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## Revision

# The Balfour Declaration

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Consider the following question, then take a look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

*To what extent was the Balfour Declaration responsible for the unrest in Palestine in the period from 1919 to 1939?*

### Student answer with commentary

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 played a significant role in the unrest in Palestine in the period up to 1939. The Declaration's support for a Jewish homeland conflicted with promises made by McMahon in his letters of 1915 to Hussein, supporting Arab nationalism, and also with the Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916. These conflicting promises were only made worse by growing Arab nationalism and Zionism, which made the potential for conflict ever present. In addition, the changing international situation – particularly Hitler's accession to power, which led to emigration from Germany to Palestine – only added to the likelihood of unrest.

The opening shows a clear understanding of the issues, outlining a range of factors, and has a sound factual basis. Links are made between the factors and the response puts forward the view that the Balfour Declaration played a significant role. This will need to be shown through the essay to support the view offered.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 promised British support for a Jewish homeland, and although it did not promise the Jewish people either a state or that this would be Palestine, this was how many people interpreted it. Britain was keen to draw the USA into the First World War and believed such support would encourage Jewish people in America to influence their government's actions. The Declaration was an important cause of unrest as it appeared to conflict with the McMahon letters, which had promised British support for Arab independence if they fought against the Turks in the First World War. It appeared with the Declaration that the Jews had gained the international support they wanted to return to what many saw as their homeland or 'Promised land'. It was a great boost for Zionists and encouraged many to move to Palestine, and this appeared to threaten the dominance of the Arab population who feared being outnumbered. The Declaration ensured that Britain would also be heavily involved in the region's future after the First World War and be expected by Jewish people to honour the Declaration, while the Arabs expected support for the promise of independence. As a result, Britain played a significant role in bringing about conflict, by following contradictory policies to win short-term support during the First World War.

This first main paragraph considers the importance of the named factor and weighs up its significance in bringing about unrest. Its role is explained and is linked to other factors that had

been introduced in the opening paragraph. It clearly shows that the declaration was part of a complex and contradictory set of policies followed by Britain and cannot be seen in isolation as the most important cause. The response started by examining the named factor and this is always a good approach to take, as it ensures that the focus of the question is addressed.

The development of Arab nationalism was also a cause of the unrest. The Arabs believed that they had fought for their independence from the Turks and deserved complete self-government. Not only were they angered by the Sykes–Picot Agreement, which divided up Turkey’s Arab lands between them, but also by the League of Nations’ mandates agreed at Versailles. They felt Britain had betrayed its wartime promises and that British and French colonial interests had triumphed over their aspirations. It would be the root of many of the disputes that followed and, as one British officer noted, it was ‘a peace to end all peace’. Arabs felt they had simply exchanged the rule of the Ottomans for another colonial power. However, they were even more angered by increasing Jewish immigration and the buying up of land in what they considered ‘their country’. The Arabs felt that they were being driven out, but also felt that because of the Balfour Declaration, Britain was following a pro-Zionist policy. It was the combination of these factors that sparked Arab unrest in Jaffa in 1921.

The response considers a second issue raised in the opening paragraph. Once again, links are made between a range of factors, but the response brings the answer back to the role of the Balfour Declaration and reaches a judgement that it was a range of factors that caused the unrest.

The growth of Zionism in the late nineteenth century, stimulated in part by pogroms in Russia, encouraged some 60,000 people seeking a Jewish homeland to settle in Palestine. This situation, and the increasing number who followed after the First World War, led to tensions with the Arabs. Migration was further encouraged by the League of Nations confirming in 1922 that Britain was responsible for establishing a Jewish national homeland. Tensions were increased again by Weizmann’s comment that he wanted ‘To make Palestine as Jewish as England is English’. The growth of Zionism only fuelled unrest in the early 1920s and although the number of Jews moving to Palestine did slow, it had doubled in the ten years after the war so that by 1929, 160,000 Jews were living in Palestine. Their purchase of land from absentee Arab landlords resulted in the eviction of Arab tenants who had previously worked the land, as Jewish people often sought to employ only Jews on Jewish-owned land. This further encouraged unrest, and violence erupted in Jerusalem in 1929, although in part this was over who controlled the holy places, sacred to both Jews and Muslims. It can therefore be argued that the development of Zionism pre-1914 encouraged tensions, but that British policy during and after the war did little to lessen it.

The issue of Zionism is well developed and the supporting detail – particularly on the number of migrants to Palestine – is well used. Once again, the factor is linked back to other issues, such as Arab nationalism, to show how the issues are all linked. A judgement is reached about the importance of the factor discussed.

The trigger for the most serious unrest, the Arab rebellion of 1936–39, was the accession to power of Hitler in 1933. His antisemitic policies drove many Jewish people from Germany and they chose to settle in Palestine, so that by 1939 there were 450,000 Jews living there. This caused the Arabs to be fearful that they would lose their country. Arab peasants became poor, ‘landless and discontented’ as Jewish people bought even more land and evicted them. It was this that ultimately caused the outbreak of fighting in the countryside and eviction. Arab farmers fought to prevent eviction and villagers attacked Jewish people who had bought land from absentee Arab landlords. However, the

unrest was furthered by the British partition plan of 1937, as Arabs believed the whole of Palestine should be an Arab state and that Britain had promised this to them.

The response argues that the trigger for the unrest was the increased migration caused by Hitler's policies, and again the argument is well supported. There is a judgement within the paragraph about the importance of the factor, but it could have been developed if this issue had been more closely linked to the Balfour Declaration and how the belief in a homeland in Palestine had been encouraged, which is why many Jewish people chose to go there.

The Balfour Declaration was an important cause of unrest, as it conflicted with other promises and agreements Britain had made, particularly to the Arabs. It also encouraged Jewish emigration to Palestine, which caused Arabs to feel they were being overwhelmed. However, other factors – such as Hitler coming to power – added to the problem, as it increased emigration to Palestine and ultimately resulted in the most intense unrest, with the Arab rebellion of 1936–39. Contradictory British policy was the major factor in bringing about the unrest, but it was not just the Balfour Declaration but the promise to the Arabs and agreement with the French that was the problem. In the longer term, the growth of Arab nationalism and Zionism was the underlying cause, while Hitler coming to power was the trigger, increasing immigration and fuelling Arab discontent.

The conclusion follows from the rest of the essay. It considers the importance of the named factor and links it to other issues, showing that the Declaration cannot be seen in isolation, but had such an impact because of other issues. A clear judgement is reached and the importance of the Balfour Declaration within that wider picture is evident.

This response would reach the higher levels of the mark scheme as the importance of a range of factors are explained, and linkages demonstrated. The essay follows a consistent line of argument and is well supported.

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