arabs of Palestine and Transjordan alone" (paragraph 10). The suggestion is that we should try to bring over "moderate Arab opinion in Palestine" by firm military measures against terrorism, while Arab opposition in general is regarded as probably "tending to wane." It seems to be assumed that Ibn Saud<sup>6</sup> can be relied upon to maintain his "correct" attitude (paragraph 7). I fear that these assumptions regarding the attitude of the Arabs, at least in the neighbouring countries, are likely to prove unfounded and misleading.
3. It may be convenient first to consider how far this proposed policy coincides with the actual recommendations of the Royal Commission<sup>7</sup>, and what are now likely to be its implications and its consequences, if it is in fact adopted.
4. The Royal Commission, it will be remembered, put forward its partition recommendations after the conclusion of its main report and outside its main terms of reference. In a document of over 400 pages, only 16 are devoted to this admittedly tentative suggestion for a constructive solution of the problem. The success of the scheme was recognised to be dependent on a number of assumptions, the most important of which was that it would be arrived at by general agreement, which, with the treaties that would be negotiated as a result of it, would make it possible to overcome the obvious difficulties of security, defence, exchange of populations, immigration, &c., inherent in the scheme. But events since the Report was published have admittedly modified the situation. We have not only had time for close reflection on the wider aspects of the problem and been able to estimate

the various international reactions to it, but we are now faced with solid and growing opposition from the majority of the native inhabitants of Palestine, and, what is much more serious, from the whole Arab world<sup>8</sup>.

5. It seems clear that partition can now only be imposed by force, and that many of the measures consequent on it, which, in the Royal Commission's conception, would have been taken by consent, will now prove impracticable. In these changed circumstances, it is essential to consider to what our policy will ultimately lead.
6. What then are likely to be the consequences, and what are our prospects of success, if we continue our present policy, and do contrive to set up a Jewish State by force? Is the creation of that State, in present conditions, likely to furnish any real solution?
7. Our main object in setting up the Jewish State will be to give to the non-Palestinian Jews of Central Europe better opportunities for immigration, and to the 400,000 Jews of Palestine complete security and independence. Let us take immigration first. Even if the whole area recommended by the Royal Commission be allocated to this State, it now seems clear that the opportunities it will offer for further immigration will be severely restricted. This area is at most 4,600 square kilometres, and already contains some 645,000 inhabitants, or about 140 inhabitants to the square kilometre. As the Jews themselves have pointed out, this density of population corresponds to that of modern industrial Germany, and is nearly twice that of France. It is proposed that the quarter of a million Arabs at present in this area should be removed. As they are likely to be extremely unwilling to go, as there is very little alternative land of equal value on which they could be settled, and as nothing like a comparable number of Jews exists in the proposed Arab State against whom they could be exchanged, this operation, which will have to be carried out by force, is likely to be one of great difficulty. But, even if it succeeds and the absorptive capacity of the Jewish State is thereby increased, it seems in the highest degree unlikely that the area will be able to support, at the very most, another half-million people. Allowing for the natural increase of the existing Jewish population, it is difficult to see how the new Jewish State could possibly absorb any considerable number of new immigrants.
8. Mr. Ormsby-Gore told the Permanent Mandates Commission<sup>9</sup> that, "if the Arabs and the rest of the country are granted independent freedom, it will be easier to induce the Arabs to allow the Jews to enter their areas." The Jews themselves make no secret of their intention to expand, and the Polish Ambassador recently said that Dr. Weizmann had given as one of his main reasons for urging the acceptance of partition the fact that it would still be possible for the Jews to spread into the Arab State. But even without these statements, it is surely obvious from the nature of the case that, unless immigration is to be practically stopped—and perhaps even if it is—the Jews must expand beyond their new borders. Their skill and enterprise will lead them to establish at first economic, and

later political, influence in the neighbouring territories. The flow of immigrants from the vast reservoir of European Jewry seeking outlet or escape will drive even those Jews who wish to remain in their little coastal State to seek to establish themselves beyond its frontiers. Indeed, when the Jewish State is created, the pressure of immigration is likely steadily to increase, since (as the French have pointed out to us) anti-Jewish campaigns in Poland, Germany and other countries will be intensified once the Jews can be represented as having “their own country” to go to. The outward urge from the small nucleus of the Jewish State is therefore likely to be well-nigh irresistible.

9. What will be the Arab attitude towards this inevitable attempt at expansion? The Arabs are not a mere handful of aborigines, who can be disregarded by the “white coloniser.” They have a latent force and vitality, which is stirring into new activity. If any stimulus were required to their rapidly growing nationalism, it is hard to imagine any more effective method than the creation of a small dynamic State of hated foreign immigrants on the seaboard of the Arab countries with a perpetual urge to extend its influence inland. There are many Arab leaders who fully and clearly realise all the implications of the creation of the Jewish State, and who view with growing consternation the prospect of either becoming a minority in what they regard as a province of Arabia, or of becoming widely subject to steadily growing Jewish influence. From the Arab point of view Palestine is an Arab country, the best area of which is being treacherously handed over to an alien and particularly dangerous invader by a Power whom the Arabs thought to be their friend. Their reaction is becoming increasingly bitter. I give at Annex I one of the many reports which has reached me on this subject, and which throws a useful sidelight on Arab opinion in Palestine. It may be noted in this connexion that General Dill, who was then Commander-in-Chief in Palestine, expressed, last June, the opinion that it was only when we began putting the recommendations of the Royal Commission into practical effect (as we shall be doing when we begin actually establishing the Jewish State and embark on the eviction of its 230,000 native Arab inhabitants), that the full strength of Arab opposition would show itself (see extract at Annex II). But even since Mr. Ormsby-Gore expressed to the Permanent Mandates Commission the view quoted in paragraph 8, the situation has so greatly deteriorated that it would surely be hopeless, on the present basis, to hope for any reconciliation between the native Arabs and the immigrant Jews, such as to enable any Jews to establish themselves in Arab territory without provoking a conflict.
10. Historical parallels are dangerous, but a close and sinister parallel to the present situation may be found in our well-intentioned efforts to re-establish the Ionian Greeks on the Western edge of Asia Minor. We did the Greeks no service by sending them back to their classical homelands, but on the contrary consolidated Turkish nationalism in a way which led us into moments of acute national peril.
11. With this background of fundamental hostility between the native Arabs and the

immigrant Jews, what is our position going to be when the Jewish State has been set up? As I have said, one of our objects in creating the Jewish State would be to give the Jews security. Are we to arm them to defend themselves, and leave them to their own resources? It is proposed that the defence of the new State should be provided for by a treaty of alliance. Treaties will in any case be necessary, if only for the protection of our own imperial strategic interests—the pipe line, inter-imperial communications<sup>10</sup>, &c. But treaties will both decrease our authority and perpetuate our responsibilities. Moreover, there is no question of our wholly escaping from our Palestine commitment, since under the Royal Commission's proposals we are to be entrusted—and rightly—with the protection in perpetuity of the Holy Places of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, and possibly elsewhere. Again, with so much inflammable material about, it is admitted that we shall have to retain a right to protect minorities in the new States. Are we to use British troops to prevent all the conflicts which seem to lie so close beneath the surface of an enforced partition? And, if so, can we see any limit to the extent to which these troops are likely to be involved? The so-called independent sovereignty of the new Jewish State, and the increased bitterness of the Arabs towards the Jews and towards us, must create new elements of danger.

12. Mr. Ormsby-Gore's paper states that Arab opposition should not be taken too seriously, and that we can safely ignore Arab opinion outside Palestine if we show determination. I consider, in view of recent developments, that this hope is unhappily ill-founded, and that it would be most unwise to regard Arab opposition in this light. I have already alluded in paragraph 9 to Arab opposition in Palestine. Arab opposition in the neighbouring countries is even more serious. It is a dangerous misconception to imagine that we can deal with the Palestine problem in isolation. The Middle East is an organic whole. The frontiers between the Arab States as shown on the maps are largely artificial post-war creations, resting on no true national, geographical or ethnographical basis. Palestine's neighbour States are not "foreign" to Palestine in the European sense, and opinion or events in one produce quick reactions in another. There is a growing number of Arab nationalist leaders in Syria, Egypt and Iraq, and the example and prestige of Saudi Arabia, the guardian State of the Holy Places of Islam, may yet prove a formidable force.

## **Egypt.**

13. I will take these neighbouring countries one by one, and begin with the case of Egypt. Hitherto the attitude of the Egyptian Government towards the Palestine question has been, on the whole, remarkably correct, but speeches at Geneva by the Egyptian Representative on the League of Nations and a recent statement in the Egyptian Parliament by Nahas Pasha<sup>11</sup> clearly indicate that the question is one of interest to the Egyptian public and that the Government is under the necessity of showing that they are not indifferent to Arab opinion. If this sympathy is not at the moment very active, it is, at any rate, latent and ready

to take active form if an occasion arises. Such an occasion would be Arab resistance to our forceful imposition of a policy hateful to the Arabs. There is, indeed, a real and ever-present danger that the nationalism and religious sentiment of the Egyptians, always readily inflammable, may be roused to new excitement by sympathy with their Arab co-religionists, of whose civilisation they regard themselves to some extent as the leaders. Such popular excitement would be extremely difficult for any Egyptian Government to resist. Egyptian politicians, and perhaps particularly members of the Wafd, aspire to a position of leadership in the Arab world, both for themselves and for their country. The present Wafd Government is in a state of decline. No successor Government, however, is likely to be in a strong position either. There would be great temptation, therefore, either for the present Government or an eventual successor to secure popularity by espousing the Arab cause.

14. These factors and the general delicacy of the internal situation in Egypt provide a promising field for Italian propaganda<sup>12</sup> which would not be slow to fan the flames of pro-Arab resentment. It is not a situation which His Majesty's Government can contemplate with equanimity, when even in the best circumstances in Palestine we might require to be free to draw on our other available forces in the Middle East, and when we might find ourselves faced with a situation in Egypt which demanded the retention of all our forces in that country. In saying this, I have taken no account of the tension with Italy and the presence of large Italian land and air forces on the western frontier of Egypt, facts which measurably increase the necessity of retaining our forces intact in Egypt and avoiding a situation in which they might have to be used partially for internal security.
15. The main importance to us of our position in Egypt derives from the necessity to protect our imperial communications through the Suez Canal, a matter on which, incidentally, the Dominions are particularly sensitive. This necessity was the chief reason for the decision to conclude a treaty with Egypt and to accept the terms to which the Egyptians were willing to agree. It seems to me highly important now to avoid substituting for the Egyptian question (which we may hope to have settled for some years) another question in Palestine and the surrounding countries, not less—and with its external repercussions possibly even more—troublesome. It can hardly be desirable in a large measure to throw away the strategical and political advantages gained from the Egyptian settlement.
16. Moreover, Egypt, already nervous for its security on the west, does not relish the idea of a vigorous and expansive non-Moslem State being created as a near neighbour on the east. To create a sovereign Jewish State in the Middle East can hardly fail—as I have suggested in paragraph 8 above—to encourage anti-Jewish measures in Central Europe. The Germans will not be slow to appreciate that, by making the most of such an opportunity, they will be able both to get rid of more Jews and at the same time to foster our difficulties in the Middle East. With Egypt involved in the controversy, Herr Hitler is brought indirectly into Egyptian affairs. It will be bad enough to produce a situation in

which Egypt is thrown (even if reluctantly) on to the side of the Arab countries united in antagonism to us. It will be far worse if, the Arab countries having been forced into the arms of one of our European rivals, Egypt should be brought into the same hostile camp. I attach, as Annex III, a telegram which has just reached me from His Majesty's Ambassador in Egypt strongly confirming the above views.

### **Iraq.**

17. Very similar considerations apply in the case of Iraq. The present Iraqi Government have behaved correctly, though the speech of the Iraqi Foreign Minister in the Assembly of the League last September was a strong and able plea on the Arab side, which created a considerable impression; while it was his brother who presided at the recent Arab nationalist congress at Bludan in the Lebanon<sup>13</sup>. It must be remembered, however, that our position in Iraq is by no means too secure, and that Governments in that country have of late not been noted for their stability. Arab and Moslem feeling is high, particularly on the Middle Euphrates and among the desert tribes. Were public opinion and religious fanaticism to be inflamed by some event or incident in Palestine, such as a serious encounter with an Arab band of Iraqi origin, or some serious clash with British forces in the process of the establishment of the Jewish State and the eventual eviction of its Arab inhabitants, the danger cannot be excluded of a wide movement against us. It must be remembered that Iraq is now a very important source of our oil supplies, and that it would be of little avail to have safeguarded the seaward end of the pipe line at Haifa if the oilfields themselves were to be seriously threatened. There is also the position of the Royal Air Force in Iraq to be considered, and the vital importance of the Iraqi aerodromes to our military and civil air communications with India and the East. A telegram from His Majesty's Ambassador at Baghdad forms Annex IV.

### **Saudi Arabia.**

18. Meanwhile there are strong indications that King Ibn Saud may before long be driven to reconsider his whole attitude towards us, and possibly even to throw in his lot with Italy if we cannot give him some satisfaction over Palestine. I annex (Annex V) a paper containing King Ibn Saud's latest communications to us on this subject, from which His Majesty's deep anxiety and distress at our own present policy will be apparent. I also attach (Annex VI) a copy of a letter of the 8th November from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office, giving the views of our Minister at Jeddah on King Ibn Saud's probable future attitude. These documents reveal a most disquieting situation. I would only add that the effect of our Palestine policy on King Ibn Saud has already made itself felt in the stiffening of his attitude towards us over the question of his south-eastern frontiers, and in his revival of his claim to Akaba and Ma'an and his presentation of a new claim for a territorial corridor to

Syria—claims which have recently formed the subject of a report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee (see paper C.O.S. 627 of the 15th November).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Yemen.**

19. Hardly less serious is the attitude of the King of the Yemen. It was recently decided by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee “that it was a matter of the utmost importance from the imperial point of view that Italy should not be allowed to establish herself in the Yemen.” The King of the Yemen was until recently no less anxious than we to prevent this. We know, however, that the reaction in the Yemen to our Palestine policy has been most unfortunate. The Yemeni protests against it have now been followed by the conclusion of a new Italo-Yemeni Treaty, and the establishment of increasingly cordial relations between the Yemen and Italy. Following on this, the King of the Yemen has recently revived the question of the Aden Protectorate frontier, and it is a curious coincidence that the Italians at the same moment should be challenging our actions in the Northern areas of the Protectorate and in the Southern Red Sea.
20. I suggest, then, that it is not only useless and dangerous to deal with the Palestine question in isolation. All our evidence goes to show that it is now dominating every other question throughout the Middle East, and that our whole future relations with the Middle Eastern States depend almost exclusively on our handling of it. Our European adversaries have not been slow to seize on this fact. It is difficult to estimate the dangers of a European conflagration, but they are sufficiently real for our potential enemies to neglect no field in which they can cause us embarrassment.

### **League of Nations.**

21. There is another aspect of this question which is no less important—that of probable reactions at Geneva. As my colleagues are aware, before partition can become effective, our policy will need the unanimous approval of the Council of the League<sup>15</sup>. If forcible partition were proposed and pressed, I foresee the gravest difficulty in obtaining the necessary unanimity in the Council, and I think it very probable that we should fail in our attempt to secure it. There is, it is true, at the moment no Arab State on the Council, but the Middle Eastern States are represented by Persia and no doubt rely on her support. Further, this is a matter on which we could look for no active support from the Council, not even from the French representative, since France has her own Moslem difficulties.
22. From the point of view of the Assembly, the public demonstrations of friends and allies against us, which created such a painful impression last September, might be converted into more active opposition. I should view with dismay the possibility of Egypt, Iraq, Persia and possibly Turkey also working against us at Geneva. It could surely prove more

serious than the possible opposition, which would be confined to this issue, of the States with large Jewish populations, such as Poland and Roumania. Such limited opposition would be unlikely to affect the general policy of Poland and Roumania, or their relative positions in the balance of power. But the alienation of the Moslem countries might well be total and permanent.

23. These arguments seem to me to constitute a very strong case against any decision to commit ourselves afresh to carrying out a policy of partition in Palestine forcibly and in opposition to the wishes of the inhabitants. The Secretary of State for the Colonies has expressed the view that we are too far committed to the policy of partition to retreat. I am not convinced that this is precisely the point at issue. The declarations of His Majesty's Government have all been subject to important provisos—the approval of the Council of the League and of Parliament in this country, and, above all, our ability to secure at least a measure of consent on the part of the parties concerned. It has now become clear that this consent will not be forthcoming, and to impose a policy of partition on an unwilling population is surely a very different proposition from that which the Royal Commission contemplated, and to which His Majesty's Government originally gave their support. I therefore feel strongly that the possibility of an alternative solution should not be excluded, and that the new Commission's terms of reference should be so enlarged as to allow it to consider, and if necessary recommend, alternative proposals.

### **Possible Alternatives.**

24. Is it in fact possible to devise a practicable and preferable alternative solution? I have tried to show that the Palestine problem cannot be dealt with without regard to the general situation in the Middle East, but this does not mean that a local solution of it is not possible. It is essential in considering this question of alternatives to clear our minds as to the real cause of the trouble, and the more closely this question is considered, the clearer it seems that, serious as the "Palestine problem" in its accepted sense may be, there is, in fact, no serious problem in Palestine itself. In spite of its diversity of races and faiths, there is nothing insoluble in the task of evolving a safe and prosperous future for Palestine and its present inhabitants, including the 400,000 Jews already in the country, provided the Arabs can cease to regard these Jews—as they do at present—merely as the vanguard of an invading army. The Palestine problem, as we have known it hitherto, is created by one single and quite extraneous circumstance—the fact that we have hitherto been required annually to bring into Palestine a steady flow of foreign immigrants from outside that territory, who are, in fact, and setting aside for a moment Old Testament associations, as alien to present-day Palestine as the Greeks to Asia Minor and the Moors to Spain.
25. A similar problem would surely have arisen in any part of the world if a similar process were applied to it. If a Power conquers a territory already occupied by a population

possessing a certain level of civilisation and a growing sense of nationalism, and then introduces a new population into that territory in such a way as must eventually reduce the original population to a minority in what it regards as its own country, the original population can hardly fail to rebel—at least when it realises that the danger point is reached and that it must either lose a part of its territory or accept a position of inferiority. The whole crux of the Palestine problem is the fear of the Arabs that they will become a minority in a country which they have for thousands of years regarded as their own. I have often been assured that the majority of the Arabs would far rather have continued under the rule of a Turkish minority than be “liberated” in order to fall under the numerical predominance of the Jews.

26. It has been suggested to me that there is only one way in which we can now make our peace with the Arabs, both in Palestine and in the surrounding Arab States, and avoid the dangers I have indicated above, that is, by giving the Arabs some assurance that the Jews will neither become a majority in Palestine, nor be given any Palestinian territory in full sovereignty, with the danger of its serving as a jumping-off point for further expansion. These are very serious conditions, and the question whether we can, in fact, reassure the Arabs on these two points is one which will need very careful consideration. But if we could agree to them, we should, I think, go a long way towards recovering the confidence and friendship of the Middle Eastern States, and greatly strengthen our moral and political position in that vital area.
27. Can we do this compatibly with our obligations under the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate towards the non-Palestinian Jews? What is the precise nature of those obligations? I attach, as an annex to this paper (Annex VII), a memorandum intended to show that it was never the true intention of the Balfour Declaration, or of the Mandate, to create a predominantly Jewish State in Palestine, although that meaning has subsequently been attached to these documents as a result of later European events. In this Annex replies are also given to two other arguments frequently advanced by supporters of the Zionist cause, which have led to much misunderstanding in the past, and have served further to confuse the issue. I will not repeat these arguments in the body of this paper, but I think the annexed paper makes a strong case to show that we should be violating no pledge and doing no injury to the Jews, in now seeking a primarily Palestinian solution of the Palestine problem.
28. I am naturally not in a position to put forward a detailed alternative solution to the present proposal for enforced partition. I would only urge that, in view of the very grave difficulties and dangers to which I have drawn attention, all other possibilities should be carefully explored. One which has been suggested to me, and which might enable us to re-establish peace with the Arab and Moslem world, while at the same time enabling us in no lesser degree to fulfil our obligations to the Jews than would be the case by an enforced partition of the country, is that of the establishment of a fixed numerical proportion

between the two races. It would be for the new Commission to consider the arguments for and against this. It is true that such a solution would involve an indefinite continuance of the British Mandate over the whole country. But I doubt whether this would, in fact, involve us in any greater responsibilities or commitments than we should incur by retaining responsibility—as at present proposed—in certain isolated and indefensible portions of the country, and incurring difficult responsibilities, by treaty or otherwise, for the protection of the proposed new States. I am assured that such a solution would be welcomed by King Ibn Saud, who would probably agree, if it were adopted, to abandon his old claims to Akaba and Ma'an, and his new claim to a corridor to Syria. The main outlines of a solution of this type have been submitted to me, and I think deserve very careful consideration. I am not, however, putting them forward to my colleagues at this stage, as I feel that the new Commission should be given complete freedom to put forward whatever proposals it thinks best suited to meet the new situation which has developed since the Royal Commission issued its Report. No doubt solutions are feasible; such as some kind of provisional cantonisation—which, it will be remembered, was suggested by the Permanent Mandates Commission. But for the moment my main concern is to show the grave dangers which would follow if His Majesty's Government were to commit themselves forthwith to a policy of enforced partition, likely not only to involve them in continuing military commitments of a far-reaching character in Palestine itself, but also to bring on them the permanent hostility of all the Arab and Moslem Powers in the Middle East.

A. E<sup>16</sup>

Foreign Office, November 19, 1937.

## Notes

1. **C.P. 269:** Cabinet Paper No. 269 (1937) submitted by the Colonial Secretary proposing implementation of partition after the Peel (Royal) Commission.
2. **Partition:** The 1937 Peel Commission proposal to divide Mandate Palestine into a small Jewish state, a larger Arab state (to be united with Transjordan), and a British-administered corridor around Jerusalem/Bethlehem.
3. **“Commission”:** The new technical commission (later the Woodhead Commission, 1938) proposed to work out practicable boundaries/arrangements for partition.
4. **International point of view:** The Foreign Secretary's remit—how partition would play at Geneva (League of Nations) and across Arab/Islamic opinion, and its impact on British alliances and communications.
5. **(William) Ormsby-Gore:** Colonial Secretary, 1936–38 (later Lord Harlech), responsible for Mandate administration and for advancing partition after Peel.

6. **Ibn Saud:** 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Saud, King of Saudi Arabia; his stance on Palestine affected wider Arab reactions and British desert relationships.
7. **Royal Commission:** The Peel Commission Report (Cmd. 5479, July 1937) diagnosing the Mandate as unworkable in its then form and recommending partition "in principle."
8. **"Whole Arab world" opposition:** By late 1937 anti-partition positions were voiced by the Arab Higher Committee, governments in Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and at the Bludan Congress.
9. **Permanent Mandates Commission:** League of Nations body overseeing mandates; in late 1937 it gave conditional approval to exploring partition but raised legal/political obstacles.
10. **Pipe line, inter-imperial communications:** The Iraq Petroleum Company line from Kirkuk to Haifa (and Tripoli); air/sea routes via Suez—vital to imperial strategy.
11. **Nahas Pasha / Geneva speeches:** Mustafa el-Nahhas, Egyptian Prime Minister (Wafd), who criticized British Palestine policy at Geneva and in the Egyptian Parliament in 1937.
12. **Italian propaganda / forces:** Fascist Italy leveraged Arab grievances; Italian troops/airbases in Libya (Cyrenaica/Tripolitania) menaced Egypt and Suez.
13. **Bludan (Ghouta) Congress, Sept. 1937:** Pan-Arab meeting near Damascus that condemned partition and urged coordinated Arab action; an Iraqi minister's brother (Naji Shawkat/Hikmat Sulayman circle) presided.
14. **COS 627 (15 Nov. 1937):** Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee appreciation on Ibn Saud's revived claims to Akaba/Ma'an and a corridor to Syria—seen as leverage responding to Palestine policy.
15. **League Council unanimity:** Any change to a mandate's terms (e.g., partition) required unanimous Council consent under League procedure—hard to secure amid Muslim and French sensitivities.
16. **A.E.:** Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Dec. 1935–Feb. 1938), author of this memorandum cautioning against enforced partition.

## POLICY IN PALESTINE

by William Ormsby-Gore, Secretary of State for the Colonies (excerpts)

1. WHEN the question of policy in Palestine was last under discussion in the Cabinet (Cabinet 42 (37))<sup>1</sup>, it was agreed that the matter should be postponed and that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should circulate a memorandum; but it was also understood that there was no question of going again over the ground covered by the Royal Commission<sup>2</sup>, but rather of considering whether the situation had been altered by factors which had arisen since the Commission's Report was made public.
2. I feel bound to observe that the memorandum (C.P. 281 (37))<sup>3</sup> which has been circulated by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs seems to me to ignore certain fundamental realities of the Palestine problem and of our position in relation to that problem, and to adopt a standpoint which must involve the reopening not only of the Report of the Royal Commission, but of the policy embodied in the Command Paper of last July<sup>4</sup>, if not of the policy, now twenty years old, which was embodied in the Balfour Declaration<sup>5</sup>.....
3. The Royal Commission, who occupied, in the eyes of the public, the position of arbitrators between the contending parties in Palestine and between those parties and the British Government, after a disinterested examination of all the relevant facts as to the nature of our obligations towards Arabs and Jews, reached certain important conclusions which may be summarised as follows:— ... that the only means by which we could discharge our obligations to the two races was by partition<sup>2</sup>, which, in the opinion of the Commission, was the only solution which seemed to offer at least a chance of ultimate peace....
4. In face of these events I would like the Cabinet to envisage the consequences of withdrawal from the policy to which we are committed. We have accepted the impartial interpretation of the Royal Commission as to the nature of our obligations towards the Jewish people, an interpretation which clearly does not satisfy their full demands, but for which their leaders have obtained approval in principle. On what grounds could we justify to the Jews the repudiation of a Statement of Policy<sup>4</sup> issued only four months ago, and the offer to the Jews, in place of a settlement by partition, which follows inevitably from acceptance of the arguments and conclusions of the Royal Commission, of a permanent minority position in Palestine? I know of no new development which would provide us with a defence against the charges of betrayal which would be levelled at us from Jews throughout the world, and I should not envy any Secretary of State who might be called upon to defend such a proposal in Parliament or before the Permanent Mandates Commission<sup>6</sup>. The effect of such a *volte-face* on our relations with foreign Governments is not for me to assess, but I feel bound to draw attention to the serious possibilities of disturbance of our relations with the Government of the United States<sup>7</sup>.

5. The greater part of Mr. Eden's memorandum<sup>8</sup> is devoted to showing that the policy of partition has met with widespread opposition from the Arab peoples of the Middle East, and, if I understand him aright, he maintains that this opposition represents the "new development" which justifies reconsideration of our policy: but this opposition has surely taken no one by surprise....
6. It is important to consider the nature of the Arab opposition to our policy. Both in Palestine and, I think Mr. Eden will agree, in surrounding Arab countries, this opposition has been based not on the merits of the question at issue, but on the inveterate Arab objection to the Balfour Declaration<sup>5</sup>. It is clear to me that with such objections there can be no compromise. Either we must carry out our pledges to the Jewish people as now interpreted by an impartial Royal Commission, or we shall have to tell the Jews that we cannot fulfil our frequently reiterated pledges for fear of jeopardising our relations with the Arab rulers outside Palestine. This is the issue which will have to be faced in the last resort. Previous British Governments have been unable to face this issue squarely owing to lack of clear definition of our obligations towards the Jews. Our acceptance in principle of the conclusions of the Royal Commission and the acceptance in principle by the Jews of the partition solution provide us with the necessary moral foundation for a firm policy, and the grave consequences of abandonment, on grounds of expediency, of our obligations to the Jews must be weighed in the balance against any "Middle Eastern" interests that may be held to justify so formidable a change of policy.
7. I hope that I do not underestimate the strength of the pan-Arab movement<sup>9</sup>, but, with all deference, I venture to doubt whether it is yet possible to argue with any plausibility that "the Middle East is an organic whole." I do not propose to comment in detail on the paragraphs of Mr. Eden's memorandum dealing with the state of opinion in Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Yemen<sup>10</sup>. I cannot say what impression these paragraphs may have made upon the minds of my colleagues, but, for my own part, I find no conclusive or final evidence in those paragraphs of any widespread or permanent feeling in those countries with reference to the Palestine question.
8. The reference in paragraphs 21 and 22 to possible obstruction at Geneva has caused me some surprise. Speaking from my own personal experience during the recent Special Session of the Permanent Mandates Commission, I can only testify that the attitude of that body, whose opinion carries much weight with the Council of the League, was almost exclusively concerned with the fulfilment of the Balfour Declaration and that our policy was criticised on the ground, not that partition would be unjust to the Arabs, but that it would not give enough to the Jews. Indeed, the whole tenor of my cross-examination was that we had been weak in the face of Arab aggression<sup>11</sup>.

In view of the reference in paragraph 21 to possible lack of sympathy with our policy on the part of the French Government, I feel it necessary to observe that, so far as I am aware,

the only doubts so far expressed by that Government related to the proposal mooted in Part II of the Report of the Royal Commission for the establishment of an Arab Bureau in this country<sup>12</sup> and to the advisability of encouraging the pan-Arab movement. On the Palestine-Syria frontier the French authorities are co-operating whole-heartedly with the Government of Palestine in the control of political undesirables and the suppression of armed bands. I also find difficulty in accepting the suggestion that Persian opposition is likely to be encountered at Geneva. In my opinion the attitude of Iran is not likely to differ from that of Turkey, who is strongly opposed to any encouragement of pan-Arab ideals<sup>13</sup>.

12. In paragraph 28 Mr. Eden states that he is not in a position to put forward a detailed alternative solution to the proposal for partition, but elsewhere in that paragraph and in paragraphs 24 and 26 he appears to favour the suggestion which has been put forward by King Ibn Saud<sup>14</sup> that a fixed numerical proportion should be established between the two races (Ibn Saud demands the maintenance of the existing proportion), thus providing the Arabs with an assurance "that the Jews will neither become a majority in Palestine nor be given any Palestinian territory in full sovereignty." It will be clear from the preceding paragraphs of this memorandum that such a proposal, which the Jews have described on past occasions as the conversion of their National Home into yet another "ghetto," not only would involve repudiation of the Royal Commission's interpretation (accepted in our Statement of Policy) of the nature of our obligations to the Jewish people, but could not be regarded as in any sense a solution of our problem, which is to secure ultimate peace in Palestine. Such terms would never in any circumstances have been accepted by the Jews and, in view of our Statement of Policy, would now be regarded as a betrayal. On the other hand, as Mr. Eden realises, his proposal would involve the indefinite postponement of the self-government and independence which are the primary demands of the Arabs of Palestine and Trans-Jordan. We should be committed indefinitely to the course of repression from which we are now trying to escape, aggravated by the fact that we should have to meet active opposition not, as at present, from the Arabs alone, but from both races.
13. If the Cabinet accept my view that the only solution compatible with our obligations as interpreted by the Royal Commission lies in the partition of Palestine, it follows that the functions of the new Commission<sup>15</sup>, the appointment of which has been announced at Geneva by Mr. Eden and by me in the House of Commons, should be strictly confined to working out the details of a scheme of partition, and I cannot agree to a suggestion that a new Royal Commission should be appointed to examine the whole matter *de novo*.
14. I understand that Mr. Eden sees particular objection to the announcement of an intention on the part of His Majesty's Government to enforce partition in the last resort. I hope that I have succeeded in making it clear that, in the light of recent events and if the Arab attitude remains unchanged, the only alternative to enforcing some form of partition will be to inform the Jews that we cannot carry out our obligations on account of Arab

opposition. I feel bound to emphasise the point that whether we clarify our intentions by an immediate announcement or not, this issue will have to be faced in the long run, if the new Commission succeed in devising an equitable and practicable scheme which secures the approval of His Majesty's Government, of Parliament and of the League of Nations....

15. In paragraph 2 of his memorandum Mr. Eden criticises my proposal that the Partition Commission should be empowered to receive evidence and representations from the Arabs of Palestine and Trans-Jordan alone, and implies that I am dealing with the question "from a purely Palestinian angle." I cannot accept that implication. In my opinion, this particular question is one of procedure and my recommendation is based on purely practical considerations. I know of no precedent for inviting representatives of foreign Governments to give evidence before a Commission appointed to carry out investigations in territory under British administration, and if, as I recommend, the functions of the Commission are confined to working out a scheme of partition, there could, at best, be no justification, practical or otherwise, for associating such foreign representatives with the inquiry. The intervention of the Arab Kings in Palestine in 1936<sup>16</sup> was not invited by His Majesty's Government and was only tolerated with the greatest hesitation. As my colleagues are aware, the consideration accorded by His Majesty's Government and the Government of Palestine to the mediatory activities of those rulers has been the subject of grave criticism both in Parliament and at Geneva....
16. I remain then of the firm opinion that an early announcement should be made and that the terms of such an announcement should be as definite as possible. I must, however, defer to the representations of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs as regards the international complications to be apprehended as a result of any accentuation at the present stage of certain implications of our policy, however inevitable they may be....

W. O. G.<sup>17</sup>

Colonial Office, December 1, 1937.

## Notes

1. **Cabinet 42 (37):** The 42nd Cabinet meeting of 1937 discussing Palestine policy after publication of the Peel Report.
2. **Royal Commission / Partition:** The 1937 Peel Commission (Cmd. 5479) that diagnosed Mandate failure and recommended partition with a British-administered corridor.
3. **C.P. 281 (37):** Cabinet Paper No. 281 of 1937—Anthony Eden's memorandum urging reconsideration of partition in light of regional reactions.
4. **Command Paper (July 1937):** The Government's "Statement of Policy" accepting partition "in

principle” after Peel (Cmd. 5513).

5. **Balfour Declaration (1917):** British pledge to support a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine while safeguarding non-Jewish civil and religious rights.
6. **Permanent Mandates Commission:** League of Nations body overseeing mandates; scrutinised British policy at Geneva.
7. **United States:** Ormsby-Gore warns that reversing course on partition could harm British standing with a US public increasingly sympathetic to Zionism.
8. **Mr. Eden:** Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary (1935–38), who urged that partition be re-examined due to wider Arab opposition and international considerations.
9. **Pan-Arab movement:** Interwar Arab nationalist sentiment linking Palestine to a broader Arab cause across Syria, Iraq, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and beyond.
10. **Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen:** The main regional states whose domestic politics and public opinion could be inflamed by Palestine policy.
11. **“Weak in the face of Arab aggression”:** Ormsby-Gore’s account of his cross-examination at the Special Session (Nov. 1937), where several Mandates Commissioners pressed Britain to be firmer in protecting the Jewish National Home.
12. **Arab Bureau proposal:** Peel (Part II) floated an “Arab Bureau” in London; the French were wary, fearing official British encouragement of pan-Arabism.
13. **Iran/Turkey at Geneva:** Ormsby-Gore argues Iran would likely align with Turkey’s scepticism toward pan-Arabism, not oppose Britain over partition.
14. **Ibn Saud’s “fixed proportion”:** The Saudi King’s suggestion to cap Jewish immigration so Jews never become a majority—seen by Zionists as turning the National Home into a “ghetto.”
15. **New Commission:** The technical partition commission announced after Peel—subsequently the **Woodhead Commission (1938)**—tasked with working out practicable boundaries.
16. **Arab Kings’ intervention (1936):** Mediation by regional rulers (notably Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Transjordan, Yemen) to end the 1936 Arab general strike; controversial in London/Geneva.
17. **W. O. G.:** William Ormsby-Gore, Secretary of State for the Colonies (1936–38), author of this memorandum.

## Statement on Palestine in the House of Commons

by Malcolm MacDonald  
Secretary of State for the Colonies (excerpts)

**November 24, 1938**

The real problem in Palestine is not a military problem, it is a political problem<sup>1</sup>. Our troops can restore order; they cannot restore peace. The Government have to do that; this House has to do that. There is nothing so easy as to state the problem in Palestine. It was done brilliantly in the pages of the report of the Peel Commission<sup>2</sup>. There is no need to alter a word or a comma in the analysis of the problem as it is made in that remarkable State document.

Palestine is a tiny country. Spiritually it is great. In spiritual quality it has no peer among the countries of the earth; it guards some of the Holy Places of three of the world's great religions<sup>3</sup>. But physically it is tiny. Some of its soil is very fertile and bears rich fruit, but much the land is rocky or hilly, and much of it is desert. That is the nature of the small stage on which a grim tragedy is being played to-day. There are two protagonists in the piece. First of all there are the Jews. Nearly 2,000 years ago their home was Palestine, but since then they have been dispersed, scattered over the face of the earth. They are a country-less people. But during the last 20 years many of them have been hastening back to Palestine under the terms of a Mandate endorsed by more than 50 nations<sup>4</sup>, under which the administration of the country was entrusted to Great Britain<sup>5</sup>. I do not think that anyone can justly say that during these years Great Britain has not been fulfilling her obligation to facilitate the immigration of Jews into Palestine<sup>6</sup>.

Since 1922 more than 250,000 Jews have entered Palestine and settled there<sup>7</sup>. Their achievement has been remarkable. They have turned sand dunes into orange groves. They have pushed ever further into waste land the frontiers of cultivation and settlement. They have created a new city 140,000 souls<sup>8</sup> where before there was only bare seashore. There is no knowing where their achievement might end if Palestine were empty of all other population and could be handed over to them in full ownership. The Jews are in Palestine not on sufferance but by right<sup>6</sup>, and to-day, under the lash of persecution in Central Europe<sup>9</sup>, their eagerness to return to their old homeland is multiplied a hundredfold. The tragedy of a people who have no country has never been so deep as it is this week. The sympathy of our own countrymen, their anxiety to do everything they can to help the persecuted Jews has never been so firm as it is to-day. But I hope that we are not going to allow our horror at the plight into which these people have been thrown to warp our cool and just judgment on the difficult problem of Palestine.

I must utter this word of warning. When we promised to facilitate the establishment of a national home for Jews in Palestine<sup>10</sup>, we never anticipated this fierce persecution in Europe.

We have made no promise that that country should be the home for everyone who is seeking to escape from such an immense calamity, and even if there were no other population in Palestine, its rather meagre soil could not in fact support more than a fraction of those Jews who may wish to escape from Europe. The problem of the refugees in Central Europe cannot be settled in Palestine<sup>11</sup>. It has to be settled over a far wider field than that. Palestine, of course, can make its contribution; it is making a contribution to-day. At the present time, despite the disturbances, Jewish emigrants are going at about 1,000 a month<sup>12</sup>. The Jewish Agency<sup>13</sup> naturally, in the light of recent events, are now anxious that the rate of immigration shall be greatly increased. I saw two representatives of the Agency on Monday and they spoke to me about it. I asked them to let me have their proposals complete in every detail. Those proposals reached me this morning, and they will, of course, receive at once my most careful consideration, and I shall consult the High Commissioner in Jerusalem<sup>14</sup>. But I must in all honesty say this: The Government announced a short time ago what the next definite stage in its policy would be. That is a policy of discussions with Arabs and Jews in London<sup>15</sup>, and we are going to abide by that policy. We cannot do anything now which might prejudice the chance of those discussions ending successfully. It is in the best interests of the Jews themselves that future policy in Palestine should as far as possible be based on a wide agreement.

The second people who are involved in this bitter controversy in Palestine are the Arabs. They have lived in the country for many centuries. They were not consulted when the Balfour Declaration was made, nor when the Mandate was framed<sup>10</sup>, and during the post-War years they have watched with occasional angry protests this peaceful invasion by an alien people. They have watched the buying up of their lands, they have watched Jewish settlements spreading ever further over the countryside. They have been compelled to recognise the superior energy and skill and wealth of that wonderful people. The Arabs are afraid. In 1933, 30,000 Jews came into Palestine; in 1934, 42,000; and in 1935, 61,000<sup>16</sup>. The Arabs wonder when a halt is going to be called to this great migration. If I were an Arab I would be alarmed. If we are ever to have an understanding of this problem we must be able to put ourselves in the shoes not only of the Jews but of the Arabs.

I know that a great many people regard this Arab agitation as the mere protest of a gang of bandits. Of course it is true that many of the Arabs who have taken part most eagerly in the troubles are cut-throats of the worst type. Their massacres at Tiberias<sup>17</sup>, and on a score of other miserable battlefields, have disgraced their cause. But there is much more than that in the Arab movement. many in the Palestinian Arab movement are moved by a genuine patriotism.

Those who conceived 20 years ago the possibility of facilitating the establishment of a Jewish National Home were moved by a great idea. But I do sometimes wonder whether all of the authors of this great creative act were fully informed of the situation even at that time whether they knew then that there were already living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean more than 600,000 Arabs<sup>18</sup>. Certainly I do not think they could know that Arab population would

increase rapidly. Since 1922 the Arab population has gone up from something over 600,000 to 990,000, almost entirely by natural increase; and it was calculated it would reach 1,500,000 within 20 years<sup>19</sup>.

We have most solemn obligations to both peoples in Palestine. On the one hand, we are pledged to facilitate Jewish immigration and to encourage close settlement of Jews on the land; and on the other hand, we are pledged to see that the rights and position of the Arab population are not prejudiced<sup>20</sup>. What is the answer? The Peel Commission recommended that the country should be partitioned, whilst the Holy Places were kept in an enclave still under mandatory control<sup>20</sup>. the Woodhead Commission went out to Palestine for that purpose<sup>21</sup>.

A short while ago they presented their report. That report makes it clear that partition is impracticable<sup>21</sup>. if we were to divide Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State and a Mandated area, then the Jewish State would have a great surplus, but the Arab State and the Mandated Territory would show great deficits<sup>22</sup>. It is impossible, without the continuous aid of the Jews, for the people living in Palestine beyond the Jewish settlements to maintain the standard of government and the social services to which they have become accustomed.

But that state of affairs also kills the proposal for two sovereign States, and His Majesty's Government declared that they will continue their responsibility for the Government of the whole country<sup>23</sup>. We have adopted a motto which Mr. Churchill muttered to me "Not partition, but perseverance."<sup>24</sup> We have got to find alternative means of meeting the needs of the unhappy situation in Palestine.

## Notes

1. **"Political problem":** MacDonald frames the 1936–39 unrest as rooted in competing national claims rather than purely security issues.
2. **Peel Commission (Royal Commission, 1937):** First official recommendation to end the Mandate by partitioning Palestine into Jewish/Arab states with a British corridor (Cmd. 5479).
3. **Holy Places of three faiths:** Jerusalem/Bethlehem/Nazareth (Christian), the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount (Islam/Judaism), among others—central to British concerns about international guarantees.
4. **Mandate "endorsed by more than 50 nations":** League of Nations approval (1922) following the San Remo decisions (1920); all member states assented to the Mandate's terms.
5. **Britain as Mandatory:** Great Britain administered Palestine under League oversight, tasked both with a Jewish national home and safeguarding non-Jewish civil/religious rights.
6. **"By right" / "facilitate immigration":** Alludes to the Balfour Declaration (1917) as incorporated in the Mandate preamble and Article 6 (immigration and close settlement "on the

land”).

7. **“Since 1922 250,000”:** Cumulative Jewish immigration figures under the Mandate to late 1938; totals rose sharply after Nazi persecution began in 1933.
8. **“New city 140,000”:** Tel Aviv’s growth from a 1909 suburb to a major Jewish city by the late 1930s.
9. **“Persecution in Central Europe”:** Intensified after the Nuremberg Laws (1935) and Kristallnacht (Nov. 1938), driving refugee pressures.
10. **Balfour/Mandate obligations (dual):** Britain pledged to a Jewish national home while ensuring that the “civil and religious rights” of existing non-Jewish communities were not prejudiced.
11. **Refugees can’t be settled solely in Palestine:** British line in 1938 (Evian/Inter-Governmental Committee context) that a wider international solution was required.
12. **“1,000 a month” (late 1938):** Immigration continuing despite revolt under quota categories (e.g., “capitalist,” “labour”).
13. **Jewish Agency:** Recognized by the Mandate (Art. 4) as the Jewish body to advise/assist the Administration.
14. **High Commissioner in Jerusalem:** Britain’s chief official in the Mandate (then Sir Harold MacMichael) consulted on immigration/security.
15. **London talks (1939):** The St James’s Palace Conference (Feb.–Mar. 1939) sought a tripartite settlement; it preceded the May 1939 White Paper.
16. **Immigration figures 1933–35:** Reflect the “Fifth Aliyah,” driven largely by Central European Jews fleeing Nazism.
17. **Tiberias massacre (2 Oct. 1938):** Arab gunmen killed Jewish residents, including children; widely cited by officials in Parliament that autumn.
18. **“600,000 Arabs” (pre-Mandate):** Approximate Arab population in 1922 census; used to argue that Arab presence and rights had to be considered.
19. **Arab demographic growth:** Mandate health/economic changes produced high natural increase; official estimates projected c. 1.5 million by late 1950s.
20. **Peel enclave & mandatory control:** The Commission proposed a British-administered corridor (Jerusalem–Bethlehem/Nazareth) to protect sacred sites and international interests.
21. **Woodhead Commission (1938):** Found Peel’s partition map unworkable financially/administratively; rejected large-scale “transfer,” questioned viability of the Arab state.
22. **Budget surpluses/deficits:** Woodhead’s fiscal analysis: proposed Jewish area self-supporting; Arab state and British zone dependent on subsidies.

23. **“Continue responsibility”**: Cabinet decision (Nov. 1938) to drop partition “for the time being” and seek a new policy—leading toward the 1939 White Paper.
24. **“Not partition, but perseverance”**: Churchill’s quip to MacDonald after Woodhead; adopted as a watchword for continuing British rule while seeking another settlement.



*British soldier guards Arabs in Jerusalem, 1938*

## **Winston Churchill's Speech Against the 1939 White Paper** **House of Commons (excerpts)**

**May 23, 1939**

I should feel personally embarrassed in the most acute manner if I lent myself, by silence or inaction, to what I must regard as an act of repudiation<sup>1</sup>. I can understand that others take a different view. There are many views which may be taken. Some may consider themselves less involved in the declarations of former Governments. Some may feel that the burden of keeping faith weighs upon them rather oppressively. Some may be pro-Arab<sup>2</sup> and some may be anti-Semitic<sup>3</sup>. None of these motives offers me any means of escape because I was from the beginning a sincere advocate of the Balfour Declaration<sup>4</sup>, and I have made repeated public statements to that effect.

It is often supposed that the Balfour Declaration was an ill-considered, sentimental act largely concerned with the right hon. Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George)<sup>5</sup>, for which the Conservative party had no real responsibility, and that, as the Secretary of State said yesterday, it was a thing done in the tumult of the War. But hardly any step was taken with greater deliberation and responsibility....

I regret very much that the pledge of the Balfour Declaration, endorsed as it has been by successive Governments, and the conditions under which we obtained the Mandate<sup>6</sup>, have both been violated by the Government's proposals. There is much in this White Paper<sup>7</sup> which is alien to the spirit of the Balfour Declaration, but I will not trouble about that. I select the one point upon which there is plainly a breach and repudiation of the Balfour Declaration—the provision that Jewish immigration can be stopped in five years' time by the decision of an Arab majority<sup>8</sup>. That is a plain breach of a solemn obligation. I am astonished that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister<sup>9</sup>, of all others, and at this moment above all others, should have lent himself to this new and sudden default.

To whom was the pledge of the Balfour Declaration made? It was not made to the Jews of Palestine, it was not made to those who were actually living in Palestine. It was made to world Jewry ... in particular to the Zionist associations<sup>10</sup>. It was in consequence of and on the basis of this pledge that we received important help in the War<sup>11</sup>, and that after the War we received from the Allied and Associated Powers the Mandate for Palestine<sup>6</sup>. This pledge of a home of refuge, of an asylum, was not made to the Jews in Palestine but to the Jews outside Palestine, to that vast, unhappy mass of scattered, persecuted, wandering Jews whose intense, unchanging, unconquerable desire has been for a National Home<sup>12</sup>—to quote the words to which my right

hon. Friend the Prime Minister subscribed in the Memorial<sup>13</sup> which he and others sent to us: “the Jewish people who have through centuries of dispersion and persecution patiently awaited the hour of its restoration to its ancestral home.” Those are the words. They were the people outside, not the people in. It is not with the Jews in Palestine that we have now or at any future time to deal, but with world Jewry. That is the pledge which was given, and that is the pledge which we are now asked to break, for how can this pledge be kept, I want to know, if in five years’ time the National Home is to be barred and no more Jews are to be allowed in without the permission of the Arabs?

I entirely accept the distinction between making a Jewish National Home in Palestine and making Palestine a Jewish National Home<sup>14</sup>. I think I was one of the first to draw that distinction but what sort of National Home is offered to the Jews of the world when we are asked to declare that in five years’ time the door of that home is to be shut and barred in their faces? The idea of home to wanderers is, surely, a place to which they can resort. When grievous and painful words like “breach of pledge,” “repudiation” and “default” are used in respect of the public action of men and Ministers who in private life observe a stainless honour—the country must discuss these matters as they present themselves in their public aspect—it is necessary to be precise, and to do them justice His Majesty’s Government have been brutally precise. On page 11 of the White Paper, in Sub-section (3) of paragraph 14 there is this provision: “After the period of five years no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it.”<sup>8</sup> Now, there is the breach; there is the violation of the pledge; there is the abandonment of the Balfour Declaration; there is the end of the vision, of the hope, of the dream. If you leave out those words this White Paper is no more than one of the several experiments and essays in Palestinian constitution-making which we have had of recent years, but put in those three lines and there is the crux, the peccant point, the breach, and we must have an answer to it.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs<sup>15</sup> may use his great legal ability. He is full of knowledge and power and ingenuity, but unless this can be answered, and repulsed, and repudiated, a very great slur rests upon British administration. It is said specifically on page 10 of the White Paper that Jewish immigration during the next five years will be at a rate which, if the economic absorptive capacity allows, will bring the population up to approximately one-third of the total population of the country. After that the Arab majority, twice as numerous as the Jews, will have control, and all further Jewish immigration will be subject to their acquiescence, which is only another way of saying that it will be on sufferance. What is that but the destruction of the Balfour Declaration? What is that but a breach of faith? What is it but a unilateral denunciation<sup>16</sup> of an engagement?

I cannot feel that we have accorded to the Arab race unfair treatment after the support which they gave us in the late War. The Palestinian Arabs, of course, were for the most part fighting against us, but elsewhere over vast regions inhabited by the Arabs independent Arab kingdoms

and principalities have come into being such as had never been known in Arab history before. Some have been established by Great Britain and others by France. When I wrote this despatch in 1922<sup>17</sup> I was advised by, among others, Colonel Lawrence<sup>18</sup>, the truest champion of Arab rights whom modern times have known. He has recorded his opinion that the settlement was fair and just—his definite, settled opinion. Together we placed the Emir Abdulla in Trans-Jordania<sup>19</sup>, where he remains faithful and prosperous to this day. Together, under the responsibility of the Prime Minister of those days, King Feisal was placed upon the throne of Iraq, where his descendants now rule<sup>20</sup>. But we also showed ourselves continually resolved to close no door upon the ultimate development of a Jewish National Home, fed by continual Jewish immigration into Palestine. Colonel Lawrence thought this was fair then. Why should it be pretended that it is unfair now?

I cannot understand why this course has been taken. I search around for the answer. The first question one would ask oneself is foreshadowed in a reference made in the speech of my hon. Friend, and is this: Is our condition so parlous and our state so poor that we must, in our weakness, make this sacrifice of our declared purpose? Although I have been very anxious that we should strengthen our armaments and spread our alliances and so increase the force of our position, I must say that I have not taken such a low view of the strength of the British Empire or of the very many powerful countries who desire to walk in association with us; but if the Government, with their superior knowledge of the deficiencies in our armaments which have arisen during their stewardship, really feel that we are too weak to carry out our obligations and wish to file a petition in moral and physical bankruptcy, that is an argument which, however ignominious, should certainly weigh with the House in these dangerous times. But is it true? I do not believe it is true. I cannot believe that the task to which we set our hand 20 years ago in Palestine is beyond our strength, or that faithful perseverance will not, in the end, bring that task through to a glorious success. I am sure of this, that to cast the plan aside and show yourselves infirm of will and unable to pursue a long, clear and considered purpose, bending and twisting under the crush and pressure of events—I am sure that that is going to do us a most serious and grave injury at a time like this.

We must ask ourselves another question, which arises out of this: Can we—and this is the question—strengthen ourselves by this repudiation? Shall we relieve ourselves by this repudiation? I should have thought that the plan put forward by the Colonial Secretary in his White Paper, with its arid constitutional ideas and safety catches at every point, and with vagueness overlaying it and through all of it, combines, so far as one can understand it at present, the disadvantages of all courses without the advantages of any. The triumphant Arabs have rejected it. They are not going to put up with it. The despairing Jews will resist it. What will the world think about it? What will our friends say? What will be the opinion of the United States of America<sup>21</sup>? Shall we not lose more—and this is a question to be considered maturely—in the growing support and sympathy of the United States than we shall gain in local administrative convenience, if gain at all indeed we do?

What will our potential enemies think? What will those who have been stirring up these Arab agitators think? Will they not be encouraged by our confession of recoil? Will they not be tempted to say: "They're on the run again. This is another Munich,"<sup>22</sup> and be the more stimulated in their aggression by these very unpleasant reflections which they may make? After all, we were asked by the Secretary of State to approach this question in a spirit of realism and to face the real facts, and I ask seriously of the Government: Shall we not undo by this very act of abjection some of the good which we have gained by our guarantees to Poland and Rumania, by our admirable Turkish Alliance<sup>23</sup> and by what we hope and expect will be our Russian Alliance<sup>24</sup>? You must consider these matters. May not this be a contributory factor—and every factor is a contributory factor now—by which our potential enemies may be emboldened to take some irrevocable action and then find out, only after it is all too late, that it is not this Government, with their tired Ministers and flagging purpose, that they have to face, but the might of Britain and all that Britain means?

It is hoped to obtain five years of easement in Palestine by this proposal; surely the consequences will be entirely the opposite. A sense of moral weakness in the mandatory Power, whose many years of vacillation and uncertainty have, as the right hon. Gentleman admitted yesterday, largely provoked the evils from which we suffer, will rouse all the violent elements in Palestine to the utmost degree. In order to avoid the reproach, the bitter reproach, of shutting out refugees during this time of brutal persecution, the quota of immigration may be raised, as we were told by the Secretary of State, and may be continued at an even higher level in the next five years. Thus, irritation will continue and the incentive to resist will be aggravated. What about these five years? Who shall say where we are going to be five years from now? Europe is more than two-thirds mobilised tonight. The ruinous race of armaments now carries whole populations into the military machine. That cannot possibly continue for five years, nor for four, nor for three years. It may be that it will not continue beyond the present year. Long before those five years are past, either there will be a Britain which knows how to keep its word on the Balfour Declaration and is not afraid to do so, or, believe me, we shall find ourselves relieved of many oversea responsibilities other than those comprised within the Palestine Mandate.

You are not going to found and forge the fabric of a grand alliance to resist aggression, except by showing continued examples of your firmness in carrying out, even under difficulties, and in the teeth of difficulties, the obligations into which you have entered. I warn the Conservative party—and some of my warnings have not, alas, been ill-founded—that by committing themselves to this lamentable act of default, they will cast our country, and all that it stands for, one more step downward in its fortunes, which step will later on have to be retrieved, as it will be retrieved, by additional hard exertions. That is why I say that upon the large aspect of this matter the policy which you think is a relief and an easement you will find afterwards you will have to retrieve, in suffering and greater exertions than those we are making.

I end upon the land of Palestine. It is strange indeed that we should turn away from our task in

Palestine at the moment when, as the Secretary of State told us yesterday, the local disorders have been largely mastered. It is stranger still that we should turn away when the great experiment ... has proved its power to succeed. Yesterday the Minister responsible descended eloquently in glowing passages upon the magnificent work which the Jewish colonists have done. They have made the desert bloom. They have started a score of thriving industries, he said. They have harnessed the Jordan and spread its electricity throughout the land. So far from being persecuted, the Arabs have crowded into the country and multiplied till their population has increased more than even all world Jewry could lift up the Jewish population. Now we are asked to decree that all this is to stop and all this is to come to an end. We are now asked to submit—and this is what rankles most with me—to an agitation which is fed with foreign money and ceaselessly inflamed by Nazi and by Fascist propaganda<sup>25</sup>.

It is 20 years ago since my right hon. Friend used these stirring words: “A great responsibility will rest upon the Zionists, who, before long, will be proceeding, with joy in their hearts, to the ancient seat of their people. Theirs will be the task to build up a new prosperity and a new civilisation in old Palestine, so long neglected and mis-ruled.” Well, they have answered his call. They have fulfilled his hopes. How can he find it in his heart to strike them this mortal blow?

## Notes

1. **“Repudiation”:** Churchill is attacking the 1939 **Palestine White Paper** (Cmd. 6019), which limited immigration/land sales and envisaged an independent Palestine within 10 years; he viewed it as reneging on earlier pledges.
2. **“Pro-Arab”:** Contemporary shorthand for officials/politicians urging Arab conciliation, sometimes at odds with Zionist aims.
3. **“Anti-Semite”:** Churchill insinuates some opposition to Zionism springs from prejudice rather than policy.
4. **Balfour Declaration (1917):** British pledge to support “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine while safeguarding non-Jewish civil and religious rights.
5. **“Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George)”:** David Lloyd George, WWI Prime Minister; often (incorrectly) portrayed as the sole political patron of the Declaration.
6. **Mandate for Palestine (1922):** League of Nations instrument incorporating the Balfour language and entrusting Britain with administration.
7. **“White Paper”:** The MacDonald/Chamberlain White Paper of May 1939; its core provisions were 75,000 Jewish immigrants over five years, then further immigration only with Arab consent, and restrictions on Jewish land purchase.
8. **“Stopped in five years ... Arab majority”:** Refers to paragraph 14(3) of Cmd. 6019—after the

five-year quota, further immigration required Arab acquiescence.

9. **“Prime Minister”:** Neville Chamberlain, whose government issued the White Paper in May 1939.
10. **“World Jewry ... Zionist associations”:** Churchill argues the pledge was to the global Jewish people and Zionist bodies, not only Palestine's Jewish residents.
11. **“Help in the War”:** Alludes to perceived Jewish diplomatic/financial support for the Allied cause; commonly cited (contentiously) in interwar debates.
12. **“National Home”:** Churchill's preferred reading: facilitate a Jewish national home **in** Palestine without making the whole of Palestine a Jewish state.
13. **“Memorial ... subscribed by the Prime Minister”:** Chamberlain had signed pro-Zionist declarations in earlier years; Churchill quotes such language back at him.
14. **“National Home in” vs “Palestine a National Home”:** A distinction Churchill had drawn in the 1922 Churchill White Paper—limiting Zionist political expectations while affirming immigration/settlement.
15. **“Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs”:** Sir Thomas Inskip (Viscount Caldecote) in 1939—an eminent lawyer—whom Churchill challenges to defend the policy.
16. **“Unilateral denunciation”:** Churchill's legal-moral framing of the White Paper as a one-sided abandonment of a standing international commitment.
17. **“Despatch in 1922”:** The **Churchill White Paper** (Cmd. 1700, June 1922) defining Britain's interpretation of the Balfour Declaration and setting Transjordan apart from the Jewish National Home area.
18. **“Colonel Lawrence”:** T. E. Lawrence; Churchill invokes his authority as an advocate for Arabs who nonetheless accepted the 1922 settlement.
19. **“Emir Abdulla in Trans-Jordania”:** ‘Abdullāh installed (1921) under British auspices; Transjordan excluded from the Jewish National Home provisions.
20. **“King Feisal ... Iraq”:** Faysal ibn Husayn crowned King of Iraq (1921) with British backing; Churchill casts this as balancing Arab claims.
21. **“United States of America”:** Churchill warns that renegeing on Zionist pledges risks alienating growing U.S. sympathy for Jewish aspirations on the eve of war.
22. **“Another Munich”:** Evokes the 1938 Munich Agreement—Churchill's shorthand for appeasement and loss of credibility.
23. **“Turkish Alliance / Russian Alliance”:** References to Britain's 1939 diplomatic efforts—Anglo-Turkish mutual assistance talks (formal treaty Oct. 1939) and negotiations toward a British-French-Soviet arrangement.

24. **“Five years of easement”:** The White Paper’s five-year immigration quota period, after which Arab consent applies.
25. **“Nazi and Fascist propaganda”:** British officials documented Axis subversion fueling parts of the Arab Revolt; Churchill uses it to argue against conceding to violence.



*British Jews protest immigration restrictions to Palestine, 1938.*