

## **ACTIVITY 5**

### **Promises, Promises!**

**An 'Trigger' Activity for the Subject of British Policy in Palestine during World War One**

**An Informal Educational Session for Students**

**(by Joel Meyer for UJIA)**

**Time: 1½ hours**

#### **Aims:**

- To examine the claims that Britain promised both the Jews and Arabs statehood in Palestine.
- To consider the content and context of the Balfour Declaration.
- To understand the role of wider British interests in determining its policy vis-à-vis Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.
- To encourage participants to consider their own views on the Declaration and on its long-term impact.

#### **Trigger (15 mins):**

Split the participants into 3 groups (numbered One, Two and Three).

Explain that Group Three possess something that both groups one and two desire.

Groups One and Two will enter negotiations with Group Three in order to attempt to gain what they want.

Group Three will ultimately decide which of groups One and Two will succeed.

All the groups are to be given envelopes containing instructions for their task (see attached instructions for each group).

Group Three are to be subdivided into two smaller delegations 3a and 3b.

(Only once they receive their instructions (please see below) will delegations 3a and 3b realize that they are also in competition – with each other).

The four groups are given a few minutes alone to read their instructions and then given a further 10 minutes to pair up (on two opposite sides of the room) with their designated other group – and complete their missions.

#### **Discussion (15 minutes):**

Bring all the participants seated to a circle.

- Ask Group One what their main aim was (to secure exclusive use of the room) and whether they achieved it?



- Ask Group Two what their main aim was (to secure exclusive use of the room) and whether they achieved it?
  - (You may also ask all participants whether the exercise was easy or difficult and what they had to give up in order to achieve their goals).
- Since groups 3a and 3b were competing against each other – and for both teams winning required giving their respective negotiating partners (groups 1 and 2) a promise of exclusive use of the activity room – it is likely that collectively group 3 has made promises to the other two groups which cannot both be kept (groups 1 and 2 may not both have exclusive use of the activity room).
- Did group 3 promise the same thing to both the other groups?
  - Can group 3 keep both these promises?
  - Why did group 3 make the same promise to both groups? (in order to achieve other aims – in this case to get the clothing for example)
  - Was this ethical?
  - Can you think of any real life examples where something like this has happened?

**Task: Examining the Evidence (30 minutes):**

Similarly to our scenario, it is argued by some that during World War One Britain promised both the Arabs and Jews a future State or homeland in Palestine.

Could this really be the case – could the British have done this? Let's examine the evidence in order to find out.

Split the participants to four new groups.

All groups will receive a series of documents from the period (please see attached) shedding light on British policy and statements on Palestine during the period and will be given a point to argue based on them. Each group may also seek evidence to counter alternative theories.

One group will be charged with asserting a claim that it was the Jews that were entitled to feel that they had been promised an independent State in Palestine.

The second group will be charged with asserting that it was in fact the Arabs that were entitled to a State in Palestine.

The third group will argue the idea that the British indeed made equivalent promises to both the Jews and the Arabs.

The final group will be charged with asserting that the British made no real promises to either the Jews or the Arabs.

Both groups will be given 20 minutes to evaluate the sources and a further 10



minutes to prepare a 1-2 minute presentation to be given before all the participants.

**Sikkum - Final Activity (30 minutes):**

The groups return together and perform their short presentations for each other.

Following this the activity closes with an open discussion (participants are no longer bound by the positions represented in the previous activity):

- Did the British really make the same promises in Palestine to both the Jews and Arabs?
- Did the British promise the Arabs a state in Palestine?
- Did the British promise the Jews that Palestine would be a Jewish state?
- Were British actions based on a wish to help both Jews and Arabs or rather on self-interest?
- What should the British have done? What would you have done?
- Does the Balfour Declaration have any impact on how the region looks today?
- 100 years on from the Balfour Declaration, how do you believe or hope things will look in 100 years' time?



## **Group 1 (You will be meeting Group 3a)**

*You are a group of friends looking to create an exclusive club. You wish to use the current activity room as your club room and would like exclusive use of it in order to decorate it as you wish and to store there your possessions.*

*Group 2 are also seeking to gain use of the room – your aim is to negotiate with a delegation from group 3 in order to secure your exclusive use of the room over group 2.*

- **We demand that this room be given exclusively for our use and that all other groups must use another room for whatever purpose they see fit**
- We believe that no even numbers should ever be spoken out loud and that in the event that such a number be necessary to speak of, it should be referred to as x+ – i.e. the number 42 should be referred to as 41+.
- Personal space should be respected at all times – no one should come within 50cm of any other person whilst inside the room. If you come within 50cm of another person or see someone else come within 50cm of another person you are required to make a loud noise.

## **Group 2 (You will be meeting Group 3b)**

*You are a group of friends looking to create an exclusive club. You wish to use the current activity room as your club room and would like exclusive use of it in order to decorate it as you wish and to store there your possessions.*

*Group 1 are also seeking to gain use of the room – your aim is to negotiate with a delegation from group 3 in order to secure your exclusive use of the room over group 1.*

- **We demand that this room be given exclusively for our use and that all other groups must use another room for whatever purpose they see fit**
- We believe that no odd numbers should ever be spoken out loud and that in the event that such a number be necessary to speak of, it should be referred to as x- – i.e. the number 43 should be referred to as 44-.
- Closeness is to be treasured – all efforts should be made that no person is more than 20cm away from any other, with hugs and holding hands encouraged. You are more than 20 cm away from another person or see someone else more than 20cm away from another person you are required to make a loud noise.



### **Group 3a (You will be meeting Group 1)**

*You own the room in which the activity is taking place.*

*You are entering into negotiations with group 1 regarding their wish to use the room for a new club that they are seeking to start.*

*You are flexible and open to agreeing terms with group 1 however you have the following demands:*

- For each person in group 1 to give you two items of clothing (you are competing with the other group 3 delegation over who can make the longest connected chain on the ground from clothing)
- For each person in group 1 to come within 20 cm of all members of your delegation

### **Group 3b (You will be meeting Group 2)**

*You own the room in which the activity is taking place.*

*You are entering into negotiations with group 2 regarding their wish to use the room for a new club that they are seeking to start.*

*You are flexible and open to agreeing terms with group 2 however you have the following demands:*

- For each person in group 2 to give you two items of clothing (you are competing with the other group 3 delegation over who can make the longest connected chain on the ground from clothing)
- For each person in group 2 to remain at least 50cm away from all members of your delegation



## Source 1

### The McMahon – Hussein Correspondence:

The central figure in the Arab nationalist movement at the time of World War I was Hussein ibn 'Ali, who was appointed by the Turkish Committee of Union and Progress to the position of Sharif Hussein of Mecca in 1908. As Sharif, Hussein was responsible for the custody of Islam's shrines in the Hejaz [today: Saudi Arabia] and, consequently, was recognized as one of the Muslims' spiritual leaders.

In July 1915, Hussein sent a letter to Sir Henry McMahon, the High Commissioner for Egypt, informing him of the terms for Arab participation in the war against the Ottomans.

The letters between Hussein and McMahon that followed outlined the areas that Britain was prepared to cede to the Arabs in return for their participation. The Arabs held then, as now, that the letters constituted a promise of independence for the Arabs in an area that included Palestine.

The British argued that Palestine had never been part of any promises made, thereby justifying their refusal to grant the Arabs independence in Palestine after the war. McMahon explained:

“I feel it my duty to state, and I do so definitely and emphatically, that it was not intended by me in giving this pledge to King Hussein to include Palestine in the area in which Arab independence was promised. I also had every reason to believe at the time that the fact that Palestine was not included in my pledge was well understood by King Hussein.”

**SIR,**

Many references have been made in the Palestine Royal Commission Report and in the course of the recent debates in both Houses of Parliament to the 'McMahon Pledge', especially to that portion of the pledge which concerns Palestine and of which one interpretation has been claimed by the Jews and another by the Arabs.

It has been suggested to me that continued silence on the part of the giver of that pledge may itself be misunderstood.

I feel, therefore, called upon to make some statement on the subject, but I will confine myself in doing so to the point now at issue—i.e. whether that portion of Syria now known as Palestine was or was not intended to be included in the territories in which the independence of the Arabs was guaranteed in my pledge.

I feel it my duty to state, and I do so definitely and emphatically, that it was not intended by me in giving this pledge to King Hussein to include Palestine in the area in which Arab independence was promised.

I also had every reason to believe at the time that the fact that Palestine was not included in my pledge was well understood by King Hussein.

5, Wilton Place, S.W.1.  
July 22.

Yours faithfully,  
A. HENRY McMAHON.



## Source 2

### Translation of a letter from Sharif Hussein of Mecca to Sir Henry McMahon, His Majesty's High Commissioner at Cairo, July 14<sup>th</sup> 1915

Whereas the whole of the Arab nation without any exception have decided in these last years to accomplish their freedom, and grasp the reins of their administration both in theory and practice; and whereas they have found and felt that it is in the interest of the Government of Great Britain to support them and aid them in the attainment of their firm and lawful intentions (which are based upon the maintenance of the honour and dignity of their life) without any ulterior motives whatsoever unconnected with this object;

And whereas it is to their (the Arabs') interest also to prefer the assistance of the Government of Great Britain in consideration of their geographic position and economic interests, and also of the attitude of the above-mentioned Government, which is known to both nations and therefore need not be emphasized;

For these reasons the Arab nation sees fit to limit themselves, as time is short, to asking the Government of Great Britain, if it should think fit, for the approval, through her deputy or representative, of the following fundamental propositions, leaving out all things considered secondary in comparison with these, so that it may prepare all means necessary for attaining this noble purpose, until such time as it finds occasion for making the actual negotiations:-

Firstly.- England will acknowledge the independence of the Arab countries, bounded on the north by Mersina and Adana up to the 37th degree of latitude, on which degree fall Birijik, Urfa, Mardin, Midiat, Jezirat (Ibn 'Umar), Amadia, up to the border of Persia; on the east by the borders of Persia up to the Gulf of Basra; on the south by the Indian Ocean, with the exception of the position of Aden to remain as it is; on the west by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea up to Mersina. England to approve the proclamation of an Arab Khalifate of Islam.

Secondly.- The Arab Government of the Sharif will acknowledge that England shall have the preference in all economic enterprises in the Arab countries whenever conditions of enterprises are otherwise equal.

Thirdly.- For the security of this Arab independence and the certainty of such preference of economic enterprises, both high contracting parties will offer mutual assistance, to the best ability of their military and naval forces, to face any foreign Power which may attack either party. Peace not to be decided without agreement of both parties.

Fourthly.- If one of the parties enters into an aggressive conflict, the other party will assume a neutral attitude, and in case of such party wishing the other to join forces, both to meet and discuss the conditions.

Fifthly.- England will acknowledge the abolition of foreign privileges in the Arab countries, and will assist the Government of the Sherif in an International Convention for confirming such abolition.

Sixthly.- Articles 3 and 4 of this treaty will remain in vigour for fifteen years, and, if either wishes it to be renewed, one year's notice before lapse of treaty is to be given.

Consequently, and as the whole of the Arab nation have (praise be to God) agreed and united for the attainment, at all costs and finally, of this noble object, they beg the Government of Great Britain to answer them positively or negatively in a period of thirty days after receiving this intimation; and if this period should lapse before they receive an answer, they reserve to themselves complete freedom of action. Moreover, we (the Sharif's family) will consider ourselves free in work and deed from the bonds of our previous declaration which we made through Ali Effendi.



### Source 3

#### Translation of a letter from McMahon to Hussein, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1915

I have received your letter of the 29th Shawal, 1333, with much pleasure and your expressions of friendliness and sincerity have given me the greatest satisfaction.

I regret that you should have received from my last letter the impression that I regarded the question of the limits and boundaries with coldness and hesitation; such was not the case, but it appeared to me that the time had not yet come when that question could be discussed in a conclusive manner.

I have realised, however, from your last letter that you regard this question as one of vital and urgent importance. I have, therefore, lost no time in informing the Government of Great Britain of the contents of your letter, and it is with great pleasure that I communicate to you on their behalf the following statement, which I am confident you will receive with satisfaction:-

The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded.

With the above modification, and without prejudice of our existing treaties with Arab chiefs, we accept those limits.

As for those regions lying within those frontiers wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interest of her ally, France, I am empowered in the name of the Government of Great Britain to give the following assurances and make the following reply to your letter:-

1. Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca.
2. Great Britain will guarantee the Holy Places against all external aggression and will recognise their inviolability.
3. When the situation admits, Great Britain will give to the Arabs her advice and will assist them to establish what may appear to be the most suitable forms of government in those various territories.
4. On the other hand, it is understood that the Arabs have decided to seek the advice and guidance of Great Britain only, and that such European advisers and officials as may be required for the formation of a sound form of administration will be British.
5. With regard to the vilayets of Bagdad and Basra, the Arabs will recognise that the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special administrative arrangements in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression, to promote the welfare of the local populations and to safeguard our mutual economic interests.

I am convinced that this declaration will assure you beyond all possible doubt of the sympathy of Great Britain towards the aspirations of her friends the Arabs and will result in a firm and lasting alliance, the immediate results of which will be the expulsion of the Turks from the Arab countries and the freeing of the Arab peoples from the Turkish yoke, which for so many years has pressed heavily upon them...

...It was with very great relief and satisfaction that I heard of the safe arrival of the Holy Carpet and the accompanying offerings which, thanks to the clearness of your directions and the excellence of your arrangements, were landed without trouble or mishap in spite of the dangers and difficulties occasioned by the present sad war. May God soon bring a lasting peace and freedom to all peoples!

I am sending this letter by the hand of your trusted and excellent messenger, Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Arif Ibn Uraifan, and he will inform you of the various matters of interest, but of less vital importance, which I have not mentioned in this letter.

(Signed) A. H. McMAHON.



#### Source 4

### The Sykes-Picot Agreement May 1916

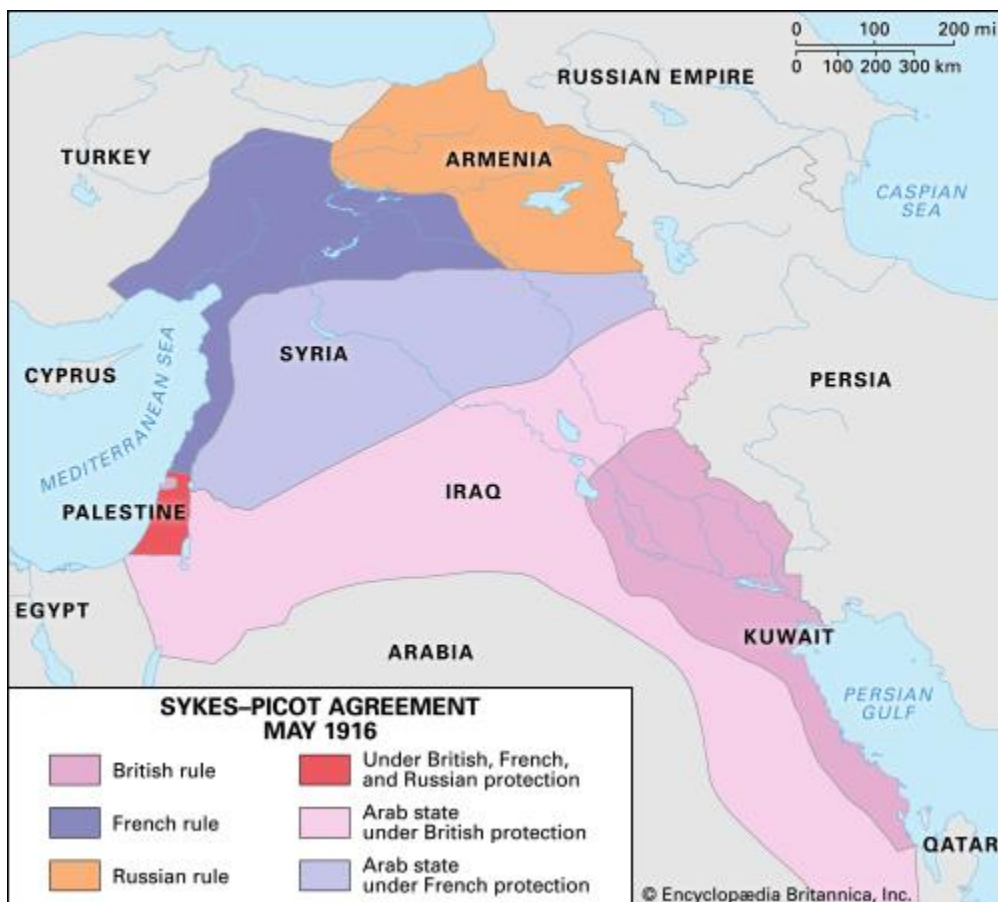
Also called the Asia Minor Agreement, it was a secret arrangement made during World War I between Great Britain and France, with the assent of imperial Russia, for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

The agreement led to the division of Turkish-held Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine into various French- and British-administered areas. Negotiations were begun in November 1915, and the final agreement took its name from its negotiators, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France.

According to the agreement the Middle East should be divided up between the signatory powers, with Palestine, as a result of the holy places, designated an international protectorate.

This secret arrangement conflicted with pledges already given by the British to Hussein Ibn Ali Sharif of Mecca, who was about to bring the Arabs of the Hejaz into revolt against the Ottomans on the understanding that the Arabs would eventually receive significant portions of land.

The Arabs, who later learned of the Sykes-Picot Agreement following its publication by the new Soviet Russian government late in 1917, were deeply angered by its contents. (Weizmann only heard about it via a journalist in April 1917.)



Source 5

**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



## Excerpts from the British White Paper of 1939

### Section I. "The Constitution"

It has been urged that the expression "a national home for the Jewish people" offered a prospect that Palestine might in due course become a Jewish State or Commonwealth. His Majesty's Government do not wish to contest the view, which was expressed by the Royal Commission, that the Zionist leaders at the time of the issue of the Balfour Declaration recognised that an ultimate Jewish State was not precluded by the terms of the Declaration. But, with the Royal Commission, His Majesty's Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country. [Editor's Note: The British position had changed since 1917 as by 1939 they knew war was imminent and they needed to protect oil supplies from the Arab World.]

...His Majesty's Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs under the Mandate, as well as to the assurances which have been given to the Arab people in the past, that the Arab population of Palestine should be made the subjects of a Jewish State against their will.

In the recent discussions the Arab delegations have repeated the contention that Palestine was included within the area in which Sir Henry McMahon, on behalf of the British Government, in October, 1915, undertook to recognise and support Arab independence. The validity of this claim, based on the terms of the correspondence which passed between Sir Henry McMahon and the Sharif of Mecca, was thoroughly and carefully investigated by the British and Arab representatives during the recent conferences in London.

Their report, which has been published, states that both the Arab and the British representatives endeavoured to understand the point of view of the other party but that they were unable to reach agreement upon an interpretation of the correspondence. There is no need to summarize here the arguments presented by each side. His Majesty's Government regret the misunderstandings which have arisen as regards some of the phrases used. For their part they can only adhere, for the reasons given by their representatives in the Report, to the view that the whole of Palestine west of Jordan was excluded from Sir Henry McMahon's pledge, and they therefore cannot agree that the McMahon correspondence forms a just basis for the claim that Palestine should be converted into an Arab State.

The (future) independent State (of Palestine) should be one in which Arabs and Jews share government in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded.

## Section II. Immigration

Under Article 6 of the Mandate, the Administration of Palestine, "while ensuring that the rights and position of other sections of the population are not prejudiced," is required to "facilitate Jewish immigration under suitable conditions." Beyond this, the extent to which Jewish immigration into Palestine is to be permitted is nowhere defined in the Mandate. But in the Command Paper of 1922 it was laid down that for the fulfilment of the policy of establishing a Jewish National Home:

"it is necessary that the Jewish community in Palestine should be able to increase its numbers by immigration. This immigration cannot be so great in volume as to exceed whatever may be the economic capacity of the country at the time to absorb new arrivals. It is essential to ensure that the immigrants should not be a burden upon the people of Palestine as a whole, and that they should not deprive any section of the present population of their employment."

It has been urged that all further Jewish immigration into Palestine should be stopped forthwith. His Majesty's Government cannot accept such a proposal. It would damage the whole of the financial and economic system of Palestine and thus affect adversely the interests of Arabs and Jews alike. Moreover, in the view of His Majesty's Government, abruptly to stop further immigration would be unjust to the Jewish National Home. But, above all, His Majesty's Government are conscious of the present unhappy plight of large numbers of Jews who seek refuge from certain European countries, and they believe that Palestine can and should make a further contribution to the solution of this pressing world problem. In all these circumstances, they believe that they will be acting consistently with their Mandatory obligations to both Arabs and Jews, and in the manner best calculated to serve the interests of the whole people of Palestine, by adopting the following proposals regarding immigration:

Jewish immigration during the next five years will be at a rate which, if economic absorptive capacity permits, will bring the Jewish population up to approximately one third of the total population of the country. Taking into account the expected natural increase of the Arab and Jewish populations, and the number of illegal Jewish immigrants now in the country, this would allow of the admission, as from the beginning of April this year, of some 75,000 immigrants over the next five years. These immigrants would, subject to the criterion of economic absorptive capacity, be admitted as follows:

For each of the next five years a quota of 10,000 Jewish immigrants will be allowed on the understanding that a shortage one year may be added to the quotas for subsequent years, within the five year period, if economic absorptive capacity permits.

In addition, as a contribution towards the solution of the Jewish refugee problem, 25,000 refugees will be admitted as soon as the High Commissioner is satisfied that adequate provision for their maintenance is ensured, special consideration being given to refugee children and dependents.

The existing machinery for ascertaining economic absorptive capacity will be retained, and the High Commissioner will have the ultimate responsibility for deciding the limits of economic capacity. Before each periodic decision is taken, Jewish and Arab representatives will be consulted.

After the period of five years, no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it.

His Majesty's Government are determined to check illegal immigration, and further preventive measures are being adopted. The numbers of any Jewish illegal immigrants who, despite these measures, may succeed in coming into the country and cannot be deported will be deducted from the yearly quotas.

