The Balfour Declaration

Terminology (nations, states, and countries)
Historians and political scientists use the terms nation, country, and state differently than everyday people. For historians and political scientists, a nation is a large group of people who are associated with a particular territory and believe that they share common attributes that make them a distinct group. These attributes often include a shared language, history, and culture. Nation is not synonymous with country, which is a political division of an area, nor is it synonymous with state, which refers to a self-governing political entity. The terms state and country can be used interchangeably, but some countries, such as the United States of America, also refer to smaller internal political units as states.

Source: A Historical Perspective on the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Peace Process
http://www.icsresources.org

Context
The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was the first significant declaration by a world power in favour of a Jewish “national home” in what was known as Palestine. Historians disagree as to what the then British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, intended by his declaration. The letter has no mention of the word “state”, and insists that nothing should be done “which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

The letter was addressed to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the Jewish community in Britain. It became an important arm of the movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Letter (Primary Source)
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 endeavors 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

US Congress Endorsement of the Balfour Declaration (Primary Source)
September 21, 1922

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress Assembled.

That the United States of America favors the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which will prejudice the civil and religious rights of Christian and all other non-Jewish communities in Palestine, and that the holy places and religious buildings and sites in Palestine shall be adequately protected.
The McMahon-Hussein Agreement of October 1915 was accepted by Palestinians as a promise by the British that after World War One, land previously held by the Turks would be returned to the Arab nationals who lived in that land. The McMahon-Hussein Agreement was to greatly complicate Middle East history and seemed to directly clash with the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

In an effort to create a third front against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria and Turkey) the Allies encouraged the Arab people in the Ottoman Empire to rise up against their Turkish overlords thus splitting the Central Powers war effort three ways.

Sir Henry McMahon, acting on behalf of the British government, met with Sherif Hussein of Mecca in 1915 and made what were taken to be a series of promises to the Arab people. These ‘promises’ were later disputed by the British government and, as with many issues concerning recent Middle East history, were open to interpretation.

Hussein interpreted the correspondence given to him by McMahon as a clear indication that Palestine would be given to the Palestinians once the war had ended. The British government was later to dispute this interpretation. They claimed that any land definitions were only approximate and that a map drawn at the time (but not by McMahon or a member of the British delegation) excluded Palestine from land to be given back to the Arab people.

The confusion arose from one small phrase in the correspondence between McMahon and Hussein. Land that "cannot be said to be purely Arab" was excluded from the agreement – as far as the British were concerned. Hussein, and very many Arab people, considered Palestine to be "purely Arab". The British saw Palestine differently as the Turks, while they had been masters over Palestine, had allowed other religious groups to exist in Jerusalem – hence their belief that Palestine "cannot be said to be purely Arab".

By the time war ended in November 1918, two distinct schools of thought had developed regarding Palestine:

1) That the British had promised Palestine to the Arabs after the war had ended in return for their support to the Allies in the war.

2) That the British had agreed to give their support to the Jews for a homeland in Palestine as laid out in the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

In fact, neither was to emerge as the League of Nations had given Palestine to the British to govern as a mandate. This left many Palestinians feeling that they had been betrayed by the British government. At the same time many Jews started to enter Palestine as a result of what they believed the Balfour Declaration had offered them. The British were left to ensure law and order was guaranteed in Palestine – something they found increasingly difficult to do.

Source: History Learning Site, http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/mcmahon.htm
The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence of October 1915, No. 1 – primary source

Translation of a letter from Sharif Husayn of Mecca to Sir Henry McMahon, His Majesty’s High Commissioner at Cairo, July 14, 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 Sherif 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 Sheriff's family) will consider ourselves free in work and deed from the bonds of our previous declaration, which we made through Ali Effendi.

**Source:** Jewish Virtual Library (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/hussmac1.html)