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The twice-promised land

by [Michael Binyon](#)

Britain is responsible for a century of suffering in Palestine.



Palestinian farmers wait to be allowed to get to their land.
photo: Alamy/AP, Oded Balilty.

Policy of Deceit: Britain and Palestine, 1914–1939

PETER SHAMBROOK

(ONEWORLD ACADEMIC, 416 PP, £35)

It is indeed the twice-promised land. Few issues in modern history have caused as much argument, anguish and bloodshed as the simple question: to whom does Palestine belong, to the Arabs, or to the Jews? It was promised, by Britain, to both. And for 30 years, between the

First and Second World Wars, His Majesty's government conducted a deliberate "policy of deceit", attempting to reconcile two contradictory pledges.

The result has been a fiercely heated and confused debate that has lasted a century, and has been made worse by deliberate obfuscation – mainly by Britain, but also by historians – making any detailed research seem partisan. Peter Shambrook, who has a doctorate in modern Middle Eastern history, and who is a consultant to the Balfour Project, has attempted to settle the argument once and for all by doing more research than almost any other historian on the documents, memoranda, minutes of meetings and statements by all those involved in Palestine between 1914 and 1939.

He summarises Britain's dilemma at the start of his fluent and readable account: Britain made five different promises, on five different occasions, to the Arabs, the Jews, the French and to its wartime allies. They could not be reconciled. To encourage the Arabs to take up arms against the Turks, Germany's allies, Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, wrote a series of letters in 1915 to Sharif Hussein, the emir of Mecca, promising British support for Arab independence if he led a revolt against the Ottoman rulers in Arabia.

Two years later, however, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration in London, the result of Zionist pressure, in which Arthur Balfour, then Foreign Secretary, said Britain "viewed with favour" the establishment of a national home for Jews in Palestine. Meanwhile, Britain and France had already signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after the British and French negotiators, which divided up all the Arab land between Turkey and Arabia in a northern zone, where France would have control after the end of the war, and a southern zone, including Palestine and Iraq, where Britain would exercise control.

Contradicting that, immediately after the war, Britain and France signed another declaration, this time affirming that they would both work for the complete liberation for the people oppressed by the Turks, allowed them a free choice of government. This in turn contradicted the so-called Constantinople Agreement of 1915, allowing Russia to take Constantinople, France to take Syria and Britain to take any other Ottoman territory after the defeat of Turkey. Shambrook goes into great, and necessary, detail on the McMahon-Hussein letters. These left the question of Palestine to be settled at a later date. But they were infuriatingly vague. Shambrook says that a key issue was the definition of the land where the Arabs would be independent, where the two sides spoke at cross-purposes on the meaning of the word "vilayet". Did this mean, as it does in Arabic, simply a district? Or did it refer to the Turkish use of the word to define specified administrative districts? Shambrook is sure Britain deliberately interpreted the word narrowly, deceiving Sharif Hussein, so that it could later claim that he agreed that France could occupy all of Syria west of a line from Aleppo to Damascus, and that Palestine would also not be included.

He quotes numerous Foreign Office memoranda that were clearly intentionally misleading or mendacious. As the subsequent arguments grew, especially as the Arabs resented the imposition by the post-war League of Nations of British and French "mandates" on their territory, questions were repeatedly raised in Parliament, in the British press and by lobbyists on why the McMahon correspondence was not published. He concludes this was because Britain wanted to avoid public embarrassment as it would be "detrimental to the public interest" or admission that encouraging Jewish immigration into Palestine ran into the teeth of Arab opposition and earlier commitments. Churchill, then colonial secretary and a keen Zionist, and others, played down McMahon as being a non-binding exchange made in the

heat of war. And as Shambrook shows, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, the British and French leaders at the Versailles peace conference, manoeuvred intensely to avoid any promise of independence for the Arabs.

Shambrook concludes, with the historian H.A.L. Fisher, that the peace treaties draped “the crudity of conquest” in the “veil of morality”. Shambrook traces the results of this policy of deceit throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when Palestine became increasingly ungovernable, with the outbreak of the Arab Revolt, the steady buying up of land by Jewish immigrants and the various fraught attempts by London to propose partition. He calls the earlier characterisation of the Arabs by Lloyd George and some senior officials as “decadent, dishonest and producing little beyond eccentrics influenced by the romance and silence of the desert” straightforward racism, which he insists largely influenced official British attitudes and policy. Details of the double-speak and cover-ups are fascinating to those wanting to nail down all the partisan claims that have accompanied the establishment of Israel, even if a bit arcane for the general reader. Shambrook concludes that the “hundred years of warfare in Palestine”, with the tensions, wars and suffering, are the result of British double-dealing. Would it be too much, he asks, for Britain to give a lead towards a settlement by acknowledging its own past and present mistakes?