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Britain and Zionism: Then and Now

Featuring Michael Makovsky, Gerard Baker, and   Simon Henderson
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On November 2, 2007 -- the ninetieth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration -- Michael Makovsky, Gerard Baker, and Simon Henderson addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Makovsky is foreign policy director of the new Bipartisan Policy Center and author of Churchill's Promised Land: Zionism and Statecraft *(2007). Mr. Baker is U.S. editor for the* Times *of London. Mr. Henderson, a former journalist with the* Financial Times*, is a Baker fellow and director of the* Gulf and Energy Policy Program *at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

MICHAEL MAKOVSKY

On November 2, 1917, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, a classified statement of support for establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Britain was an unlikely sponsor of the Zionist initiative, considering that it was the first European country to expel its Jewish population in 1290, and that it did not grant full political emancipation to Jews until 1871. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, British evangelicals began supporting the idea of a Jewish homeland because the "second coming" could occur only after the Jews had returned to the Holy Land. The idea came under serious government consideration during World War I because of exaggerated ideas about Jewish influence in Western societies (including the United States) and the availability of captured Ottoman territory (the British seizure of Jerusalem on December 9, 1917, greatly bolstered this support).

Winston Churchill's policies with regard to the Balfour Declaration provide a good starting point from which to understand British policy in the Middle East. Before World War I, he was drawn to the romantic notion of a Jewish restoration to the Holy Land. As the war came to an end, however, he opposed partitioning the Ottoman Empire into European mandates, viewing it as a means of countering the rising power of Soviet Russia even in defeat. And in 1921, using his authority as secretary of state for the colonies, he designated three-fourths of Palestine as a kingdom for Abdullah, the Hashemite prince who had fought alongside T. E. Lawrence -- who Churchill greatly admired. When Churchill traveled to Cairo that year to formalize an agreement, however, he changed his favorable opinion of the Arabs and came to regard the Jewish people as collaborators in the mission to civilize the world. At that time, he became an avid Zionist and remained one for the rest of his life.

For much of the 1930s, subsequent British administrations discouraged Jewish emigration to Palestine, and Churchill himself was preoccupied with the Nazis, Italy's political alignment, and the deterioration of the British Empire. Nevertheless, he supported Zionism and equated appeasing the Arabs in Palestine with the appeasement of Hitler. In 1940, as prime minister, he encouraged Jewish emigration to Palestine and armed Jewish groups to defend themselves against Arab fighters. He worked diligently on a postwar settlement that would create a Jewish state by force, if necessary, but failed because of the opposition of the Saudi king and President Franklin Roosevelt. Once Churchill left office in 1945, the British government reverted to a strongly anti-Zionist, pro-Arab stance, despite its shared socialist orientation with Zionism.

After Israel's war of independence, Churchill announced that the country's creation was a great event in world

history. Upon reassuming power in 1951, he tried to bring British foreign policy more in line with supporting the interests of the new Jewish state.

GERARD BAKER

According to a 2005 poll conducted by the *Daily Telegraph*, British citizens view Israel as one of the countries most threatening to world peace, one of the least desirable places to visit or live, and -- in what is a truly remarkable evaluation -- one of the world's least democratic states. Even Britain's largest university teachers' union recently voted to boycott relations with Israeli universities. Given these trends, one has to wonder why both the intellectual elite and the broader English population have such deeply entrenched anti-Israeli views.

One reason could be the ninety-year decline of modern British Christianity, a religious strand sympathetic to Zionism. Another possible reason is the slant of British media. The BBC, which plays an extraordinary role in shaping British elite and popular opinion, is profoundly anti-Zionist. At times, BBC coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes the network appear to be an apologist for Palestinian suicide bombers. Sympathy for Israel certainly declined after 1967, when the image of persecuted Jews gave way to the image of persecuting Israelis. The conflicts in 1973 and 1982 further affected British public opinion, but the Lebanon war in 2006 did more than any previous development to tilt British opinion in favor of the Palestinians and against Israel.

Despite increasingly vehement anti-Zionist sentiment at home, British policy in the Middle East has not changed to reflect public opinion. At the political level, despite clear changes in the increasingly anti-Zionist Labour government, Britain remains undeniably pro-Jewish. Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and now Gordon Brown have been steadfastly supportive of Israel. But in any democratic government, policy will almost always be aligned with public opinion in the long run. Paradoxically enough, the British public -- which has tended to support the Palestinians following past suicide attacks against Israelis -- has become less hostile toward Israel amid the recent decrease in such attacks.

Gordon Brown is personally pro-Jewish, religious, and committed to working with the United States and Israel. Despite a strong first three months in office, however, his recent apparent weakness -- revealed when he retracted his decision to hold early elections when it appeared his party would not prevail -- has cost him public support. Brown is now prey to the media and public opinion, while Blair's continued presence as a public figure limits his options.

SIMON HENDERSON

In the 1960s, many English students traveled to Israel to volunteer at kibbutzim. Today, their counterparts are more likely to volunteer for Palestinian causes. Indeed, there has been a clear shift away from the Britain that backed the Balfour Declaration to a Britain that is wary of Zionism.

Prime Minister Brown is considered a leader who acts on opinion polls, not convictions. Nevertheless, he has publicly declared that Israel will always be Britain's ally, and he expressed revulsion at the academic boycott of Israeli universities. At the same time, the website of the British Foreign Office contains no significant mention of the Balfour Declaration, and very little mention of Arthur James Balfour himself. The prime minister's website, however, has a whole page on Balfour.

Zionism has become a dirty word in Britain. No member of the British royal family has ever officially visited Israel. British relations with Israel have never been good, and now are uncomfortable. And there is a widespread perception among Britons that it is possible to be anti-Zionist without being anti-Semitic. Clearly, the relationship between Britain and Zionism remains, at best, ambiguous.