

Renewed Zionist Initiative

Before the end of 1928 there were indications that the period of political stagnation was giving way to renewed Zionist initiative and correspondingly renewed Palestinian Arab agitation and counter-measures. The Zionist Organisation pressed for a loan of two million sterling to be raised under the auspices of the League and guaranteed by HM Government, for more State lands to be given to Jewish colonisation and agricultural bodies.³⁰ and concluded a pact with non-Zionist Jewish Organisations in America which aimed at raising funds and supporting the building of the Jewish National Home in Palestine.³¹

Even as early as April 1928, the Chief Secretary, sounded a well-timed note of caution in a memorandum to Lord Plumer on the necessity of instituting a Legislative Council containing popular representatives in spite of Jewish opposition. The memorandum warned of the political influence of the 'Intelligentsia' and their desire for popular representation in the Government which was prompted, apart from motives of personal interest:

by a sense of National preservation. Their fear is that our system of administration and our laws may create general conditions prejudicial to what they conceive to be their political rights and material advantage. This fear is the chief ingredient in the quasi-Nationalist sentiment which is common to Palestinian Arabs as to other Oriental peoples at the present time and which can be quickened into popular agitation by any disaffected minority.³²

Wailing Wall or Buraq?

The issue of political representation and the economic grievances of the Arabs constituted the underlying factors of renewed tension and Arab-Jewish animosity, on the eve of the fateful year of 1929.³³ Yet, it was a religious issue, that of the *Buraq* or Wailing Wall, that triggered off the disturbances of 1929.

An incident which occurred in Jerusalem on 24 September 1928, the Jewish Day of Atonement, proved to be the starting point of a series of events which culminated in the first and only religious clash in August 1929.

The incident was triggered by a Jewish attempt to introduce screens to divide the men from the women worshippers while praying before the Wailing Wall, a Holy Muslim property, which constituted the Western face of the platform of the *Haram-ash-Sarif*.³⁴ In accordance with their duty to maintain the *status quo* the Government ordered the

removal of the screen, and when the order was not complied with the screen was forcibly removed by the police.

A widespread campaign of protest against Jewish intentions and designs to take possession of the Al-Aqsa Mosque swept Palestine. A 'Society for the Protection of the Muslim Holy Places' was established, and secret messages were despatched to the Muslims of India. In the course of the following months Muslim building operations in the neighbourhood of the Wall were instituted which the Jews believed to be intended to interfere with their devotions. 'An attempt by the Government to settle the various questions in dispute by mutual agreement between the two communities were baffled as much as Jewish reluctance as by Arab'.³⁵

An examination of the respective attitudes of the parties involved in the dispute — Arabs, Zionists and the Government reveals that the various leaderships availed themselves of the opportunities provided by the turn of events.

To begin with the Government stood to profit from the diversion of an increasingly anti-Government oriented Palestinian Arab nationalist movement to an anti-Jewish Muslim movement. As for the Zionists the incident of 24 September 1928, came at a critical moment when Weizmann was touring America trying to stir enthusiasm and elicit funds for the stagnant fortunes of the JNH in Palestine. It is not unlikely that the incident helped bring about a partnership between the Zionists and the non-Zionists in the United States during the latter part of 1928. Writing to Shuckburgh from New York on the lucrative new partnership Weizmann stated that the incident at the Wailing Wall 'has stirred the feelings of the Jewish Community throughout this country'.³⁶ A religious conflict in Palestine could be used as a major propaganda weapon for a successful money-raising campaign. Jewish apathy in the Diaspora was among Zionism's greatest enemies and the Wailing Wall dispute was guaranteed to overcome lack of interest and funds.

The Peel Commission observed that until 1929, the

... highly incendiary element of religion had had little to do with the growth of Arab antagonism to the National Home. In Palestine, as elsewhere in the Moslem world, nationalism had been more political than religious. But, if the religious cry raised, if it were widely and genuinely believed that the coming of the Jews to the country would mean not merely their economic and political ascendancy but also the full re-establishment of ancient Judaism, the invasion and