

Introduction by Revd Dr Liz Carmichael, Emeritus Research Fellow at St John's, and Co-Convener of OxPeace

This year, 2014, we have looked a great deal at the legacy of WWI. The OxPeace conference back in May was on the theme of what we are still learning from that war. Nowhere is its legacy so alive today, in so troublesome a form, than in the Middle East. And that includes the whole question of Israel and Palestine.

We are here tonight to consider Britain's role in that particular issue. There are certain facts: the British Empire was at war with the Ottoman Empire. In 1917, partly in order to prevent the Germans moving down into the Levant, a large British Empire expeditionary force set out from Egypt, under General Allenby, to conquer what was then the Ottoman province of Syria, including Palestine. Jerusalem fell on 9 December 1917. The rest of Syria was taken by September 1918.

On 2 November 1917, one month before the fall of Jerusalem, with the campaign progressing well, our Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, an influential Jewish leader: *His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*

The same text was repeated in the wording of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, drawn up in 1922 and coming into effect in 1923, with Britain as the mandatory power (as agreed at the San Remo conference in 1920). Transjordan was added to the British mandatory territory, but was excluded from the 'Jewish National Home' obligation. Palestine, in British understanding, always meant the traditional Holy Land 'from Dan to Beersheba', on the western side of the Jordan.

But what is the meaning of the term: "a national home for the Jewish people" -- a term unknown in diplomacy - which would allow full rights for non-Jewish communities as well? It does make perfect sense in terms of the old Ottoman 'millet' system, under which ethno-religious groups could live with each other in the same territory, under an imperial power, each group relating to that power through its own leaders. In so far as Britain had a plan, it was to continue that system. The millet system works fine as long as there is an imperial power and the groups are willing to relate to it. But it runs clean counter to the 19th century ideas of nationalism and self-determination of peoples in separate nation states, that were motivating both the Arab and Jewish peoples. The two concepts inevitably clashed, and by 1937 the idea of partition was taking over.

In 1946 the Kingdom of Jordan became independent. Then on 14 May 1948 Britain terminated its mandate in Palestine, handing responsibility back to the United Nations.

The Balfour Project Steering Group is a group of people of different backgrounds and competencies who share a common concern that there should be a wider understanding in the British public of Britain's role in recent Middle Eastern history, and of the questions that arise: about the integrity, or lack of it, with which Britain dealt with Palestine in the past and how we faced up to the rights both of Arabs and Jews; and how Britain should act now, with integrity, towards all the people of the Middle East?