The British White Paper of 1939: From the Great Palestinian Revolt to a Shift in British Mandate Policy

On **May 17, 1939**, the British government issued a new policy document on Palestine known as the **“White Paper of 1939”** or the **“MacDonald White Paper”**, named after the British Colonial Secretary at the time, **Malcolm MacDonald**.

The document represented one of the most significant shifts in British policy toward Palestine since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the establishment of the British Mandate. For the first time, Britain explicitly stated that its policy **was not intended to transform Palestine into a Jewish state against the will of its Arab population**. It proposed the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within ten years and introduced restrictions on Jewish immigration and the transfer of land from Arabs to Jews.

This policy, however, did not mean abandoning the concept of the “Jewish National Home” that had been incorporated into the Mandate. Nor did it grant Palestinians immediate independence or an elected national government. The Palestinian leadership therefore viewed it as a limited and belated British concession after years of revolt and repression, and one that still failed to meet the fundamental demands of the Palestinian national movement.

Palestine Before the White Paper

Since Britain occupied Palestine during the First World War, its policy had been closely linked to the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, which announced

British support for the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.”

When the League of Nations approved the British Mandate for Palestine in 1922, the Balfour Declaration was incorporated into the Mandate, and the British administration became responsible for facilitating Jewish immigration and encouraging Jewish settlement on the land, while at the same time stating that the rights of the other inhabitants of Palestine should not be prejudiced.

During the Mandate period, Jewish immigration increased, Zionist institutions expanded, and settlement and land purchases grew. Palestinians, meanwhile, demanded an end to immigration, restrictions on the transfer of land to Zionist institutions, and the establishment of a national government representing the population of the country.

According to the White Paper itself, more than **300,000 Jews** had immigrated to Palestine since the early 1920s, and by 1939 the Jewish population had reached approximately **450,000**, representing about one-third of the country’s population.

The Great Palestinian Revolt, 1936–1939

The **Great Palestinian Revolt**, which began in 1936, was the most important internal factor preceding the change in British policy.

The revolt began with a widespread general strike, while the Palestinian national movement raised three principal demands: an end to Jewish immigration, prevention of the transfer of Arab land to Jews, and the establishment of a Palestinian national government.

The revolt later developed into a large-scale armed confrontation against the British Mandate authorities and the Zionist project. Britain responded with severe military and security measures, including arrests, executions, house demolitions, exile, and the dissolution of Palestinian political institutions.

The British government itself acknowledged in the White Paper that Palestinian

fears concerning unlimited Jewish immigration were widespread and that the disturbances of the previous three years were directly connected to fears that Palestinian Arabs would eventually become subject to a Jewish majority.

The Peel Commission and the Proposal to Partition Palestine

In an attempt to address the revolt, Britain sent the **Royal Commission on Palestine, commonly known as the Peel Commission**, which issued its report in 1937 and proposed partitioning Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, while certain areas would remain under British control.

Palestinians rejected the principle of partitioning their country, while the Zionist movement debated whether partition could serve as a basis for establishing a Jewish state.

Britain later retreated from implementing the Peel Commission proposal. Following another investigation by the 1938 Partition Commission, known as the Woodhead Commission, the British government concluded that establishing two independent and viable states under the proposed partition schemes was impractical.

The 1939 White Paper explicitly stated that the failure of the partition option had led the British government to seek an alternative policy.

The London Conference of 1939

With the revolt continuing and Europe approaching another world war, Britain convened a conference in London to discuss the future of Palestine.

The conference began on **February 7, 1939**, with the participation of Palestinian and Arab delegations and representatives of the Zionist movement. Britain, however, conducted discussions with the Arab and Zionist sides separately because the Arab delegation refused to meet formally with representatives of the Jewish Agency.

The Palestinian delegation demanded recognition of the Palestinians' right to independence, an end to the Mandate, the termination of Jewish immigration, an end to the transfer of land to Jews, and the establishment of an Arab Palestinian state linked to Britain by a treaty similar to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty.

The conference also revisited the **Hussein–McMahon Correspondence** from the First World War. The Arab delegation maintained that Palestine had been included among the territories whose Arab independence Britain had promised to recognize, while Britain continued to reject this interpretation.

The parties failed to reach an agreed interpretation of the correspondence or a broader settlement.

The London discussions ended in March 1939 without an agreement accepted by all sides, prompting the British government to issue its new policy unilaterally through the White Paper.

Why Did Britain Change Its Policy?

The White Paper was not the result of a single factor.

The Great Palestinian Revolt demonstrated to Britain that maintaining immigration and settlement policies in the face of Palestinian opposition required increasingly extensive military force. The White Paper itself acknowledged that unlimited immigration would intensify hostility inside Palestine and make the Palestine question a continuing source of instability in the Middle East.

At the same time, Europe was rapidly approaching the Second World War, and Palestine lay within a strategically important region for British interests connected to the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the Arab world.

Avoiding wider Arab hostility toward Britain therefore became an increasingly important strategic consideration in the formulation of the new policy.

The White Paper thus represented an attempt by Britain to rebalance its Mandate

policy after nearly two decades of supporting the development of the Jewish National Home, while continuing to preserve British control and strategic interests.

First: Britain Declares That Palestine Will Not Become a Jewish State

This was one of the most important political provisions of the document.

The British government explicitly declared that transforming Palestine into a Jewish state against the will of the Arab population was not part of its policy, and that subjecting the Palestinian Arabs to a Jewish state against their wishes would be contrary to Britain's obligations toward them.

Britain did not, however, abolish the concept of the "Jewish National Home." Instead, it declared that the National Home had become an established reality and that its position and rights should be protected within Palestine's future political system.

This became one of the principal points of Palestinian objection to the document: while it limited the possibility of transforming Palestine into a Jewish state, it did not abandon the political and legal framework established by the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate in support of the Jewish National Home.

Second: An Independent Palestinian State Within Ten Years

The White Paper declared that the British objective was the establishment of an **independent Palestinian state within ten years**, linked to Britain by a treaty that would safeguard the commercial and strategic interests of both parties.

Arabs and Jews were expected to share in governing the future state under arrangements intended to protect the essential interests of both communities.

During the transitional period, Britain would retain ultimate responsibility for the

administration of Palestine, while increasing numbers of Palestinian Arabs and Jews would gradually participate in governmental institutions.

The White Paper did not promise the immediate establishment of an elected parliament. Political development was instead tied to what Britain described as “local circumstances” and the gradual development of self-governing institutions.

The possibility also remained that independence could be postponed beyond the ten-year period if the British government concluded that circumstances did not permit its implementation.

Why Did Palestinians Reject the Promise of Independence?

The Arab Higher Committee did not reject the principle of independence itself. It welcomed Britain’s recognition that the ultimate objective should be an independent Palestinian state.

However, it argued that the conditions surrounding the promise made independence uncertain because Britain retained authority throughout the transitional period and linked the creation of the state to Arab-Jewish relations and to Britain’s final judgment concerning whether conditions were suitable.

The Palestinian leadership instead demanded the creation of a national government within a reasonable transitional period, the drafting of a constitution by an elected national assembly, and the eventual termination of the Mandate and establishment of a treaty relationship with Britain.

It also objected to granting the Jewish National Home a permanent special status within the future state, arguing that this preserved one of the principal foundations opposed by the Palestinian national movement since the beginning of the Mandate.

Third: Restrictions on Jewish Immigration

Immigration was one of the most important and consequential sections of the White Paper.

Britain decided to allow approximately **75,000 Jewish immigrants during a five-year period** beginning in 1939, subject to the economic capacity of Palestine to absorb them.

The total was divided into:

- **10,000 immigrants per year for five years**, totaling 50,000.
- **An additional 25,000 Jewish refugees**, with priority given to children and dependents amid the growing persecution of Jews in Europe.

The stated objective was for the Jewish population to reach approximately one-third of Palestine's total population.

Most importantly, the White Paper stipulated that **after the five-year period, no further Jewish immigration would be permitted without the consent of the Arabs of Palestine**.

Britain also announced that it would act against unauthorized Jewish immigration and that immigrants who entered illegally and could not be deported would be deducted from the established immigration quotas.

The Palestinian Position on Immigration

The Arab Higher Committee regarded Britain's recognition that immigration would eventually have to stop as a partial acknowledgment of the Palestinian position, which had for years warned of the consequences of immigration for the future of the country.

However, it rejected the continuation of immigration for another five years and strongly opposed the admission of an additional 75,000 Jewish immigrants,

demanding instead an immediate and complete end to immigration.

Its position was that the humanitarian crisis facing Jews in Europe should not be resolved at the expense of the political and national rights of the Palestinian people or by altering the demographic composition of Palestine.

Fourth: Restrictions on Land Transfers

The White Paper also addressed one of the most sensitive issues in the struggle over Palestine: **the transfer of Arab land to Jews and Zionist institutions**.

The British government acknowledged that several official commissions of inquiry had concluded that continued land transfers in certain areas threatened to increase the number of landless Arab peasants, and that available land in some regions was no longer sufficient to allow continued sales without adversely affecting the Arab population.

The White Paper therefore gave the High Commissioner authority to prohibit or restrict land transfers in parts of Palestine.

The document did not, however, prohibit land sales to Jews throughout all of Palestine, and the High Commissioner retained the authority to review or modify the restrictions in light of changing agricultural conditions.

The Land Transfer Regulations of 1940

On **February 20, 1940**, the Mandate authorities issued regulations implementing the White Paper’s land policy.

Palestine was effectively divided into zones governed by different rules:

- **Zone A:** Transfers of land to anyone other than a Palestinian Arab were prohibited except in specifically defined exceptional circumstances.
- **Zone B:** Transfers of land from a Palestinian Arab to a non-Palestinian Arab required the written approval of the High Commissioner.

- **Other areas:** Land transfers remained outside these particular restrictions.

Zone A included large portions of the hill country and other regions where Britain concluded that the available land was already insufficient for the Arab population, while Zone B included areas of Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, the coastal plain, and the Naqab.

The Arab Higher Committee also rejected this arrangement and demanded a permanent and comprehensive prohibition on the transfer of Arab land to Jews, arguing that the continuing exceptions and discretionary authority of the High Commissioner made the protections incomplete.

The Arab Higher Committee Rejects the White Paper

On **May 30, 1939**, the Arab Higher Committee issued a detailed response to the White Paper.

It acknowledged that the document contained certain provisions that moved closer to the demands of the Palestinian national movement, including recognition of independence as an objective, the future limitation of immigration, and restrictions on land transfers.

Nevertheless, it concluded that the new policy failed to meet the fundamental Palestinian demands.

Its principal objections included:

- Failure to stop Jewish immigration immediately.
- Permitting the entry of an additional 75,000 Jewish immigrants over five years.
- Failure to guarantee independence definitively after ten years.
- Continued British control throughout the transitional period.

- Failure to establish an immediate national government and elected parliament.
- Continued recognition of the Jewish National Home and its special status.
- Failure to impose a comprehensive and permanent prohibition on the transfer of Arab land to Jews.

For these reasons, the Arab Higher Committee rejected the policy and refused to cooperate with Britain in implementing it.

The Zionist Movement Rejects the White Paper

The Zionist movement rejected the White Paper even more strongly, though for almost the opposite reasons.

The Jewish Agency regarded the new British policy as a retreat from the Balfour Declaration and from the commitments contained in the Mandate. It rejected immigration limits, the requirement that future immigration after five years depend on Arab consent, restrictions on land purchases, and the prospect of an independent state in which Jews would remain a demographic minority.

At the Twenty-First Zionist Congress held in Geneva in August 1939, opposition to the White Paper was nearly unanimous, and the movement adopted a policy of politically resisting the document while continuing immigration and settlement despite British restrictions.

The White Paper was therefore rejected by both sides: Palestinians considered it insufficient to secure their independence or immediately halt immigration and settlement, while the Zionist movement regarded it as a threat to its political and demographic project in Palestine.

The White Paper in the British Parliament

The White Paper also caused division within Britain itself.

Following parliamentary debates on May 22 and 23, 1939, the House of Commons approved the new policy by **268 votes to 179**.

A number of members of Parliament, including some belonging to parties supporting the government, opposed the document and argued that it contradicted earlier British commitments under the Mandate and the Balfour Declaration.

The division demonstrated that the new policy was not simply an administrative adjustment, but a significant reconsideration of the direction Britain had followed in Palestine since the beginning of the Mandate.

The Second World War Changes the Political Landscape

Less than four months after the White Paper was issued, the **Second World War began in September 1939**.

The global conflict quickly became the dominant factor in British policy, but the provisions of the White Paper—particularly those concerning immigration and land—remained an important foundation of British policy in Palestine during the war years.

At the same time, the escalating persecution of Jews in Europe and later the Nazi Holocaust increased pressure for Jewish immigration to Palestine, while Britain attempted to enforce the immigration quotas and prevent unauthorized Jewish immigration.

This situation intensified the confrontation between the Mandate authorities and the Zionist movement, which considered British immigration restrictions unacceptable in light of the persecution of Jews in Europe.

Palestinians, meanwhile, continued to oppose further immigration and any attempt to alter the demographic composition of their country.

Did the White Paper End the Balfour Declaration?

The White Paper did not formally abolish the Balfour Declaration, nor did it abolish the “Jewish National Home.”

Instead, it reaffirmed recognition of the existing Jewish National Home in Palestine while redefining the limits of British policy toward its future expansion.

Britain declared that it was not obligated to expand the National Home indefinitely through immigration and that Palestine should not be transformed into a Jewish state against the will of its Arab population.

The White Paper can therefore be understood as **a significant retreat from the previous British policy of supporting the demographic and political expansion of the Zionist project, but not as an abandonment of the framework created by the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate**.

The Palestinian Revolt and Its Impact on British Policy

One of the most important historical meanings of the White Paper is that it emerged at the end of three years of the Great Palestinian Revolt.

After years in which Britain had rejected Palestinian demands to halt immigration and settlement and establish a national government, it formally acknowledged in 1939 that unlimited immigration against Arab opposition would perpetuate conflict and that the future of Palestine should move toward independence rather than toward the imposition of a Jewish state on the Arab majority.

From this perspective, the White Paper represented a belated British acknowledgment that the political problem in Palestine could not be resolved by military force alone.

However, the change came after the Mandate authorities had already inflicted

enormous damage on the Palestinian national movement during the revolt through killings, arrests, exile, the dissolution of institutions, and the persecution of political leaders.

This left the Palestinians politically and militarily weakened by the end of the 1930s, only a few years before the transformations that would culminate in the Nakba.

Between British Concession and Palestinian Rejection

The 1939 White Paper remains one of the most complex episodes in the history of the British Mandate in Palestine.

On the one hand, Britain abandoned the partition proposal, declared that it did not seek to establish a Jewish state, promised an independent Palestinian state, imposed a ceiling on Jewish immigration, and began restricting land transfers.

On the other hand, it did not grant Palestinians the immediate independence they demanded, did not stop immigration immediately, did not abolish the Jewish National Home or the Mandate, and retained final British authority over the transition toward independence.

The Arab Higher Committee therefore regarded the concessions contained in the document as insufficient, while the Zionist movement viewed the White Paper as a threat to the foundations of its project.

The White Paper continued to shape important aspects of British policy during the final years of the Mandate, but Britain ultimately failed to transform it into a lasting settlement of the Palestine question.

Following the end of the Second World War, conflict over immigration, settlement, and the future of Palestine intensified once again. The British Mandate entered its final years amid escalating confrontation until Britain referred the Palestine

question to the United Nations in 1947, opening the way to the partition proposal and ultimately the Palestinian Nakba of 1948.