Chaim Weizmann to FokusIsrael.ch: “The future can only be based on cooperation with the Arabs”

Summary:

- Chaim Weizmannborn in 1874 in what is now Belarus, then part of the Russian Empire, was the first President of Israel.
- Already More than 20 years earlier, as a leading Zionist, he had a decisive influence on the creation of the “Balfour Declaration”.
- In it, the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour pledged his support for the establishment of a “home for the Jewish people” in Palestine.
- Under Arab pressure, the British government later de facto revoked this assurance and made the founding of the State of Israel considerably more difficult.
- Chaim Weizmann died in 1952 and is buried in Rehovot on the grounds of the Weizmann Institute of Science, which he founded. Today, this is one of the world’s leading institutes for basic research.
- Weizmann himself was a recognized chemist and biochemist.
- With the help of artificial intelligence, FokusIsrael.ch interviewed Chaim Weizmann about the creation of Israel and the obstacles and mistakes he made along the way.

Mr. Weizmann, in the middle of the First World War, you were able to convince the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to publish the so-called Balfour Declaration. What was it about?

Chaim Weizmann: The declaration was the first public commitment by a major power to promote a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. It literally stated that the British government viewed the “establishment of a national home for the Jewish people” with benevolence and would “use its best endeavors” to

facilitate the achievement of this goal. At the same time, the declaration also stated that this homeland should not affect the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine.

For me, this was a huge political breakthrough – but not yet a finished state. Because, as I said later: “A state cannot be created by decree alone … that would only be a gift of words.”

What were your decisive arguments that prompted Lord Balfour to make his declaration?

Weizmann: I have always tried to combine two levels: the moral-historical and the political. I later told the UN that the reasons for the Balfour Declaration were “idealistic” and “useful” at the same time. “Ideal” meant that the Jewish people were historically connected to Palestine. By “useful” I meant: in the First World War, London believed that it was also acting strategically cleverly with a pro-Zionist declaration. My core argument to Balfour, however, was that if the Jewish people were to find a home again at all, it should not be anywhere, but in Palestine. “History cannot be ignored.”

Was there resistance to the declaration?

Weizmann: Yes, considerably. In the British Cabinet, Edwin Montagu, himself a Jew and Minister for India, opposed it. He called Zionism a “vicious political creed” and warned that such a policy would turn Jews into foreigners in other countries.

Many Arabs in Palestine also rejected the declaration from the outset because they saw it as a threat to their own position in the country. Resistance therefore came from both anti-Zionist Jews and the Arab inhabitants of Palestine.

How important was the Balfour Declaration for the later establishment of the State of Israel, especially for the UN Partition Plan of 1947?

Weizmann: It was fundamental, but not the only decisive factor. At first, the declaration was just a British government promise. It only gained real weight when it was incorporated into the League of Nations mandate for Palestine in 1922. This turned a declaration into an internationally anchored framework. The UN partition plan of 1947 was therefore not directly based on the Balfour Declaration. But without the Declaration and the League of Nations mandate based on it, the

international path to partition and the founding of the State of Israel would hardly have been the same.

Did your ideas at the time when Lord Balfour made the declaration correspond to Theodor Herzl’s ideas about a Jewish state?

Weizmann: In terms of the objective: yes. Herzl wanted a politically secure homeland for the Jewish people. But there were differences in method. I was critical of Herzl’s exclusive reliance on grand diplomacy and also criticized this publicly. I believed in a combination of diplomacy and reconstruction work in the country. That’s why I also said: “A state cannot be created by decree alone.” I was close to Herzl in terms of the objective, but I had a different opinion on how to get there.

Who else besides you had a decisive influence on Lord Balfour from the Jewish side?

Weizmann: First and foremost, I would name Nahum Sokolow: He was my closest collaborator and secured us important support in France and Italy in 1917. Then also Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild: he was involved in the drafts and Balfour’s letter was addressed directly to him. British-Jewish politicians such as Herbert Samuel also played an important role in the prehistory and later interpretation of the declaration. In the British files, Balfour, Sykes, Sokolow and I were named as the most important authors and negotiators – with Lord Rothschild in the background.

After the Second World War, when it came to the founding of Israel, the British placed many obstacles in the way of the Jews – for example, when it came to immigration to Palestine and the establishment of their own defense army. Was this in line with the Balfour Declaration?

Weizmann: No, at least not in my understanding. The 1939 White Paper course in particular, which severely limited Jewish immigration, was in sharp contradiction to the spirit of the Balfour Declaration. The White Paper recommended limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 and then further immigrants only with Arab consent. For me, this was a departure from the earlier commitment to promote the national home for the Jewish people.

Why were the British so restrictive towards Jewish immigration and armament after the Second World War?

WeizmannBritish policy was no longer the same as it had been in 1917, with fears

for stability in the Middle East and for strategic and political relations with the Arab world.

I saw this as a break with the spirit of the Balfour Declaration. Because while Europe was in flames and millions of Jews were later left homeless, we were told that Palestine could not take them in. That was unacceptable to us.

The British acted, as they thought, in the interests of their empire: they wanted to calm the Arab opposition, secure their position in the Suez Canal area and avoid an open revolt. But for us Jews, it meant that a promise made to us was curtailed just when we needed it most.

Who then helped you to arm yourself anyway and to survive the war of 1948/49?

Weizmann: In many respects, we were on our own – but we were not completely alone. In terms of material aid, support from Eastern Europe was particularly important. Czechoslovakia supplied us with weapons and airplanes in 1947/48. Without these supplies, we would hardly have been able to hold our own.

There was also help from volunteers from abroad, mainly from the United States, but also from other countries. These so-called Machal volunteers brought experience with them, especially in flying.

However, the decisive factor was that we had already established structures before the state was founded, from which the Israeli army later emerged. This was the Haganah in particular.

I would say that overall it was a combination of preparation, determination and limited but crucial external help. I summarized this at the time in the phrase “Miracles happen – but you have to work very hard for them.”

You became the first Israeli president. David Ben-Gurion was Prime Minister. What was your relationship with him like?

Weizmann: Our relationship was a mixture of closeness and tension. Our paths were intertwined for a long time: The office of president and the office of prime minister emerged side by side, so to speak. But politically, we often represented different temperaments: I tended to stand for cautious diplomacy and international consideration, Ben-Gurion for more decisive, power-political action.

What was the biggest problem on the way to the state of Israel and in the first ten years after the state was founded?

Weizmann: On the way to becoming a state, the biggest problem was the combination of international recognition, Jewish immigration and Arab resistance. After the state was founded, the core problem was the security of the state in a hostile environment. And at the same time the question of how this state would behave towards its Arab population and its neighbors. I said at the time that the world would judge the Jewish state by how it treated the Arabs (in Palestine, ed.).

How should Israel treat the Arabs?

Weizmann: We did not come to Palestine to displace another people, but to build our own national home without doing injustice to the existing inhabitants. The Arabs are not strangers there – they are part of the country, as we want to become. The future can therefore only be based on cooperation. We must recognize their rights, respect their dignity and grant them the same civil and economic opportunities as ourselves. This is the only way our work can survive morally.

If we fail in this, the world will rightly judge us – and our claim will be weakened. But if we show that Jews and Arabs can live and thrive together, then our endeavor will be justified not only politically, but also humanely.

Looking back, what was your biggest mistake, where did you misjudge?

Weizmann: For too long, I believed that great politics could be steered primarily through conviction and reason. I placed too much trust in England – in the England of the “Balfour Declaration”. I believed that England meant what it said. Looking back, that was too optimistic. The interests of states change, and so do their policies.

I was one of those who relied heavily on diplomacy. David Ben-Gurion used to see that political reality is often decided by the balance of power. That doesn’t mean that diplomacy is a mistake. But I have learned that words alone – even benevolent ones – are not enough. A people must ultimately take its future into its own hands.

I also misjudged how great the Arab resistance to our project would be. I hoped for a long time that a balance could be found – that two peoples in the same country could find a way towards each other. This hope was not unfounded, but I misjudged

how difficult it would be to realize.

And what are you most proud of? What are you happiest about?

Weizmann: I am proudest of the fact that an idea has become a political reality. I am happiest that the Jewish people once again have a political home and that I was able to contribute to this.

Note: This interview is fictitious. It was created with the help of ChatGPT on the basis of Chaim Weizmann’s statements and writings at the time as well as historical reports about him. *In the coming weeks, we will be holding fictional conversations with other personalities from different areas of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who were important for Judaism and Israel, in order to bring their ideas closer to today’s audience. The The first interview was with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism.*