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Book Review

EMPIRE-BUILDERS HOPED TO USE ZIONISM AS A FRONT

"The Question of Palestine: British-Jewish-Arab Relations 1914-1918," Second Expanded Edition, by Isaiah Friedman. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 433 pp., no price stated

INTRODUCING the original edition (1973) of his book, Professor Friedman reveals that his original aim was merely to write an article to supplement Leonard Stein's 1961 authoritative work on the Balfour Declaration. He soon discovered, however, on reading the newly released British documents, that there was room for "a more ambitious undertaking." He then produced a work which may surely be described as a classic.

It is a comprehensive account, lucid and sometimes sparkling. It presents a carefully balanced juxtaposition of the events, motives and personalities of this complex period. It illustrates the important role of the personal element in creating the climate for the declaration.

Premier David Lloyd George's closest advisers, who helped Weizmann, were recent "converts" to Zionism. But for these advisers the Balfour Declaration - and the Jewish Legion - might never have been born. On the other side, Friedman introduces the coterie of wealthy assimilationist Jews who toiled to prevent both the declaration and the legion.

Because they were believed by British politicians to be "the" leaders of the Jewish community they succeeded in watering down the declaration and delaying the legion's establishment. The British government in the early stages of World War I had had no intention of opening a front in the East, still less of conquering Palestine. The idea of a Jewish political entity in Palestine was much discussed, and Herbert Samuel, a member of the Asquith government, actually wrote two memoranda advocating its creation as the basis for a Jewish state, but the idea was dismissed out of hand.

Friedman, through the secret British documents, skillfully traces the subsequent gradual change of mind. After Asquith was replaced by Lloyd George, long the leading advocate of opening the eastern front, the policy which finally produced the Balfour Declaration took shape. THE JEWISH factor in the war had early assumed an importance unrelated to the question of Palestine.

The increasingly critical situation on the Western front generated a great British effort to engage American sympathies, and the Jewish community, supposedly wielding great influence, was seen as a likely channel of pro-Allied propaganda. Jewish opinion, however, was divided. A degree of sympathy for Germany was enhanced and multiplied by the deep and bitter hatred for pogrom-ridden tsarist Russia - the ally of Britain and France.

Gradually and, in some cases, reluctantly, British policymakers realized that to overcome this they had to give the Jews a powerful incentive for helping the Allies, and that could only be a promise on Palestine. Another factor was information reaching the British in 1917 that the Germans were considering a pro-Zionist declaration. By the time

the Balfour Declaration was issued, London's thinking on Palestine had progressed further.

It was not enough for Germany and Turkey to be defeated. "It was essential," writes Friedman, "that Palestine come under sole British control." But the British had earlier signed the Sykes-Picot agreement, which in effect gave France a considerable share in control of the region. How the British statesman began the tortuous process of shaking off French claims is skillfully traced by Friedman.

The British were forced, however, by a much more formidable obstacle to their imperial plan. "In Russia, since the March [1917] Revolution, non-annexation [of captured territory] had become the slogan of the day, while in the US it found its most eloquent exponent in President Wilson. It constituted the most serious threat to British war aims [of extending the empire].

"Henceforth, one of the gravest dilemmas of British diplomacy was how to achieve their desiderata without giving offense to the Allies. This could be done only by a marriage with the principle of self-determination. It was here that the importance of Zionism, as far as Palestine was concerned, came in.

It provided a cloak under which Britain could appear free from any annexationist taint." It became essential for Britain to assure the Allies that her desire to control Palestine was motivated by her commitment to "facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home." For this she required Jewish action. On August 27, 1918, Lloyd George adviser William Ormsby-Gore reported to the Foreign Office that he had told the Zionist Political Committee that the British government "was not in a position to expound the idea of a British Palestine, but that the Zionists could," according to Friedman. He urged them to approach all the powers concerned at the future peace conference.

Friedman adds tersely, "This they did