

# *The Holy See, Italian Catholics and Palestine under the British Mandate: Two Turning Points*

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*This paper analyses the reactions of the Holy See and Italian Catholic public opinion towards two events which can be considered as turning points in the history of British Palestine: the disturbances of August 1929 and the presentation of the Peel Plan in the summer of 1937. Through this analysis, based on a wide range of sources, it shows how the Vatican attitude towards the Palestinian question changed during the interwar period. At the same time it aims to ascertain whether or not the Holy See and the Catholic hierarchy in Palestine were in accord with the Italian government's Near East initiatives.*

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**T**his paper aims to show how, over the years of the British Mandate, the attitude of the Holy See towards the Palestinian Question gradually changed, even though it remained hostile towards Zionism and its objectives. At the same time it assesses whether, and in what way, the position of the Holy See and the Palestine Catholic hierarchy was in accord with the Middle East policy of the Fascist government, which

AAEES, T.IV = Città del Vaticano, Segreteria di Stato, Sezione per i rapporti con gli Stati, Archivio storico, affari ecclesiastici straordinari, Turchia IV periodo; ACO, GP = Città del Vaticano, Archivio storico della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali, Oriente, rappresentanza pontificia in Gerusalemme e Palestina; ACO, L = Città del Vaticano, Archivio storico della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali, Latini; ASMAE, ASS = Rome, Archivio Storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri, Ambasciata presso la S. Sede, 1929–31; ASMAE, GAB = Rome, Archivio Storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri, Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale, 1923–43; ASV, ADAGP = Città del Vaticano, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivio Delegazione Apostolica di Gerusalemme e Palestina, Monsignor Gustavo Testa; CO = The National Archives, London, Colonial Office; FO = The National Archives, London, Foreign Office; NA = *Nuova Antologia*; OC = *L'Oriente Cristiano*; OR = *L'Osservatore Romano*; RN = *La Rassegna Nazionale*

made frequent reference to the role of Italy as a 'Catholic power' in an attempt to legitimise itself in the face of public opinion at home and abroad.

In order to address these two questions, the reaction of the Holy See and Italian Catholic public opinion to two of the central events in the history of British Palestine are examined: the bloody riots in August 1929 and the presentation of the Peel Plan in the summer of 1937. These two very different events were both true turning points in the history of Mandate Palestine.

### *A watershed year: 1929*

On Friday 23 August 1929 an Arab mob made a bloody attack on the Jewish quarter of Old Jerusalem. During the following days the disturbances spread throughout the Palestinian territory, becoming particularly virulent in Hebron and Safed. These troubles were the culmination of a period of increased tension, caused by the rival Jewish and Muslim claims to the Wailing Wall, a problem for which the British government had been unable to formulate and enforce any solution, remaining stuck with the awkward *modus vivendi* that had been established in the Ottoman period. The immediate cause of the revolt was a demonstration organised by the Jewish nationalist association Betar in defence of the Jewish rights to the Wailing Wall, which was followed by a Muslim counter-demonstration. In a climate of growing tension, which did not, however, give grounds for foreseeing the extent of the violence that would erupt, came the riots on 23 August and the massacres in the following days, made possible by the total unpreparedness of the weak British forces stationed there.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate reasons behind the disorders can be found in the long-standing dispute over access to the Wailing Wall. However, if the events are considered from a wider standpoint, the August 1929 riots seem to have been determined by the political climate and the growing conflict between Zionism and Arab nationalism. Over the months preceding the revolt, beneath an apparent calm, tension had been growing. During the summer of 1929 the Zionist Congress in Zurich, decreeing the reform and expansion of the Jewish Agency, had rekindled Arab fears, whilst inside the Palestinian camp the struggle for leadership between the various factions had strengthened the more radical position. Nor should

<sup>1</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *The emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National movement, 1918–1919*, London 1974, 258–73; Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: the Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish conflict, 1917–1929*, London 1978, 217–35; Charles Townshend, 'Going to the wall: the failure of British rule in Palestine, 1928–31', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* xxx/2 (2002), 25–52 at pp. 26–34.

it be overlooked that at the end of the 1920s the Mandate administration again proposed the idea of introducing forms of self-government in Palestine, which had previously failed due to Arab opposition.<sup>2</sup>

In this tense and volatile situation, the election of a Labour government in Britain in June 1929, which was looking for a new colonial policy and was divided over the Palestine question, increased the climate of uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

The riots in August 1929 were a turning point in the history of British Palestine.<sup>4</sup> They marked the end of the 'peaceful' 1920s and the beginning of a very difficult decade which became ever more violent, culminating in the great Arab revolt (1936–9). Palestine, which had hitherto been a fairly quiet region, became a military problem for the British administration.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the 1929 riots and the harsh clampdown which followed reinforced a radical Arab leadership which centred around the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amīn Al-Husayni.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the Zionist camp, the position of those advocating the use of force strengthened at the expense of those who preferred to work towards agreements with certain sectors of the Arab elite.<sup>7</sup> The riots in 1929 led to the first serious crisis between the British administration and the Zionist leadership, opening the way for the publication of the 1931 White Paper and the questioning of Chaim Weizmann as leader of the Zionist movement.<sup>8</sup>

The events of 1929 had wide international repercussions and helped to awaken public opinion and direct diplomatic attention towards the future of Palestine, the Zionist political project and the significance of the British mandate. The Italian Catholic press closely followed events: from a general standpoint, whilst not reaching the level of anti-semitism that was in vogue a few years earlier, it displayed a unanimously anti-Zionist stance and underlined the convergence of Christian and Arab-Muslim entreaties.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Townshend, 'Going to the wall', 28.

<sup>3</sup> On the Labour attitude towards Zionism see Paul Kelemen, 'Zionism and the British Labour Party: 1917–39', *Social History* xxi (1996), 71–87 at pp. 75–8.

<sup>4</sup> Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine*, 235; Townshend, 'Going to the wall', 27.

<sup>5</sup> See Yigal Eyal, 'The 1929 disturbances as a turning point in the British government's internal security policy', *Cathedra: for the History of Eretz Israel and its Yishuv* lxxxiii (1997), 125–42 (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> See Zvi Eipeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin al-Hussaini, founder of the Palestinian national movement*, London 1993, 22–4; Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an empire, constructing a nation: Arab nationalists and popular policies in Mandate Palestine*, London 2006, 44–74.

<sup>7</sup> See Hillel Cohen, *Army of shadows: Palestinian collaboration with Zionism, 1917–1948*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2008, 15–42.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, 'Intention and results of the British in Palestine: Passfield's White Paper', *Middle Eastern Studies* ix (1973), 43–60 at pp. 53–4.

<sup>9</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (1961), Turin 1993, 108–14; Renato Moro, 'Le premesse dell'atteggiamento cattolico di fronte alla legislazione razziale fascista: cattolici ed ebrei nell'Italia degli anni Venti (1919–1932)', *Storia*

The main objective of Catholic polemic was, however, the role of the British and the political organisation of the region, for which they envisaged the possibility of international control or even handing over the mandate to Italy.<sup>10</sup> Positions of this type were the fruit of a long tradition that had grown stronger in the previous decade, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the need to sort out the Near East politically had reawakened interest in the situation of the Christian holy places and the future of Palestine.

During the 1920s the attitude in Italian Catholic political circles had been anti-British and anti-Zionist.<sup>11</sup> There were various reasons for this: the marginal role reserved for Italy in the eastern Mediterranean; fears for the *status quo* of the sanctuaries, threatened by the Greek Orthodox Church, which was supported by the British;<sup>12</sup> and lastly the perception that in the Holy Land materialistic and anti-Christian lifestyles were spreading thanks to the influence of the Zionists.<sup>13</sup>

Concerns of this sort found particularly fertile ground in openly Catholic-Nationalist circles which, with the consolidation of the Fascist regime, began to underline the new possibilities opening up in the Levant for an Italian initiative which involved both political penetration and the defence of Catholic rights. These groups, gravitating around the 'Pro Luoghi santi' associations (groups for the defence of the Holy Places), showed themselves to be particularly sensitive to these suggestions, and used their press to emphasise the presumed ties between Italy and the Holy Land. This took the form of a public awareness campaign, focusing on the Imperial Roman past, the Crusades and the role of the Maritime Republics, as well as the (uncertain) legal entitlement of the House of Savoy to sovereignty over Jerusalem, or the Italian identity of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which was often referred to simply as the 'Italian Custody'.<sup>14</sup>

The events of 1929 allowed the full deployment of all these rhetorical weapons. The Conciliation between Church and State, as achieved by the

*Contemporanea* xix (1989), 1013–119 at pp. 1112–15; Paolo Zanini, 'Italia e Santa Sede di fronte ai disordini del 1929 in Palestina', *Italia Contemporanea* lxiii/264 (2011), 406–24 at pp. 407–11.

<sup>10</sup> See Filippo Meda, 'Il Sionismo e la Palestina', *La Scuola Cattolica* lviii (1929), 292–6, and 'L'Italia in Palestina', *Palestina* iii (1930), 21–2.

<sup>11</sup> See Moro, 'Le premesse', 1053–63.

<sup>12</sup> See Guglielmo Della Rocca, 'La nostra Rivista', *OC* vi (1928), 1–4, and Gaspare Ambrosini, 'La situazione del cattolicesimo in Palestina e le insidie degli scismatici e protestanti appoggiati dall'Inghilterra', *OC* vi (1928), 138–42.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the spread of these views and the role played by Barlassina see Paolo Pieraccini, 'Il Patriarcato latino di Gerusalemme: ritratto di un patriarca scomodo: mons. Luigi Barlassina', *Il Politico* lxiii (1998), 207–56, 591–639.

<sup>14</sup> 'Francescani e Salesiani in Palestina', *L'Italia*, 1 Sept. 1929. See also Benedetto Monasterolo, *La politica religiosa fascista e la Terra Santa*, Chieri 1928.

Lateran Pacts in February 1929, gave a renewed relevance to such outlooks. Freed from the last lay prejudices, the new Fascist Italy would be able to pursue a dual objective: reinforce the Italian position in the Middle East and act as principal support for the Holy See in the defence of Catholic rights, overtaking France in its traditional role of protector of Middle Eastern Latin communities.<sup>15</sup>

Similar objectives were not the sole preserve of Italian Catholic interests. Important Fascist circles and diplomatic sectors shared the premisses and their implications, even if they regarded the religious issues behind them in an even more instrumental way. Catholic claims thus became a significant element in the convoluted Fascist policy towards Palestine, grounding themselves in the fact that the location of the Last Supper, the so-called *Cenacolo*, was claimed by the Italian government, and in the presumptive Italian nature of the Custody of the Holy Land.<sup>16</sup> This was a deliberately ambiguous political line, in which Catholic claims were mixed unscrupulously with advances towards Arab nationalists and, more rarely, Zionists, and whose only objective was that of making difficulties for Great Britain and increasing Italy's influence in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, after the slaughter in August 1929, the historical and cultural ties between Italy and the Holy Land, and the religious significance of the latter, were used to sustain Italian claims to involvement in regional affairs via the internationalisation of the mandate and the introduction of Catholic powers into the administration.<sup>18</sup> In the light of this, analysts at the Foreign Ministry suggested it would be useful to reinforce as much as possible Italian institutions present in Palestine, starting with the

<sup>15</sup> 'Momento palestinese', *OC* vii (1929), 27–8; 'Rinascita dell'influenza italiana nell'Oriente cristiano', *Palestina* iii (1930), 41–3. On the need to extend to the Levant the understanding between State and Church see Nicola Lardi, 'La conciliazione e le sue prevedibili conseguenze nella politica missionaria', *OC* vii (1929), 5–10; Ernesto Vercesi, 'La ripercussione mondiale dei patti del Laterano', *Vita e Pensiero* xv (1929), 215–20; and Ignazio Tambaro, 'La situazione in Palestina', *OC* vii (1929), 91–2.

<sup>16</sup> See Sergio Minerbi, 'The Italian activity to recover the *Cenacolo*', *Risorgimento: Rivista europea di storia italiana contemporanea* i/2 (1980), 181–209; Paolo Pieraccini, 'I Luoghi santi e la rivendicazione italiana del Cenacolo', *Il Politico* lix (1994), 653–90; and Andrea Giovannelli, *La Santa Sede e la Palestina: la custodia di Terra Santa tra la fine dell'impero ottomano e la guerra dei sei giorni*, Rome 2000, 63–72.

<sup>17</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Il fascismo e l'Oriente: arabi, ebrei e indiani nella politica di Mussolini*, Bologna 1988, 125–86; Daniela Fabrizio, *Fascino d'Oriente: religione e politica in Medio Oriente da Giolitti a Mussolini*, Genoa–Milan 2006, 265–334.

<sup>18</sup> See Virginio Gayda, 'Sangue in Palestina: gli arabi contro gli ebrei', *Gerarchia* viii (1929), 758; Romolo Tritonj, 'La riforma del mandato sulla Palestina', *NA* lxiv (1929), 479–91; and Gaspare Ambrosini, 'La situazione della Palestina e gli interessi dell'Italia', *NA* lxv (1930), 497–513.

ecclesiastical ones, and at the same time to coordinate diplomatic initiatives in tandem with those of the Holy See.<sup>19</sup>

If such were the hopes of Catholic public opinion and Italian diplomacy, the Vatican took a different view. Publicly, the press directly tied to the Holy See strongly condemned the August massacres, showing unprecedented support for the victims. This did not mean, however, that its overall view of the political situation had changed: the main cause of the riots was identified in fact as the increasing spread of Zionism in Palestine, unwisely encouraged by the British.<sup>20</sup>

These opinions restated in a more moderate fashion the policy set out by the Vatican in the early 1920s. Then, as is well known, the Holy See conducted a public opinion campaign aimed at stigmatising the dangers resulting from the British presence and Zionist penetration of Palestine.<sup>21</sup> This policy, initiated right after the Balfour Declaration and the British capture of Jerusalem at the end of 1917, encountered its most dramatic moment in 1922 when the League of Nations discussed ratification of mandate.<sup>22</sup> From the mid-1920s, with the political situation stabilised, the polemic disappeared almost totally: however, the reasons that had given rise to it remained unchanged and found their expression in the strongly anti-Zionist attitude of the Catholic authorities in Palestine.

For this reason, with regard to the events of 1929, it would seem most interesting to consider the assessment of the Holy See's representatives in Palestine, particularly since, at the start of 1929, profound changes had altered Catholic structures in the region. Up until then the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Luigi Barlassina, had been the main Catholic ecclesiastical authority in the Holy Land. Whilst always appreciated for his pastoral abilities, he had shown little political aptitude and was unable to co-operate with other Catholic institutions, with the consequence that relations between the Patriarch and the British government were very strained, and those with the Custody, most of the religious orders and the Melkite (Greek-Catholic) community completely unsatisfactory.<sup>23</sup> To deal with this situation, and coordinate initiatives in the region, in 1925 the Holy

<sup>19</sup> *I Documenti diplomatici italiani* (7th ser. 1922–35), IX: 15 aprile–31 dicembre 1930, Rome 1975, doc. 163.

<sup>20</sup> 'I gravi conflitti tra arabi e ebrei da Gerusalemme a Damasco', *OR*, 29 Aug. 1929; 'Cose Straniere', *La Civiltà Cattolica* lxxx/3 (1929), 562–3.

<sup>21</sup> See Elena Caviglia, 'Il sionismo e la Palestina negli articoli dell'Osservatore Romano e della Civiltà Cattolica (1919–1923)', *Clio* xvii (1981), 79–90, and Sergio Minerbi, *Il Vaticano la Terra Santa e il sionismo*, Milan 1988, 88–138.

<sup>22</sup> Minerbi, *Il Vaticano la Terra Santa*, 254–64.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Henry Chilton to Austen Chamberlain, 18 Jan. 1929, CO 732/40/7; Pascal Robinson to Pietro Gasparri, 24 Jan. 1929, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o. 102, fasc. 99, fos 55r–56v; *Anglo-Vatican relations: 1914–1939: confidential annual reports of the British ministers to the Holy See*, ed. T. E. Hachey, Boston 1972, 44–5.

See had sent the Irish Franciscan, Pascal Robinson, as Apostolic Visitor.<sup>24</sup> In the face of continuing problems, in February 1929 a more radical step was taken: an autonomous Apostolic Delegation was set up. This included Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Cyprus and was entrusted to the delegate in Cairo, Valerio Valeri.

There were two types of task for Valeri to carry out: on the Catholic front he had to normalise relations between the Patriarchate and the Custody and supervise the Eastern Catholic communities and their relations with the Latin Catholics; on the diplomatic front he had to become the sole point of contact with the mandatory government, containing Barlassina's excessive political activism and putting a stop to the autonomous proclamations of the various Church representatives.<sup>25</sup>

When the disorders of August 1929 began Valeri found himself in Rome. The first reports to reach the Holy See were, therefore, those sent by Barlassina on 29 August and 10 September. In his view, the cause of the tumult was the poverty of the region and the frustration felt by the Arab population, ground down by taxes and tormented by Zionist oppression. Barlassina took a highly critical view of Zionism, even likening it to 'a vampire which sucks on Arab blood'. No less caustic were his assessments of the other protagonists in the events. First and foremost, the British, who had deliberately underestimated the danger of a revolt and, on the eve of the uprising, were committed to indiscriminate repression. However, Barlassina also had little sympathy for the Arab rebels, highlighting their ferocity and Islamic 'fanaticism', a factor which risked becoming very dangerous for Christians, who had stayed out of the riots and thus earned the resentment of the Muslims. This seems to be significant. The Patriarch had, in fact, over the preceding years, often expressed sympathy with the Arab nationalist cause; despite this fact the violence in 1929 reignited in him fears of what could happen to the Christians should the current anti-Zionist alliance with the Muslims fall apart.

To cope with these dangers Barlassina advised the Holy See to avoid making any declaration whatsoever in favour of the Jewish victims, in order not to further complicate the situation for Arab Christians. The only solution which might ensure the continued tranquillity of the Catholics in Palestine, however, was internationalisation. For precisely this reason Barlassina suggested exploiting the emotional climate to

<sup>24</sup> See handwritten note, 9 July 1925, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o. 61, fasc. 64, fos 3r-4v; *Per l'udienza del Santo Padre*, ACO, GP, fasc. 930/28, doc. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Instructions for Valerio Valeri, 23 Feb. 1929, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o 78, fasc. 85, fos 44r-45v; *Istruzione a mons. Valeri quale Delegato Ap. Della Transgiordania Palestina e Cipro*, ACO, GP, fasc. 930/28, doc. 62.

secure, through joint action by the Catholic powers, the revision of the Mandate and the internationalisation of the region.<sup>26</sup>

The Patriarch had to bear in mind new elements, such as the perception of the danger represented by Islamic reawakening, alongside more commonplace judgements about British untrustworthiness and the threat of Zionism. The concept of internationalisation was likewise traditional thinking, especially the idea of achieving it through the help of the Catholic powers. Valeri, however, reached different conclusions. Upon returning, hurriedly, from Rome, he drew up an accurate assessment of the situation between September and December 1929. He too considered the political objectives of Zionism as in conflict with Catholic interests in Palestine, but far from considering the Jewish nationalist movement as a single entity, he was aware of the debate within it and sympathetic to the more moderate elements who proposed canton-type solutions and sought possible co-habitation with the Arabs. As far as the cause of the revolt was concerned, Valeri stressed two events: the sixteenth Zionist Conference held in Zurich in July which, confirming the desire to increase Jewish emigration to Palestine, had exasperated the Arabs; and the opening of negotiations between the British Labour government and the Egyptians, in which Arab public opinion had seen a sign of British weakness.<sup>27</sup>

Valeri concentrated more on the role of the Catholics in the region than on the political aspects of the situation. Catholics had taken no part in the revolt and only a few had been randomly involved in the fighting. Such observations did not stop him from realising that all believers, and the majority of the local clergy, especially the Melkites, sided with the Arab cause. For this very reason his main efforts immediately after the outbreak of the disorders were to contain nationalistic enthusiasm amongst the Catholics, striving to ensure that they remained as neutral as possible, and confined themselves to promoting peace. This caution was prompted by two concerns. The first, more idealistic, was the possibility that once inside the militant anti-Zionist movement the Catholics could have adopted extremist positions and supported violence. The second, essentially political, was suspicion about the August 1929 movement due to its preponderantly Islamic character. The question was: what would happen if, once the Zionists were beaten, the Muslims turned on the Christians, whom they were, for the time being, cultivating?<sup>28</sup>

This concern became more pronounced thereafter, and was justified by certain events. In October 1930 a violent altercation between the

<sup>26</sup> Luigi Barlassina to Gasparri, 29 Aug., 10 Sept. 1929, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 108, fasc. 102, fos 21r–29r, 44r–46r.

<sup>27</sup> Valeri to Gasparri, 18 Sept., 7 Oct. 1929, *ibid.* fos 52r–56v, 71r–72r.

<sup>28</sup> Valeri to Gasparri, 18 Sept. 1929, *ibid.* fo. 55r. On Christian-Muslim relations see Valeri to Gasparri, 22 Dec. 1929, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 108, fasc. 103, fos 3r–6r.



numerous Melkite community in Haifa and the Muslim majority shook their common anti-Zionist stance, which was traditionally very strong in the city.<sup>29</sup> In December 1931 the first world Islamic conference took place in Jerusalem, with delegates visiting from all corners of the Muslim world. This event, whilst devised with an anti-Zionist purpose, also aroused fears in Catholic observers, because it reaffirmed the intention of regarding Jerusalem as a holy Muslim city, relegating any Christian status to a secondary one.<sup>30</sup> The outcome of this changed climate and of a few other minor incidents was that, in November 1932, the newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* could denounce publicly the 'xenophobic zeal' of the Muslims and provocations against the Christians in Palestine.<sup>31</sup>

After the August 1929 riots, Valeri's main efforts were directed towards steering the Catholics out of the political turmoil. However, two other aims appear central to his actions: improving relations with the British government, to which end the delegate worked quickly, achieving impressive results; and the attempt to limit the interference of Catholic powers in the life of the Church. On this point, Valeri, ever since his arrival in Jerusalem, had advised against supporting Italian claims to the site of the Last Supper, aiming instead at an autonomous move by the Vatican.<sup>32</sup> He maintained a similar stance in the subsequent months, being unresponsive to any melding of the interests of the Church with those of individual nations. In this he was reflecting the prevailing line within the Secretariat of State. Italy made advances about possible joint diplomatic initiatives to protect Catholic interests in Palestine, but these were generally rejected by the Holy See.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the Vatican press showed no enthusiasm for nationalist-Catholic designs, underlining the international nature of the Custody of the Holy Land. This was in direct conflict with those who interpreted the Franciscan institution as the main bulwark of the Italian presence in the Levant.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Telex 2078/500, ASMAE, ASS, b. 18, fasc. 9/1.

<sup>30</sup> Valeri to Eugenio Pacelli, 4 Jan. 1932, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 105, fasc. 101, fos 24r–28r. On the Congress see Martin Kramer, *Islam assembled: the advent of the Muslim Congresses*, New York 1986, 126–40; Erik Freas, 'Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Haram al-Sharif: a pan-Islamic or Palestinian nationalist cause?', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* xxxiv (2012), 19–51.

<sup>31</sup> Fidelis, 'Lettere di Terrasanta', *OR*, 17 Nov. 1932.

<sup>32</sup> Valeri to Gasparri, 26 Apr. 1929, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 105, fasc. 100, fos 48r–49v.

<sup>33</sup> See Secretariat of State to Borgongini Duca, 27 Jan. 1931, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 125, fasc. 109, fos 82r–83v.

<sup>34</sup> Fidelis, 'Il cattolicesimo in Terrasanta', *OR*, 7 Mar. 1930. See also Alessandro Besozzi, *Italia e Palestina*, Milan 1930.

*The Peel Plan*

After the upheavals in 1929, the political and military situation remained tense in Palestine for a long time. The early 1930s saw, however, a restoration of Mandate authority and a diminution in the number of violent clashes. Towards the middle of the decade this precarious equilibrium was upset. The increase in Jewish immigration following Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the limits on immigration imposed by western countries, the worsening economic situation and the continuing growth of Arab nationalism were the main reasons why the great revolt of 1936–9 took place. The upheavals began with a strike called by the Arabs in April 1936, following some isolated incidents involving the two communities where blood was shed. The economic boycott soon degenerated, however, into a fully-blown civil war which would continue, in alternating phases, for almost three years.<sup>35</sup>

Faced with a growing crisis, the British government sent a commission to Palestine, headed by Lord Robert Peel, to seek a solution. On 7 July 1937, after months of interviews and discussions, the Peel commission published a report consisting of more than four hundred pages. It focused on many issues. However, from a political point of view, the most interesting part referred to the partition project, which immediately overshadowed the rest of the report.<sup>36</sup>

Given the impossibility of getting the two communities to co-exist peacefully, the Peel Report postulated the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab one. A small part of the territory, containing Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the main Christian sanctuaries and access to the sea would remain under British control. The situation *vis-à-vis* Nazareth was unclear; geographically it was within the future Jewish state, but the Peel commission confined itself to merely recommending that it be kept under the Mandate without issuing any precise instructions about how this should be carried out.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> On the context, motivations and outbreak of the revolt see Tom Bowden, 'The politics of the Arab rebellion in Palestine, 1936–1939', *Middle Eastern Studies* xi (1975) 147–74; Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian-Arab national movement: from riots to rebellion, 1929–1939*, London 1977, 162–260; Mahmoud Yazbak, 'From poverty to revolt: economic factors in the outbreak of the 1936 rebellion in Palestine', *Middle Eastern Studies* xxxvi (2000), 93–113; and Matthew Hughes, 'From law and order to pacification: Britain's suppression of the Arab revolt in Palestine, 1936–39', *Journal of Palestine Studies* xxxix (2010), 6–22.

<sup>36</sup> Penny Sinanoglou, 'The Peel Commission and partition, 1936–1939', in R. Miller (ed.), *Britain, Palestine and empire: the Mandate years*, Farnham 2010, 119–39 at pp. 120–1. On the Peel Commission's work see also Roza El-Eini, *Mandated landscape: British imperial rule in Palestine, 1929–1948*, London 2006, 316–30.

<sup>37</sup> *Palestine Royal Commission* (Peel Commission), London 1937 [Cmd. 5479].

The Peel Plan was a turning point in the history of mandatory Palestine.<sup>38</sup> For the first time, the British government declared itself in favour of the partition. For the first time the expression 'Jewish State' was used in an official British document, instead of the ambiguous 'National Home', used in the Balfour Declaration. Moreover, although the partition plan did not take immediate effect, all subsequent attempted solutions followed its design for splitting the Mandate into three parts, a model which would later be the basis for the UN Resolution 181 of November 1947 and the subsequent declaration of the State of Israel.

For the Holy See, partition between Arabs and Jews posed pressing questions about the security of the sacred sites and the future of the Catholics in the Holy Land, especially in those areas excluded from the future Mandate.<sup>39</sup> In Italian political and diplomatic circles the plan was considered to be an attempt to reinforce the British position in the area, through the establishment of a smaller but more governable mandate and the influence that the British would continue to exert on two small, independent states.<sup>40</sup>

During the 1930s Italian Middle East policy, which had previously alternated between opening to the Zionists or, more often, to the Arab nationalists, shifted in favour of the latter. This attitude led, between 1936 and 1937, to the breaking off of relations with the various Zionist factions, even if these had previously been good, albeit discontinuously so.<sup>41</sup> Support for Arab-Palestinian nationalism, which was increasingly Islamic in nature, led to the role of Italy as an 'Islamic power' being emphasised – a country alert to the interests of Arab and Muslim peoples of the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> This had various consequences. On a political-diplomatic level Italy supported fairly openly the grand revolt of 1936–9.<sup>43</sup> On a cultural level attempts were made to emphasise the ties linking Italy to the Arab world, highlighting a common Mediterranean heritage as opposed to a

<sup>38</sup> Itzhak Galnoor, *The partition of Palestine: decision crossroads in the Zionist movement*, Albany 1995, 36; Avi Shlaim, *The politics of partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists and Palestine, 1921–1951*, Oxford 1998, 54–6.

<sup>39</sup> Pacelli to Filippo Bernardini, 31 July 1937, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o. 171, fasc. 149, fo 15r.

<sup>40</sup> 'Progetto britannico per la spartizione della Palestina', ASMAE, GAB, 1061, b. 4. See also 'Il progetto per la spartizione della Palestina', *Relazioni Internazionali* iii (1937), 553–4.

<sup>41</sup> De Felice, *Il fascismo e l'Oriente*, 177–86.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 16–20; Nir Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933–1940*, Basingstoke 2010, 33–4.

<sup>43</sup> Lucia Rostagno, *Terrasanta o Palestina? La diplomazia italiana e il nazionalismo palestinese (1861–1939)*, Rome 1996, 197–262; Nir Arielli, 'La politica dell'Italia fascista nei confronti degli arabi palestinesi, 1935–1940', *Mondo Contemporaneo* ii (2006), 5–65; Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940*, Farnham 2010, 87–111.

British-dominated Western hegemony.<sup>44</sup> It is easy to see how these ideas did not fit well with the concept of Italy as a ‘Catholic power’, protector of Christian rights in the Levant.

In the second half of the 1930s, therefore, Catholic claims took second place in Italy’s Middle East policy. They did not completely disappear, remaining alive in certain diplomatic circles and certain religious ones, but without the centrality that they had once had. This aspect was particularly evident following the presentation of the Peel Plan. Most of the Italian press focused their attention on the political aspects of the project, whilst showing an unusual degree of moderation in denouncing the possible British reinforcement.<sup>45</sup> Only the expressly Catholic newspapers united political-strategic assessments with religious ones, highlighting the risks that the enactment of the Peel Plan would pose to Catholics in the Holy Land.<sup>46</sup> The very same Italian diplomacy which, just a few years earlier, had highlighted its concern for Catholic rights in Palestine, used similar arguments only marginally:<sup>47</sup> only the consul-general in Jerusalem, Quinto Mazzolini, principal contact between the Italian government and Arab-Palestinian nationalists, made a show of regarding as still useful the pronouncements of the Catholic authorities in Palestine in order to discourage the application of the Peel Plan. For this reason he tried to make the most of the polemical declarations of the Melkite archbishop, Gregorios Hajjar, and the concerns of Barlassina, whilst expressing disappointment at the cautious reserve of the Holy See.<sup>48</sup>

Mazzolini’s disappointment and the silence of the media closest to the Holy See, which made no comment on the planned partition, should not deceive us:<sup>49</sup> the Vatican had for some time been following closely the work of the Peel commission.<sup>50</sup> Rumours about the publication of the report and the proposal for partitions had reached the Secretariat of

<sup>44</sup> On these suggestions see Emilio Beer, ‘Perennità Mediterranea’, *RNlix*/2 (1937), 116–23, and ‘Oriente e Occidente’, *RNlx*/1 (1938), 9–13.

<sup>45</sup> On this last point, see James Eric Drummond to Anthony Eden, 6 Aug. 1937, FO, 371/20811. <sup>46</sup> Pasquale Pennisi, ‘Il giudizio di Salomone’, *L’Italia*, 14 July 1937.

<sup>47</sup> See ‘Conclusioni’, ASMAE, GAB, 1061, b. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Quinto Mazzolini to Ministry, 22 July 1937, ASMAE, GAB, 1061, b. 4, fasc. *Rivolta in Palestina*. <sup>49</sup> See G. G. [Guido Gonnella], ‘Acta Diurna’, *OR*, 14 July 1937.

<sup>50</sup> Regarding the Vatican’s reaction to the presentation of the Peel Plan see Maria Grazia Enardu, *Palestine in Anglo-Vatican relations, 1936–1939*, Florence 1980; Kreutz, *Vatican policy*, 63–9; Christian Rossi, *Partition of Palestine and political stability: Ottoman legacy and international influences (1922–1948)* (EUI, RSCAS, Working Papers, 2010), 13–5; Paolo Zanini, ‘Italia e Santa Sede di fronte al piano Peel di spartizione della Palestina: il tramonto della *carta cattolica*’, *Studi Storici* liv (2013), 51–77; and Lucia Russo, ‘La Santa Sede e la Palestina dall’approvazione del mandato britannico alla conferenza di St James (1922–1939)’, *Ricerche di Storia sociale e religiosa* lxxxiii (2013), 75–108 at pp. 96–102.

State at the beginning of July 1937,<sup>51</sup> closely followed by the first detailed reports on the matter. Two people in particular were sought for their opinions: the apostolic delegate in Jerusalem, Gustavo Testa, and the Patriarch, Barlassina. Their opinions, widely divergent, reflected different religious and political sensibilities and an opposed view of the priorities. Testa was very sceptical about the strength of Palestinian Catholicism and the quality of its leaders, who achieved modest results in return for all the resources at their disposal. This was why he insisted on concentrating on the defence of the sacred sites, trying to involve the Catholic powers. This was a very traditional outlook, which appeared then to be particularly complicated due to the poor relations between France and Italy and the desire not to serve excessively the pro-Arab positions of the Italian government.<sup>52</sup>

With respect to this diplomatically oriented assessment, the proposals put forward by Barlassina appear more contradictory, but also more interesting. In his view, the defence of the Catholic communities in the Holy Land was of central importance: they were threatened by the partition plan, which would leave them at the mercy of two non-Christian states and subject – in the few areas retained under mandate – to an administration such as the British which he continued to consider anti-Catholic. In his view, there were fewer risks to the sacred sites. The real danger, the Patriarch underlined, was for ‘the Faith, the Catholics and the Institutions which instruct and conserve them’.<sup>53</sup>

For their protection Barlassina continued to regard the internationalisation of Palestine as a necessity, or at least in those areas where they were most numerous, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem or Nazareth.<sup>54</sup> In these considerations, the Patriarch showed a marked pastoral sensibility, attentive to the welfare of the Christian community rather than the status of the sanctuaries. Likewise, Barlassina’s reference to the necessity of mobilising public opinion to defend Catholic rights in Palestine also appears to be very modern thinking as he avoided concentrating his energies on diplomatic skirmishing.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Valeri to Pacelli, 5 July 1937, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 171, fasc. 149, fos 11r–12r; Bernardini to Pacelli, 10 July 1937, fos 7r–8r.

<sup>52</sup> Gustavo Testa to Pacelli, 23 July 1937, *ibid.* fasc. 151, fos 4r–7v. See also Testa to Pietro Fumasoni Biondi, 23 Feb. 1937, ASV, ADAGP, b. 3, fasc. 13, fos 52r–53v.

<sup>53</sup> Barlassina to Pacelli, 29 Aug. 1937, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 171, fasc. 152, fo. 63r.

<sup>54</sup> *Rapporto sulla Palestina*, *ibid.* fasc. 151, fos 15r–21r.

<sup>55</sup> On this point it is worth remembering that, a few years earlier, Barlassina had been the promoter of the International Centre for the Protection of Catholic interests in Palestine, an institution whose purpose was to remind public opinion of the difficulties facing Catholicism in the Holy Land. See Paolo Zanini, ‘Il Centro internazionale per la protezione degli interessi cattolici in Palestina’, *Studi Storici* liv (2013), 393–417.

In the Patriarch's opinions these innovative elements existed, however, side by side with hurriedly-reached judgements which were sometimes without basis in fact. For example, in order to explain the difficult situation that Catholicism found itself in Palestine, he harked back uncritically to the stale theory of a Masonic plot, underlining that all the major figures in the land, be they Arab, Jew or British, were all enrolled in Lodges.<sup>56</sup> Similarly harsh and without objective substance were his views on the Arab nationalists, whose 'Islamic fanaticism' he feared, as well as on the Jews, who were all 'averse to Christianity' according to him, and also on the Mandate government, which he continually denounced as guilty of abuse of power.<sup>57</sup> Where Barlassina's proposals were most lacking, however, was on an operational level: the Patriarch's initiatives ended up as clumsily executed Machiavellian manoeuvres which cast the Patriarchal office in a bad light that also reflected on the other Catholic institutions in Palestine.

In the Secretariat of State they were aware of the situation and, whilst praising the pastoral zeal of the Patriarch, placed no particular trust in his ability to influence political events.<sup>58</sup> More generally, it would seem that they were not completely satisfied with the reports coming from Palestine. Testa's report was too diplomatic and left entirely out of consideration the local Catholic communities; Barlassina's, on the other hand, concentrated exclusively on the traditional 'rights and privileges' of the Catholic communities, without being able to provide any concrete information about the abuses alleged to have been carried out by the British administration.<sup>59</sup> Lastly, the inexplicable silence of the Custody caused consternation. The intransigent position of Monsignor Hajjar was also unhelpful. The bishop of St Jean d'Acre, in fact, in an attempt to avoid Galilee, with its numerous Melkite community, being allocated to the Jewish state, immediately joined the opposition to the Peel Plan and tried to involve the Holy See in this.<sup>60</sup> The notorious political activism and open nationalism of Hajjar, however, meant that Testa, the Secretariat of State and the Congregation for Eastern Churches did not endorse his initiatives, denying him permission for a trip to Europe during which he intended to raise the alert about the consequences of the Peel Plan for the Arab-Christian population.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Risposte supplementari al Rapporto del 3 agosto*, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o. 171, fasc. 152, fos 43r-46r.

<sup>57</sup> *Rapporto sulla Palestina*, *ibid.* fasc. 151, fos 18r-19r.

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous handwritten note, 25 Aug. 1937, *ibid.* fos 66r-71r.

<sup>59</sup> Anonymous undated note, *ibid.* fasc. 150, fo. 9r.

<sup>60</sup> Delegation's note, 14 July 1937, ASV, ADAGP, b. 2, fasc. 8, fo. 116r. On the nationalist leanings of Hajjar see Giulio Brunella, 'Sulla posizione nazionalistica del vescovo melchita Grigurius al-Hajjar (1875-1940)', *Alifba* iv/6-7 (1986), 57-78, and Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine*, Austin 2011, 35-6.

<sup>61</sup> Giuseppe Cesarini to Gregorios Hajjar, 27 Sept. 1937, ACO, L, fasc. 457/48, doc. 11. On the mistrust surrounding Hajjar's trip to Europe see Barlassina to Giuseppe

Faced with the urgency of the situation and so many contradictory outlooks the Secretariat of State took upon itself the responsibility for all initiatives regarding Palestine, moving in three directions. In diplomatic circles steps were taken to be more influential in the League of Nations Mandates Commission: here, having dismissed the idea of seeking support from the main Catholic nations, whose involvement would have irritated the British, some smaller nations were identified, such as neutral Belgium and Switzerland, as points of reference in Geneva.<sup>62</sup> Through precise instructions given to the Vatican diplomatic corps they also attempted to make international public opinion aware of the dangers that the holy sites and the Catholics in Palestine would be facing.<sup>63</sup> The biggest push, however, was in the direction of the British government, with the dispatch of a comprehensive *aide-mémoire* containing the Holy See's hopes and fears for the future of the region.

The idea of sending out a document which summarised Catholic demands *vis-à-vis* partition came up immediately following the presentation of the Peel Plan. It was immediately obvious what the main points to concentrate on were: safeguarding the sacred character of Palestine, all of which was considered to be the Holy Land; defending the Christian holy places and extending the Mandate to Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee and other sanctuaries scattered throughout the Palestinian territory; and requesting rights and guarantees for Catholics, whose suffocation was feared in future independent Arab and Jewish states.<sup>64</sup>

Despite such clarity of intent, drawing up the final version of the *aide-mémoire* required no small effort. It went through various drafts and was the result of intense diplomacy between the Secretariat of State and the British Legate at the Holy See. Francis D'Arcy Osborne, British envoy to the Vatican, met Monsignor Giuseppe Pizzardo several times for the purpose of toning down various aspects of the Vatican *communiqué* which would displease London the most.<sup>65</sup> Over and above the outcome of this unusual diplomatic procedure (in truth, somewhat limited, given that Osborne managed only to obtain limited modifications to the original text) such mediation showed how the Secretariat of State and the

Pizzardo, 1 Aug. 1937, AAEESS, T.iv, p.o. 171, fasc. 151, fos 82r–83r; Testa minute, 23 Sept. 1937, ASV, ADAGP, b. 5, fasc. 23, fo. 338rv.

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous note, dated Monday, AAEESS, T.iv, p.o. 171, fasc. 150, fos 80r–81r; Aldo Laghi to Pacelli, 11, 13 Aug. 1937, fasc. 152, fos 22r–24v, 35r.

<sup>63</sup> Circular letter and attached *promemoria*, 18 Aug. 1937, *ibid.* fasc. 151, fos 51r–53r.

<sup>64</sup> All the points which would be included in the final version of the *aide-mémoire* appear already defined, even if in a preliminary form, in a handwritten note, probably made at the beginning of the document's preparation, *ibid.* fasc. 150, fos 28r–29r.

<sup>65</sup> Francis D'Arcy Osborne to Owen St Clair O'Malley, 23 July 1937, FO, 371/20810; Osborne to Eden, 4 Aug. 1937, FO, 371/29011. See also Enardu, *Palestine*, 13–16, and *Anglo-Vatican relations*, 376–7.

Foreign Office desired to reduce as far as possible contrasting positions and inflexibility. This attitude was probably determined by the difficulties that both parties had to face, with regard both to the Palestine question and to the complex international situation.

The British government, in addition to the serious need to keep the peace in Palestine, had to take into account the divergent views of the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office and of a public opinion that was polarised between counterposing sympathies and traditionally wary of any Vatican interference.<sup>66</sup> Such factors explain why it was appropriate to reduce to the minimum not only conflict with the Holy See but also every opportunity for public debate, opting instead for diplomacy's reserved channels. Similarly complex and contradictory were the pressures on the Holy See, squeezed between the protests of the Arab-Palestinian Catholics, who were opposed to partition, the concerns of the entire Christian world for the holy sites and worries about a very uncertain future after the termination of the British Mandate, which had never been regarded so positively as when it was drawing to a close.<sup>67</sup>

On 6 August 1937 the final version of the *aide-mémoire* was issued. Compared to the earlier drafts, the final one was more circumspect with regard to which sanctuaries should be kept under British mandate and more cautious about guarantees for Catholics in Palestine: the overall purpose and design of the document remained, however, unchanged.<sup>68</sup> The British government did not fully accept the Vatican's requests, despite appreciating the 'tactful manner' in which they were formulated.<sup>69</sup> The Foreign Office and the Colonial Office were in agreement that it would be impossible to extend Mandate control to all of the places indicated by the Vatican unless the territorial area of the future Jewish State were reduced to a 'patchwork' of small enclaves that would be extremely difficult to manage.<sup>70</sup>

The partition of Palestine was first delegated to an *ad-hoc* commission and then, to all intents and purposes, abandoned in 1939 as events unfolded in the Middle East and the rest of the world. What seems

<sup>66</sup> See the anonymous undated note, AAEESS, T.IV, p.o. 171, fasc. 150, fo. 102r. On the different views of the two ministries see Aaron S. Klieman, 'The divisiveness of Palestine: Foreign Office versus Colonial Office on the issue of partition, 1937', *Historical Journal* xxii (1979), 423-41.

<sup>67</sup> Osborne to Eden, 4 Aug. 1937, and C. J. W. Torr to Eden, 6 Aug. 1937, FO, 371/29011.

<sup>68</sup> See the *aide-mémoire*, attached to the letter from Torr dated 6 Aug., which contained further instructions received verbally from Monsignor Pizzardo, in order to explain the meaning of the note: *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Edward Maurice Ingram to Torr, 2 Sept. 1937, CO, 733/353/5.

<sup>70</sup> Lacy Baggallay minute, 16 Aug. 1937, FO, 371/20811; T. S. Bennet note, 24 Aug. 1937, CO, 733/353/5.



interesting to underline here, even more than the changing fortunes that the Vatican's wishes, as expressed in the *aide-mémoire*, had with the British government,<sup>71</sup> is the overall significance of the Holy See's attitude to the Peel Plan. And, most of all, with respect to one particular question: in what way did the Vatican regard the continuing, although less frequent, Italian attempts to exploit religious claims for its own national interest? Answering this is not straightforward, given the differing standpoints of senior figures in the Church and the Vatican diplomatic corps. However, it would seem fair to say that the Holy See sought to dispel any suspicion of convergence with Italian policy. The main consequence of this was that little attention was given to the question of the internationalisation of the future mandate. This solution, which was judged as excellent from a general point of view, and was a traditional objective of Vatican policy, was not emphasised too much so as to avoid giving the impression of supporting Italian wishes, which had always been in favour of the internationalisation of Palestine.<sup>72</sup>

The reactions of the Vatican following the 1929 riots and after the presentation of the Peel Plan show the extent to which the position of the Holy See regarding the Palestine question, the British Mandate and the future of the region changed between the early 1920s and the end of the following decade.

First and foremost, belief in Arab-Palestinian nationalism had evaporated. And not only in Rome, where any convergence of Christians and Muslims had always been evaluated from a tactical standpoint, but also among the church authorities in Palestine.<sup>73</sup> On this point it would seem significant to recall that the role of Christians, and Catholics in particular, inside anti-Zionist organisations, which had been prominent at the beginning of the 1920s, declined over time until becoming marginal by the late 1930s when the great Arab revolt took place.<sup>74</sup> This process was mainly due to the development of the Arab-Palestinian nationalist movement. The urban elites, among whom were numerous Christian families, were gradually sidelined from leading positions in the movement as it became more radical and armed; the developing leadership of the Mufti had the effect of emphasising the pan-Islamic nature of the struggle for Palestine, which contributed to reducing the Christians' political role.

<sup>71</sup> See Enardu, *Palestine*, 18–23; Kreutz, *Vatican policy*, 65–9.

<sup>72</sup> On this point, the silence maintained by Pius XI about the Holy Places during the Christmas celebrations 1937 is significant: a reticence attributed by British diplomats accredited to the Holy See to the pope's desire not to support Italian claims in any way: Torr Ingram, 30 Dec. 1937, CO, 733/369/9.

<sup>73</sup> For the diverse positions in the Vatican see Silvio Ferrari, *Vaticano e Israele dal secondo conflitto mondiale alla guerra del Golfo*, Florence 1991, 23–5.

<sup>74</sup> Porath, *Emergence*, 293–303, and *From riots to rebellion*, 269–71; Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity*, 36–43, 158–61.

Developments inside the Church of Palestine also had an effect, and there is no doubt that, starting from 1929, the apostolic delegates who succeeded to the area were less involved than the local church authorities in the situation, and therefore had a significant role in limiting the political involvement of Catholics, especially in Jerusalem.

Growing scepticism about the reliability of Arab-Palestinian nationalists was accompanied by a comprehensive rethink about the role of the British in the region. Inside the church hierarchy there was no shortage of those who were highly critical of the British in Palestine. The upper echelons of the Secretariat of State had, however, radically revised their views at the beginning of the 1920s and had reached the conclusion that the continuation of the Mandate was the main guarantee for a continued Catholic presence in Palestine. Relations between church authorities in the Holy Land and the British administration had also markedly improved, thanks to the limiting of Barlassina's role and the efforts of successive apostolic delegates in Jerusalem from 1929 onwards.<sup>75</sup>

The changing perception of the British role in the eastern Mediterranean went side by side with a growing discontent over the attempts of the Catholic powers to exploit for political ends their role, real or presumed, as protectors of Christians in the Middle East. This attitude originated from the desire of the Holy See to develop an extra-European policy that was not tied to the protection of the colonial powers and made the most of autochthonous Catholic communities. There was a growing need for this, made stronger in the aftermath of the First World War, which saw the first cracks appearing in the colonial empires and in the Arab Levant took the concrete form of promoting the Eastern-Catholic Churches with an Arab clergy.<sup>76</sup>

Against this background, there were other factors driving the Vatican's chilly attitude towards Italian approaches regarding Palestine: in 1929 the desire to demonstrate how, despite the newly-found good relations between Church and State in Italy, the Holy See kept intact its autonomy of action. In the second half of the 1930s, however, a central factor was the growing distrust of Italian foreign policy, increasingly seen as a destabilising element on the global scene.

Together with these factors, which emerged as clearly in 1929 as in 1937, two further aspects should be highlighted. Notwithstanding insistence on the unitary nature of the Holy Land, in the second half of the 1930s the Holy See was willing to refrain from obstructing the partition of Palestine as long as the safety of the holy places and the Catholic community was ensured. This was an innovative standpoint, adumbrating the position

<sup>75</sup> See *Anglo-Vatican relations*, 158, 246, 272.

<sup>76</sup> See Agostino Giovagnoli, 'Pio XII e la decolonizzazione', in Andrea Riccardi (ed.), *Pio XII*, Rome-Bari 1985, 179-90.

that the Holy See would adopt in the autumn of 1947 in response to UN Resolution 181. On this latter occasion, Vatican diplomacy initially settled on a position of cautious reserve, avoiding any head-on clashes given that the plan, with its provision for a separate international zone including Jerusalem and Bethlehem, whilst not being the best solution, seemed to guarantee Catholic interests.<sup>77</sup>

Amongst these changes, a significant fixed point was the substantive continuity in the Vatican's view of Zionism. The early 1920s were characterised by a Catholic public opinion campaign against Zionism. Over the following fifteen years the polemics could be more or less harsh, the contrasts more or less evident, while there were sometimes even friendly contacts between representatives of the Catholic hierarchy and exponents of Zionism: what stayed constant, however, was a basic position that identified in the Jewish nationalist movement the most dangerous foe that the Catholic Church faced in Palestine. Zionism was perceived as irredeemably opposed to Catholic interests, so much so that, should the time come to make a decision that could not be put off, it would seem certain that the Vatican would have preferred an Arab rather than a Jewish sovereignty over the holy places.<sup>78</sup>

Behind all these positions was a theological judgement, which made even the most moderate Catholic observers disturbed and sceptical about the prospect of an independent Jewish state in the Holy Land. Such a prospect seemed to contradict the centuries-old concept of the diaspora as the confirmation of a divine punishment for the deicide.<sup>79</sup> However, there were other elements playing an equally important role in forming these views. One was the fear that the establishment of a Zionist state would spread Communism in Palestine:<sup>80</sup> this idea, particularly bandied about in the 1920s, re-emerged during the 1930s, when the danger represented by Communist movements and anti-religious governments became the main concern of Pius xi's Church.<sup>81</sup> And, alongside this, there was the

<sup>77</sup> For further analysis see Kreuz, *Vatican*, 93–4, and Ferrari, *Vaticano e Israele*, 52–4.

<sup>78</sup> Silvio Ferrari, 'Pio xi, la Palestina e i Luoghi santi', in *Achille Ratti papa Pio XI*, Rome 1996, 909–24 at p. 920. See also the anonymous note dated 25 Aug. 1937, AAEISS, T. iv, p.o 171, fasc. 151, fos 66r–71r.

<sup>79</sup> On Catholic theology regarding the diaspora see the useful account by John T. Pawlikowski, 'The contemporary Jewish-Christian theological dialogue agenda', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* xi (1974), 599–616. For the implications that such concepts had in anti-Zionist Catholic polemic see Ferrari, 'Pio xi', 917–19. With regard to the presence of similar scriptural interpretations among the most able Vatican diplomats see Valeri to Pacelli, 25 July 1930, AAEISS, T. iv, p.o. 108, fasc. 103, fos 23r–24v.

<sup>80</sup> Among the possible examples see Fidelis, 'Lettere di Terrasanta', *OR*, 24 June 1931, and Testa to Pacelli, 27 Mar. 1936, AAEISS, Stati Ecclesiastici iv periodo, p.o. 474, fasc. 482, fos 6r–7v.

<sup>81</sup> Philippe Chenaux, *L'Église catholique et le communisme en Europe (1917–1989): de Lénine à Jean-Paul II*, Paris 2009, 32–9, 86–108.

perception that the Zionist presence would contribute to spreading unreligious and anti-Christian lifestyles in the Holy Land and alter the spiritual nature of the region.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> For more about these fears see, for example, *Nota d'archivio sul Sionismo*, AAEISS, T.IV, p.o. 7, fasc. 23, fos 68r–71r, and anonymous note, p.o. 171, fasc. 150, fos 82r–84r.