

ACTIVITY 4

Who's Full of Hot Air?

Balloon Debate Activity on the Subject of the Balfour Declaration

An Informal Educational Session for Students

(by Joel Meyer for UJIA)

Time: 1½ hours

Aims:

- To explore and deepen understanding of arguments for and against the Balfour Declaration.
- To examine the positions of Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews on the issue, along with those of the British Government and Arab Nationalists.
- To understand the content and context of the Balfour Declaration
- To encourage participants to consider their own views on the Declaration and on its long-term impact.

Trigger (10 mins):

Begin with a skit presenting an important meeting of British politicians:

Actors dressed as stereotypical English gentlemen from the early 20th Century (black suits, top hats etc.) should face the participants whilst sitting around a conference table:

Actor 1: "I call this meeting to order. Gentlemen, we sit here, at the beginning of 1917 with the task of considering the continued glory of the British Empire in the post-war era. Whilst we are keen to work on a strategy for Britain in peace time, we are required, nonetheless, to receive an update on the on-going war. I have asked our colleagues at the War Office to prepare a report."

Actor 2: "Thank you Sir. The war is taking much longer than anticipated. At this time the Western Front is at a standstill. Many of our brave young soldiers have died or have been wounded. Progress is frustratingly slow with no end in sight. However in the territories of the Middle East, we are confident that a breakthrough is imminent against the Ottomans."

Actor 1: "Thank you. Let me turn now to our colleagues at the Colonial Office. If this encouraging news regarding the Middle East is correct, we may soon find ourselves in possession of Palestine. What are your thoughts?"

Actor 3: "Palestine is of immense importance to many of the British Empire's subjects. Christians across the Empire make pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Millions of our subjects in India are Muslim as are the majority of the population of Palestine. And of course, for the Jews, Palestine, or Eretz Israel as it is known, is their biblical and ancestral homeland."



Actor 1: “That’s all very enlightening but what does this mean for us?”

Actor 3: “Palestine may prove to be the greatest prize in the Empire if we take the right decisions and administer it appropriately. An opportunity to increase our influence and gain considerable standing is within our reach. However, if we were to make mistakes, Palestine could perhaps become our greatest disaster.”

Actor 1: “This truly is a matter of great importance. I shall ask Lord Arthur Balfour to consider these issues in more depth. We must tread carefully. For the glory of the Empire, Gentlemen, we must tread carefully...”

Facilitator explains:

“With the British aware of the likelihood of Palestine falling into their possession, making the right decision on how to administer the territory would indeed be key.

Balfour began his inquiry into the possible options, taking into account the interests of the British government as well as getting to know the arguments for and against the creation of a Jewish homeland in the region.

As part of his work, Balfour consulted with high profile British Jews, both Zionist and Anti-Zionist, before making his decision. This work ultimately culminated in the publishing of the Balfour Declaration.

These consultations together with acquiring the input of other interest groups took several months – during which the direction of British policy and the wording of the document changed to and fro.

Let’s consider how the process may have taken shape as well as how you would have acted in these circumstances as we go back in time to the negotiating table...”

Task 1: Preparation (15 minutes):

[See Character Guidance notes at end]

“Each of you will now have the opportunity to become one of these key characters from the period. You will be split to four different groups with each designated a different character.

Within your groups, each of you will receive an information sheet on your character – their background, views and ideas.

You will have 10 minutes to read and get to know the character that you will shortly become – and as a group to consider the questions on the sheet.”

[**ALTERNATIVE:** simply run the activity as a conventional Balloon Debate.]



Task 2: Balloon Debate – Round One (20 minutes):

“Each of you will now become your character. You must act and think as your character would!

You have all boarded the steam-locomotive train to London in order to make a presentation to the Colonial Office.

Sometime into your journey you receive a message that there is only time for one of you to present your ideas. The rest of you will be required to leave the train before reaching London.

Please take a seat in one of the carriages.”

A number of ‘carriages’ are formed (according to the number of participants).

One participant from each of the four character groups joins each carriage (so that in each carriage all four characters are represented – see illustration below)

TRAIN CARRIAGE 1		TRAIN CARRIAGE 2		TRAIN CARRIAGE 3		TRAIN CARRIAGE 4	
WEIZMANN	MONTAGUE	WEIZMANN	MONTAGUE	WEIZMANN	MONTAGUE	WEIZMANN	MONTAGUE
ANTONIUS	BALFOUR	ANTONIUS	BALFOUR	ANTONIUS	BALFOUR	ANTONIUS	BALFOUR

The first character receives exactly 60 seconds without interruption to explain their point of view.

Following this an additional two minutes is given for direct questions to the character along with their answers.

The above is repeated for each of the characters – until each of the four characters has been given the opportunity to speak before each of the others and respond to questions.

Timings should be strictly overseen by a facilitator in order that each of the groups finishes at the same time!

The Vote (5 minutes):

When all the groups have finished, all the participants return to one circle in order to vote for who should leave the train.

Facilitator: *“The train is about to stop in Sheffield, where two of our characters will be departing the train. Please all come and join me in the dining car.”*

It should be explained that voting should not be according to whom you most agreed or disagreed with but rather on the strength and conviction of their arguments.



Each person receives two opportunities to vote according to their strength of feeling: 2 hands are raised for the character that you definitely want to see thrown off the train and 1 hand raised for the character that you would somewhat like to be removed.

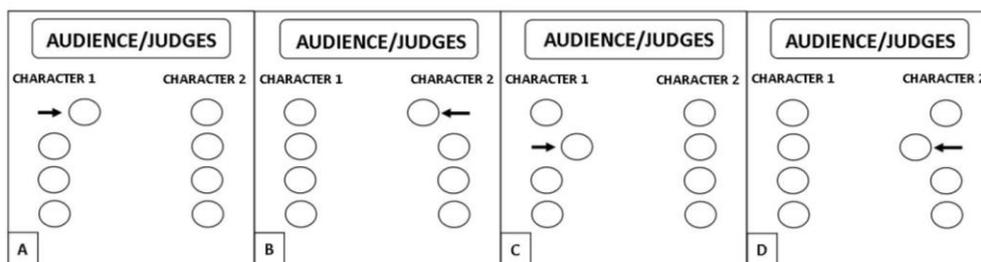
The votes are cast and it is revealed who are the two characters to leave the train.

Task 3: Balloon Debate – Round Two (20 minutes):

“The remaining two characters will continue their train journey down to London. The rest of you however will choose which of them will be granted an audience with the Colonial Office of His Majesty’s Government.”

All the participants voted out in the previous round now form the audience – they will judge the final vote.

The remaining participants (representing the two remaining characters) stand opposite each other in two rows (see diagram).



One at a time, back and forth, a representative from each character group steps forward and makes a claim to discredit a claim or view of the other character.

This back and forth exchange continues on until all the participants have spoken.

Time is given for members of the audience to ask just one question to each character.

The audience then vote (one person one vote) choosing who they would like to be the last remaining character on the train.

The result is then formally announced (you may wish to award prizes to the winning team).

Sikkum - Final Activity (20 minutes):

Form a circle and begin a discussion with the following question:

Balfour considered most if not all of the points that you raised in the activity. Having considered the views of men and women such as Montagu, Weizmann and Antonius, what decision or course of action did he take?



Hand out copies of the Balfour Declaration.

Foreign Office

November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

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.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour

Hold a brief discussion based on the following questions:

- 1) Were you right? Is Balfour's Declaration as you expected?



- 2) Is any of the wording of the Declaration deliberately confusing or ambiguous?
 - a. e.g. “a home”, not “the home”
 - b. e.g. “home”, not “state”
 - c. e.g. “civil and religious rights”
 - d. e.g. “in Palestine”, not “Palestine will be”

- 3) Do you think that the Zionists were happy with the document? (Relate to question 2 if necessary).
 - a. If so why?
 - b. If not why not?
 - c. Did it go far enough?

- 4) Could any of the motivations for creating the document be considered antisemitic? (i.e. tropes of Jewish power and control).

- 5) If you could have been there when it was written, what would you have changed?

- 6) What ideas or lessons can we draw from what we have explored today?

Final Words

The Facilitator may wish to finish with excerpts from an introduction that Balfour wrote to a book published by the Zionist Nahum Sokolow in 1919 that discussed, in retrospect, Balfour’s thoughts on the validity of the Zionist endeavour, the Balfour Declaration and the fears of those who opposed it.

The Group Leader should then present a 5-10 minutes summary – reviewing the Simulation Game whilst emphasising what actually happened in reality.



CHARACTER GUIDANCE NOTES

The Arab Nationalists:

George Antonius (1891-1942)



George Antonius was a Lebanese-Egyptian author and diplomat who lived much of his life in Jerusalem. He was one of the first advocates of modern Arab nationalism.

Born in Lebanon to a Lebanese Eastern Orthodox Christian family, Antonius graduated from Cambridge University and would later join the newly formed British Mandate Administration in Palestine as a civil servant - the deputy in the Education Department.

Influenced by Western ideas of nationalism, Antonius declared the region the exclusive provenance of the Arabs on the grounds that they shared racial, cultural, and linguistic bonds. Antonius argued that Great Britain was dishonouring its prior commitments to the Arabs, and was instead pursuing its own colonial interests at the expense of the people – the unity and independence of the would-be Arab state.

Antonius believed that in the McMahon Letters – correspondence between the British High Commissioner in Egypt and the Sharif of Mecca between late 1915 and early 1916 – the British Government had offered the Sharif an independent Arab state if he joined the British side in the war against the Ottoman regime. In his view, this state would include Palestine. According to Antonius, it was with these assurances that, in June 1916, the Sharif ordered his army to attack the Ottoman garrison in Mecca.

Antonius envisioned creating an Arab state that would encompass Palestine.

Basis for your group's position:

The Arabs and not the Jews are the 'native people' of Palestine.

Zionism and Jewish nationalism are contemporary political inventions as opposed to historical or religious imperatives.

Zionist settlement in Palestine is a contemporary colonial project that seeks to usurp the land from its native inhabitants.

Britain has previously given assurances to the Arabs, in return for their support with the war effort, that Palestine would be given over to the Arabs.

The Zionists:

Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952)



Chaim Weizmann was a prominent scientist and Zionist leader who would later become President of the World Zionist Organization and then the first President of Israel. As a biochemist Weizmann developed a way of producing acetone through bacterial fermentation. This discovery was key to the continued production of munitions for the British during World War I. Weizmann was born in the village of Motal near Pinsk in Belarus (his father was a middle class timber merchant) and moved to Germany and then Switzerland for his studies before taking up a post as senior lecturer in Chemistry at the University of Manchester. Ever-present at each Zionist Congress from 1898 onwards, he opposed Herzl and established the Democratic Faction (1901) and was instrumental in lobbying for the creation of Jewish institutions of higher education in Palestine, especially in the fields of science and engineering. After arriving in the UK Weizmann became a leader among British Zionists. At the time Arthur Balfour was a Conservative MP of a Manchester constituency and also Prime Minister. Balfour likely supported the idea of a Jewish homeland even back in 1906 when the two first met – with Weizmann credited with convincing him that Palestine and not Uganda should be the location. Later, during World War One, Weizmann was appointed Director of the British Admiralty's laboratories and used his position to influence thought in British government circles regarding the potential pertinence of the Jewish question to British imperial interests in Palestine – playing on British concerns including the passage to India; control of Middle East oil supplies; aversion to French control of Palestine. Weizmann first visited Jerusalem in 1907, and while there, he helped organize the Palestine Land Development Company as a practical means of pursuing the Zionist dream, and to found the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Though Weizmann tirelessly sought to advance the Zionist cause by diplomatic means, he also believed that: "...Even if all the governments of the world gave us a country, it would only be a gift of words. But if the Jewish people will go build Palestine, the Jewish State will become a reality..."

Basis for your group's position:

The British are likely to take control of Palestine therefore their support for Zionism is important.

Zionism may have considerable appeal to British politicians, many of whom are practicing Christians.

Jews are justified in working for a Jewish State or national home in Palestine not only as a result of historical connections to the region but also due to the national nature of the Jewish people.

A Jewish state will provide a solution to the age-old problem of antisemitism and allow the Jewish people to function as a nation like other nations—the Eastern European Jews are experiencing appalling levels of anti-Semitism (pogroms, discrimination, etc.).

It could be argued to the British that their support for Zionism may impact positively on support in the war from the Americans and the Bolsheviks – the new Communist government of Russia.



The Anti-Zionists:

Edwin Samuel Montagu (1879-1924)



Montagu was a British Liberal politician who would later hold the position of Secretary of State for India between 1917 and 1922. He was only the second Jew to serve in the British Cabinet. Educated at Cambridge, he was the first student president of the Cambridge University Liberal Club as well as president of the Cambridge Union.

The most vocal opponents of the creation of a Jewish State or homeland in Palestine were British Jews, among them David Alexander, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Lucian Wolf, a journalist who held what amounted to the Foreign Affairs portfolio at the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Claude Montefiore (1858-1938), a great-nephew of Sir Moses and a proponent of Liberal Judaism, was another fierce adversary of Zionism. Another, Leon Simon who was a Zionist (and biographer of Ahad Ha'Am), authored the pamphlet *The Case of the Anti-Zionists: A Reply*.

They argued that the Jews were solely a religious community and they were concerned that Jewish Nationalism would raise doubts about their own loyalty to the British Crown.

Likewise, Montagu was firmly opposed to Zionism which he called "a mischievous political creed", and would oppose the Balfour Declaration of 1917. He was responsible for mobilizing considerable Jewish opposition to the document whose terms were ultimately modified as a result. In a memo to the Cabinet, he outlined his views on Zionism as such:

"...I assume that it means that Mohammedans [Muslims] and Christians are to make way for the Jews and that the Jews should be put in all positions of preference and should be peculiarly associated with Palestine in the same way that England is with the English or France with the French, that Turks and other Mohammedans in Palestine will be regarded as foreigners, just in the same way as Jews will hereafter be treated as foreigners in every country but Palestine. Perhaps also citizenship must be granted only as a result of a religious test."

Basis for your group's position:

Many Anti-Zionists consider Judaism to be a religion and a culture as opposed to a people or a nation. As such they may challenge the justification for a Jewish homeland or nation-state in Palestine.

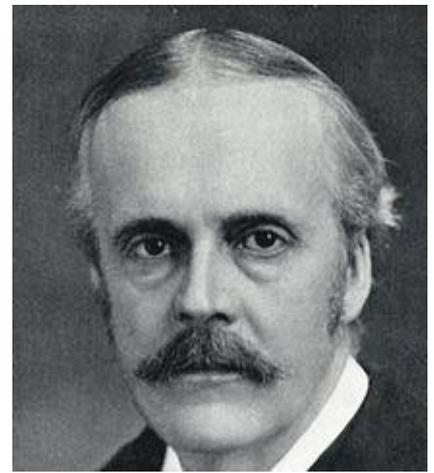
Zionism raises questions of allegiance and loyalty to the Crown and the State. British Jews have worked for centuries to secure acceptance in Britain. This is threatened when Zionist Jews profess a wish to create a new country on the basis of their faith.

The creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine will likely see suspicion towards Jews across the Diaspora. Jewish loyalty to their countries of residence will be further questioned and in many cases Jews will be ostracised from society and deposed from positions of influence.

Non-Englishmen such as Chaim Weizmann are purporting to represent the interests of British Jewry. They would be best served by staying silent.

The British Establishment:

Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930)



Balfour was a British Conservative politician who was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from July 1902 to December 1905, and later Foreign Secretary.

He entered Parliament in 1874, and achieved prominence as Chief Secretary for Ireland. In July 1902 he succeeded Lord Salisbury as Prime Minister. He oversaw reform of British defence policy and the Entente Cordiale, an agreement with France that influenced Britain's decision to join the First World War.

In 1905 he strongly supported stringent anti-immigration legislation, meant primarily to prevent Jewish immigrants fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe from entering Great Britain. He resigned as Prime Minister in the same year. Balfour returned as First Lord of the Admiralty in Asquith's Coalition Government (1915–16). In December 1916 he became Foreign Secretary in David Lloyd George's wartime administration.

Balfour is perhaps best known for his signing off on the Balfour Declaration (though it was drafted by others) – a letter to British Zionist leader Lord Rothschild regarding Britain favouring the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Balfour understood the British hope that the Jews could help with the war effort. London needed Russia to stay in the Great War and for the USA to accelerate its military involvement in the fighting. It was the case that Russia's Kerensky was sympathetic to Jewish concerns – though hardly a Zionist; Russian communist revolutionary Leon Trotsky was Jewish but certainly no Zionist. In fairness, President Wilson had nominated Louis Brandeis (who was indeed a Zionist) to the USA Supreme Court in 1916. Another Zionist, Felix Frankfurter (later, also a member of the USA Supreme Court) worked in the War Department and elsewhere in the Wilson administration. Indeed, at the end of the day, Woodrow Wilson signalled that he would welcome a Jewish homeland declaration by Britain.

Asked later about the Balfour Declaration, Prime Minister at the time David Lloyd George would make the case that the Zionist movement was "exceptionally strong in Russia and America."

Of course, there was a dark side to this overrating of Jewish influence — antisemitic conspiracy theorists even convinced themselves that a Jewish "hidden-hand" wanted the World War to continue and was somehow profiteering from it.

Basis for your group's position:

One must balance the Jewish historical claims to Palestine, as well as their historical suffering with an understanding for the rights of non-Jewish populations dwelling in the area.

British support for Zionism could benefit the War effort for example harnessing support from influential Jewish groups in the United States, Germany and Russia.

What form could a Jewish homeland take? An independent State or British protectorate? Can and should the land be shared in some fashion?

Opposition to Palestine falling under French control (or Russian) or remaining under Turkish control; importance of protecting Egypt and the Suez Canal (and the route to India), & Middle East oil supplies.

