

The 1943 'Reconstruction Plan' for Mandatory Palestine: The Controversy within the Jewish Community

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In 1943, the British Colonial Office initiated a far-reaching process of arrangements to prepare plans for detailed reconstruction in the territories subject to British control. Reconstruction as a concept, a tendency and an action plan was basically directed at building and constructing that which had been destroyed in the war, based on a plan thought out in advance. This article explores the struggle between the British plan for the reconstruction of Mandatory Palestine and the Jewish interpretation that the main aim of their steps is to implement the White Paper policy of May 1939. After six months of confrontation, the British intention to promote economic steps while presenting them as separate from the political tension over Palestine's political future and the Jewish-Arab confrontation proved to be a false assumption.

In a radio address given by the British high commissioner for Palestine, Harold MacMichael, on 23 March 1943, the British Mandatory government placed on the political agenda a plan for the reconstruction of Mandatory Palestine. MacMichael indicated that the likelihood of its implementation depended on two main conditions. The first was the soundness of the planning of the schemes and the second was 'the degree of cooperation and goodwill which all are willing to contribute to the work to be carried out'.¹ Cooperation and goodwill were the two things which David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, did not even vacillate over giving MacMichael and his plan.

The years of the Second World War were marked in Palestine by a lengthy series of frictions, confrontations and crises over the local Jewish community's relations with the Mandatory authorities, focusing primarily on the areas of immigration and

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security.² In contrast, the controversy over the reconstruction plan proposed by the Mandatory government in 1943 focused largely on ways of conducting everyday civilian lives, including their economic and social aspects.

In existing historical research on Palestine and Britain in 1943, most attention is focused on the diplomatic domain. The reason for this is that in March–April 1943, at exactly the same time that the reconstruction plan appeared on the agenda in Palestine, there began internal consultations, initiated by Churchill, between various government authorities in London and the Middle East over the future of Palestine. At the beginning of July, these enquiries led to the setting up of a ministerial committee whose remit was to discuss the long-term policy of his majesty's government in Palestine.³

These consultations can justifiably be seen as a central plank of a broader trend gathering momentum at the same time—that of considering what kind of world would come about following the war. In 1943, the British Colonial Office initiated a far-reaching process of arrangements to prepare plans for detailed reconstruction in the territories subject to British control. This was the outcome of, *inter alia*, protracted American criticism of British willingness to inculcate ideas of progress, modernisation, development and industrialisation as guiding principles in their administration. It also came about as a result of domestic British pressures for change in how the country administered the empire. A pronounced public expression of this tendency can be identified in the 13 July 1943 parliamentary address of the colonial secretary, Oliver Stanley, in which he outlined a series of steps that the British government intended to take in order to promote effective economic development and through which the infrastructure would be provided for bringing about independent rule in those areas which would subsequently become part of the British Commonwealth.⁴

MacMichael appointed Sir Douglas Gordon Harris to the position of reconstruction commissioner in the Mandatory government on 19 March 1943.⁵ From 1940 until his 1943 appointment, Harris served as chairman of the War Production Board in Palestine. Harris's appointment to the position was announced in an official statement published by the government four days later. His appointment was presented as a plank of the international arrangements which began to speed up at the same time, with an eye to the days that would follow the end of the Second World War and as a response to dealing with issues that were at the heart of the public debate, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, as to ways of shaping the post-war reality.⁶ Albeit by chance rather than anything else, between these two events Churchill gave an extremely important broadcast speech, in which he outlined a four-year plan for reorganising Britain and the world after the defeat of the Axis powers. The emphasis was mainly on future improvements in the economic and social spheres, and Churchill declared, 'Difficulties mastered are opportunities won.'⁷

Churchill's speech was tantamount to providing legitimisation by the most senior echelons in the international arena of the crucial need to address the hammering out of plans intended to prepare for the days following the end of the hostilities, while the storm of battle was still raging with its full fury. The weight attached to these plans increased slowly but surely throughout the war years. Lessons learned

from recovering from the First World War were integrated in this, together with the aspiration to eliminate totalitarianism and ideas for establishing international regulatory institutions and mechanisms to help with the rehabilitation of Europe and prevent another slide into a world war. The basic assumption of all these plans, which were addressed in countless publications, was perceptively outlined by the well-known historian Edward Hallett Carr in his closing words to his book *Conditions of Peace*, published in March 1942: ‘The old world is dead. The future lies with those who can resolutely turn their back on it and face the new world with understanding, courage and imagination.’⁸

Gradually there evolved a kind of competition between intellectuals, politicians, journalists, scientific institutions, economic corporations and government bodies on various levels, who outlined a whole gamut of plans which claimed that, in one fell swoop, they would eliminate all of the trials and tribulations that had plagued mankind for thousands of years: poverty, ignorance, unemployment, diseases, old age, disabilities and more. Leaders and governments made intoxicating promises that raised the spirits, as is the wont of politicians mired in dealing with a crisis whose end is nowhere in sight.⁹ Churchill, who as early as January 1943 ‘expressed serious reservations about shrouding the government in a “cloud of pledges and promises” for “airy visions of Utopia and Eldorado”’, was forced against his will into being carried away in the raging stream of growing demands to hammer out reconstruction plans.¹⁰

Reconstruction as a concept, a tendency and an action plan was basically directed at building and constructing that which had been destroyed in the war, based on a plan thought out in advance. It had three main goals. The first involved laying the physical foundations for the ‘new world’ which would emerge from the ruins of the Second World War, by means of rationalisation as well as technical and technological improvements which would be embedded in the process of revamping the cities, factories, traffic routes, ports and so on. The second goal was to generate an up-to-date system of political arrangements in the area of governance, states, borders, political and economic ties between different peoples in the areas of customs, taxes, international trade and so forth. Reconstruction’s third goal was the reorganisation of the economic and societal structure of society, whose expressions are the ways of dividing up national income, the extent of state involvement in the economy, in social insurance, in guaranteeing the ability to make a living and so on.¹¹

In its Palestinian version, reconstruction, according to High Commissioner MacMichael, was intended to prepare plans for developing the public services—first and foremost in the areas of education, social insurance and health, building housing and public institutions which were not set up during the war years because of a lack of building materials, adapting industrial plants to peacetime markets, improving the irrigation and sanitation systems and rehabilitating citrus growing.¹² One might perhaps be taken aback by the British reconstruction proposal. In Mandatory Palestine proper, as opposed to other areas of the world, no battles took place during the years of the Second World War. No localities suffered physical destruction, the economy grew by an average of 11 per cent a year, primarily

because of large-scale demand by the British army, unemployment was around just 2 per cent, industry, instead of collapsing, developed and diversified and most branches of agriculture thrived and prospered. Fundamental, far-reaching changes occurred in the Palestinian economy as a result of the transition from a peacetime economy to a wartime one, but they were not all positive ones. The citrus-growing sector, which made up some 15 per cent of the national income of the Jewish sector and was export based, was seriously hurt by the blocking of the maritime marketing routes. Civilian building (flats, schools and so on) practically ground to a halt as a result of the lack of raw materials. Certain industrial areas underwent exaggerated artificial expansion in the wake of the autarkic constraints which imposed transport difficulties resulting from the wartime realities. It was also necessary to provide a suitable response to the demands of military supply, such as in the area of metals, footwear, diamonds and canned goods and conserves.¹³ The high commissioner praised the achievements of Palestine economy to the British the war effort in the Middle East. On the other hand the functionaries in the Colonial Office thought that Stanley should advise MacMichael that 'Palestine can do far more to help the war effort at the present moment by the best possible management of food and other supplies than by trying to make itself the emporium of the Middle East'.¹⁴ In this connection, they thought that the appointing of a reconstruction commission would achieve not only co-ordination of individual efforts of Jewish economic initiatives in Palestine, but would also have 'the very desirable effect of putting the brake on any impracticable schemes which might otherwise be contemplated'.¹⁵

I

The day after MacMichael's radio address, Ben-Gurion declared in an address that he gave at the Assembly of Delegates of Palestine Jewry on 24 March that the reconstruction plan was based on implementing the White Paper policy of May 1939 and that it was entirely intended 'to set up a territorial ghetto for Jews in their own homeland'. He admitted that the reconstruction plan that spoke about developing the country 'sounded heartwarming' to Jewish-Zionist ears, but claimed that in its current form it was intended entirely to develop the Arab sector in Palestine by using tax revenues raised from Jewish sources. Ben-Gurion stated baldly: 'There will be no cooperation between us and the White Paper Government, neither today nor after the war.'¹⁶

Ben-Gurion's public proclamation of 'no Jewish cooperation' with the reconstruction plan took place without any preliminary discussion, clarification and decision in the various political institutions, general and party alike. This fact infuriated many in Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) circles, who saw the British approach as a welcome initiation of discussion and preparations for adapting the country's economy to suit future circumstances. Thus, for example, an editorial in *Ha'aretz*, identified with moderate, liberal and pro-British circles, defined MacMichael's speech as opening a new chapter in the history of the Palestinian economy and expressed the hope that Harris would involve in his work representatives of the private sector in the Yishuv.¹⁷

Richard Casey, the Australian statesman who was a member of the British war cabinet and his majesty's government's minister resident in the Middle East, noted in a memorandum which he wrote a month after publication of the reconstruction plan that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine would be a step opposed to the 'Atlantic Charter'. Casey stated explicitly: 'One would also like to see the Palestine Government put in a position to embark on a program of social services on a scale comparable with modern European standards, in order to attract the moderates of both races—particularly the Jews—towards co-operation in economic and social betterment and away from too exclusive dependence on purely "national" institutions.'¹⁸ In fact, Casey's assumption was that the reconstruction plan had the ability to constitute one of the most significant components in producing an alternative to the present Jewish leadership, in other words Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency Executive. Casey saw the plan as an appropriate response to the needs and desires of 'a considerable, though silent, mass of moderate Jews in Palestine who distrust and fear the present "national" leadership, but accept it because they see no alternative.'¹⁹

The feeling in the Mandatory government was that after Ben-Gurion's speech at the Assembly of Delegates and the sporadic expressions in the local press, the subject of reconstruction had disappeared from the public opinion agenda as well as that of the decision-makers on the Jewish side.²⁰ In point of fact, most of the Yishuv's attention was focused at that time on the fate of European Jewry, in three contexts: raising and allocating funds for rescue operations; the Bermuda Conference which was convened by the British and Americans on 19 April in order to discuss the 'refugee problem' and concluded with bitter disappointment; and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which began on the same day.²¹

On 28 April Harris denied a report in the anti-British Revisionist Movement's paper, *Hamashkif*, to the effect that he was involved in preparing a list of industrial plants destined to be closed down after the war and had invited Aryeh Shenkar, president of the Palestine Manufacturers' Association, to meet him in order to discuss issues affecting them in the context of the reconstruction plan.²² The next day, in a speech that Harris delivered at the YMCA Club in Jerusalem, he gave a detailed presentation of his opinion about how to implement the plan. In his mind's eye he dreamed of seeing Lydda airport become a centre for overnight stopovers by civil flights on their way from the metropolis in England to India and the Far East, and he enthusiastically described how freight would be trans-shipped to smaller aircraft which would fly to destinations in neighbouring Middle East countries: Cairo, Amman, Damascus, Beirut, Cyprus, Ankara and Baghdad.²³ Harris, who had stated emphatically in a lecture he gave six months earlier that 'imports are Palestine's life blood, and if they dry up, it dies',²⁴ did not hide from his listeners his basic attitude to Jewish industry in his new position also. According to him, this was an area which during wartime had provided an admirable response to strategic needs, but only a blind man could fail to discern that its development was not based on economic considerations. Many products were now being produced by local industry with practically no relationship to their cost, and at least some factories, which had been set up during the war, 'will inevitably have to close down', since at the end of the hostilities it

would be possible to import these goods more cheaply. 'Reconstruction will inevitably involve widespread reorganization, accompanied in some cases with dislocation and possibly also with heart-burning.' These truths, when uttered by Harris, sounded particularly unpleasant to Jewish ears, since they indicated that the government intended to play an active role in deciding which industrial fields would get the chop in the future. His statement that the citrus industry was, after all, the most important industrial branch of the Palestinian economy not only ignored the collapse of this sector during the war years, but also expressed the dominant pattern of thought among senior British civil servants as to the chances of a diversified, modern industrial sector existing in Palestine and its foreseeable development.²⁵ The public reverberations set off by Harris's speech, Shenkar's willingness to meet with him only with the approval of the Jewish Agency Executive (given Ben-Gurion's declaration of non-cooperation with the British over reconstruction) and the fact that Harris' administrative staff initiated explanatory activities about the reconstruction plan at Jewish factories forced the Jewish Agency Executive to call a meeting of the Jewish political institutions in order to take a binding decision about Zionist policy over this issue.²⁶

On 9 May, the Jewish Agency Executive accepted the 'non-cooperation' policy declared by Ben-Gurion at the Assembly of Delegates and decided to bring it for the approval of the Limited Zionist Executive, the senior Zionist body between the Zionist Movement Congresses. But the opponents of Ben-Gurion who denounced the 'non-cooperation' policy, led by Eliezer Kaplan (the director of the Jewish Agency's financial department and a senior Mapai figure), managed to get the agreement of the Jewish Agency Executive to invite the representatives of various economic bodies in the Yishuv and hear their views on the British reconstruction plan.²⁷

The British correctly estimated at the beginning of June that the opposition to the non-cooperation policy declared by Ben-Gurion had gained strength and Ben-Gurion 'has come in for some sharp criticism for his hasty and ill-considered adoption of an attitude which in the opinion of more moderate elements can do little good, and may do a great deal of harm, to the Zionist cause'.²⁸ This description was based first and foremost on the disagreement revealed in the consultation which the Jewish Agency Executive held with the heads of the economy and the local authorities on 16 May.²⁹

In addition to the nine heads of the civilian economy, invitations were also issued to seven of Ben-Gurion's trusted Mapai allies who were senior figures in the Histadrut economy establishment. The participation of the latter in the meeting, probably organised by Ben-Gurion, was intended to counter-balance the words of rebuke—delivered in the guise of grounds based on professional authority, knowledge and office and ostensibly devoid of any political involvement—which would be expressed at the meeting by individuals with political and social outlooks which ran counter to his. These individuals—Shenkar, the mayor of Tel Aviv, Israel Rokach, the mayor of Petah Tiqva, Yosef Sapir, the leader of the New Aliya party, advocate Pinchas Rosenblitt (Rosen), Zvi Butkovsky, one of the Farmers' Union leaders, Daniel Auster, who was deputy mayor of Jerusalem and the general manager of the Anglo-Palestine Bank, Eliezer Siegfried Hoofien—all advocated economic liberalism and political moderation. At the beginning of the consultation, Ben-Gurion incisively presented his

position condemning the reconstruction plan, describing it as a matter which would be put into practice by 'English clerks, with Jewish money, to benefit the Arabs'. Countering Ben-Gurion's clarification that when he referred to non-cooperation he meant only with regard to the reconstruction plan, the senior figures from the economy argued that everyday matters and matters relating to post-war planning were interwoven, and in real life no distinction could be drawn between them by means of political formulations. Hoofien added that an attempt to implement a non-cooperation approach would result in an 'extremely great disaster', which would isolate the Jewish Agency Executive from other players in the Yishuv and would leave just one step undone—the declaration of an 'uprising' against the British. Levy Skolnik (Eshkol) and Golda Mayerson (Meir), two of the Histadrut economy leaders, disagreed with them, arguing that, to judge by what they were saying, the only conclusion was that the Zionist cause in Palestine was a lost cause, whereas the driving force behind Zionism throughout its entire existence had always been a refusal to accept the facts on the ground as they were. The discussion concluded with a complete lack of agreement between the sides, with the right-wing representatives arguing that any development plan detracted to some extent from the implementation of the White Paper, while the labour movement people thought that providing any legitimacy for acting in conjunction with the government over reconstruction would accustom the Yishuv to going along with implementing the White Paper policy in all walks of life. There was just one subject over which there was no disagreement in the discussion: the statement by David Remez, the secretary of the Histadrut labour federation, to the effect that in Ben-Gurion's speech to the Assembly of Delegates he expressed the covert feelings of the Jewish public in Palestine 'from the driver to the housewife and the professor'.³⁰

A very real drama played out behind the scenes a few hours before the convening of the Limited Zionist Executive on 18 May. According to the intelligence department of the British police in Palestine, that is the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) version, the demands of the representatives of the economic bodies—that the decision to be taken in the Limited Zionist Executive be preceded by an internal discussion in their midst—encountered vehement opposition by Ben-Gurion and a statement that, if their demand were to stand, he would prevent the subject from being brought up for any discussion in this forum. The British also knew that the differences of opinion on this matter between Ben-Gurion and Moshe Shertok (Sharett), the head of the political department in the Jewish Agency from Mapai, were likely to bring about a crisis in Mapai.³¹

In actual fact, Ben-Gurion did not take part in the meeting of the Limited Zionist Executive on 18 May, and in any case the reconstruction plan was not discussed at it, but for a more prosaic reason. In an extraordinary meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive which took place that morning, Werner Senator, a representative of the non-Zionists in the Jewish Agency Executive and the administrator of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, insisted that, in the wake of the meeting held with the representatives of the economy, the executive rediscuss its position on reconstruction.³² His demand received the support of a majority of the executive's members, who wanted to

respond to pressure from a variety of economic circles and undermine the comprehensive opposition to any dialogue with the British about matters relating to future development. However, by virtue of his authority as chairman of the executive, Ben-Gurion refused to give in to this unprecedented demand, which in practice amounted to an expression of no confidence in his leadership and policy. At the end of the meeting, Ben-Gurion went to his office—and fainted.³³ In the course of a meeting of the Mapai secretariat which had taken place the previous evening and at which Mapai's position on reconstruction had been determined, and also during a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive on the morning of 18 May, dramatic notes were exchanged between Ben-Gurion and Shertok, who had recently returned from a mission in London and New York. In this correspondence, Ben-Gurion accused his colleague of circulating various charges against him, and in effect informed him that he was dismissed from his post as director of the Jewish Agency's Political Department.³⁴ What was clear is that Shertok was prevented from expressing himself in meetings dealing with reconstruction in the Jewish Agency Executive and Mapai. Initially, he ascribed his silence to the flimsy pretence that he had only recently returned to the country and had not yet studied the matter.³⁵ Apparently he had given Ben-Gurion his word that he would not express his opinion on the matter in the various institutions, but naturally the excuses chosen by him became ever lamer as the weeks went by. Over time, his silence became more and more embarrassing, not to say louder and louder and ever more awkward. Shertok's failure to fall in line with Ben-Gurion in his tooth-and-nail, tempestuous struggle against the reconstruction plan was clear to all, and weakened the validity of Ben-Gurion's stance. Thus Ben-Gurion became embroiled in a situation in which his two Mapai colleagues on the Jewish Agency Executive adopted a position opposed to his. This fact did not escape the attention of the British, who viewed it as a reason to expect that eventually the Yishuv would agree to become more flexible over reconstruction.³⁶

The unconscious Ben-Gurion was rushed to Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus. The doctors diagnosed him as suffering from lumbago, influenza and exhaustion. The daily papers carried reports that Ben-Gurion's speech at the Limited Zionist Executive had been cancelled as a result of the illness from which he was suffering, but his hospitalisation was kept secret and revealed only some ten days later, the day before he was discharged.³⁷ Ben-Gurion's physical collapse was not only an expression of his physical condition, but also evidence of the psychological stress from which he was suffering as a result of the enormous opposition he was encountering in his own party, the Jewish Agency Executive and among senior figures in the economy. It also augured the partial breakdown of the rigid line pursued by him and provided the advocates of dialogue with the British with an opportunity to undertake a series of contacts which led to the emergence of a more flexible line over the reconstruction plan.

On 23 May a letter, written in a somewhat more conciliatory tone and undoubtedly also taking account of their opponent's state of health, was sent to the Jewish Agency Executive, bearing the signatures of most of the right-wing individuals who had taken part in the consultations referred to above. The letter made it clear that they had no intention of taking part in the implementation of a plan based on the White Paper

policy. They expressed their displeasure at the monopoly of faithfulness to the Zionist goals to which representatives of the labour movement laid claim in the discussion, and gave their word that they had no intention of giving rise to the impression or illusion—from the British point of view—that heads of various branches of the economy were prepared to abandon the political future of the Jewish people in Palestine in return for assurances of support and development. Subject to this basic agreement, they insisted that a decision be taken to establish ties with those government departments involved on a day-to-day basis in making economic arrangements and improvements, including the department in charge of drawing up the reconstruction plan. They also asked for their letter to be presented to the Limited Zionist Executive, which was supposed to take a decision on the matter.³⁸ When their letter was presented at the meeting of the Limited Zionist Executive in July, Berl Katznelson (Ben-Gurion's fellow member of Mapai leadership) was furious about the 'manifesto' by 'seven Yishuv notables, Yishuv wise men, Yishuv economists', masquerading as opponents of the policy of the White Paper, but who when it came to the crunch went along with it and did everything to avoid a war against it.³⁹

As a result of Ben-Gurion's unexpected illness, the opponents of his approach achieved their immediate goal of postponing the date for taking a decision on the matter. They took advantage of his absence to get organised. They tried to hold more and more discussions on the ways of implementing reconstruction in specialised and internal forums so as to blunt the initial off-putting impression *vis-à-vis* reconstruction and to cool the fervour of the opposition to it, which had been kindled by Ben-Gurion. Their approach was to develop a broad front to support its promotion, crossing party political lines and realistically reflecting the crucial needs of a range of economic players and circles.

A report which MacMichael sent to the colonial secretary, Oliver Stanley, in mid-July stated that, among the Arabs, there was overwhelming willingness to take part in reconstruction, but, among the Jews, opinions were split between those who preferred to attach priority to changes in the political arena, those who were united under Ben-Gurion and those who attached top priority to economic development as a means of safeguarding the country's future. The impression given by MacMichael's description—as if the disagreement was between two camps of equal weight in the Yishuv—was unwarranted, because it excessively reinforced the public strength of the moderate circles. MacMichael thought that the position of those who opposed the reconstruction plan was based on the fear that, for a considerable proportion of the Yishuv, 'the conception of a Jewish state would lose its glamour when regarded beside the solid advantages of a bi-national state with a progressive programme of development and social services'.⁴⁰ This view was unfounded in respect of a few of those senior figures who wanted to tone down Ben-Gurion's negative approach, including Shertok, Kaplan, Remez and Shenkar. The high commissioner went so far as to mislead his superiors in London by describing Rokach and Hoofien as figures who, albeit not political leaders, 'are not without considerable political influence'. His forecast that the internal Jewish disagreement 'is likely to be determined by the shape and substance of the plans designed' in the framework of the reconstruction plan was refuted even before he could sign his report and send it to London.⁴¹

II

Ben-Gurion's speech opened the discussions of the Limited Zionist Executive meeting, which were held on 5 and 11 July. His speech was based on two fundamental motifs, presented with barbed sarcasm: the British intended to benefit the Arabs only and the political struggle demanded the abandoning of economic benefit options. In return, the British would expect an expression of Jewish approval for the closing of Palestine to Jews and to the political aspirations of the Jewish people. These achievements would necessarily come about 'at the expense of the Jews of Yemen, and at the expense of the Jews of Bulgaria and at the expense of the Jews of Iraq'. Under these circumstances, Ben-Gurion concluded, 'the question is: what should take priority? The Jews outside the country, or benefits for the Jews here?'⁴²

On 11 July, the discussions of the Limited Zionist Executive concluded with a series of decisions. In principle they adopted Ben-Gurion's viewpoint in his statement 'that the Jewish people and Palestine Jewry will have no part in the working out of the present Reconstruction Scheme'.⁴³ The upshot was the ratification in practice of his declaration at the Assembly of Delegates in March. Mistakenly, most public attention at the time was focused on the final section in the decisions, which read as follows:

A Small Advisory Committee to assist the Jewish Agency Executive will be set up by the Executive and the Vaad Leumi to ensure faithful adherence to these decisions and to review all border-line cases concerning Reconstruction. In the event of any differences within the Advisory Committee, the final decision will rest with the Jewish Agency Executive.⁴⁴

This section was depicted as stripping the vocal declarations about 'non-cooperation' of any meaningful content. What was the meaning of the decision to set up a form of 'exceptions committee', whose remit would be to provide exemptions from the ban on cooperating with those involved with reconstruction plans in the British government? In order to understand properly the willingness of Mapai, including Ben-Gurion, to go along with this demand, modified as appropriate, using the excuse that it was of great importance to ensure unity in the ranks in Zionism and the Yishuv, it is necessary to take cognisance of one of the political sleights of hand which were developed and became a fine art in Mapai institutions: stripping of content and authority those respected committees which were set up to their supporters' jubilation, to great clamour and acclaim (even though from the outset these bodies were seen as unnecessary for those who were at the cutting edge of decision-making), so that they would expire at the right moment without anyone considering them to have any further relevance. In practice it was agreed that it would be possible to hold ongoing discussions with the British on all matters which the moderates in the Yishuv managed to present as accruing to the benefit of the Jews. This was the best that could be achieved by Kaplan, Shertok, Remez and the other advocates of a moderate approach in Mapai, in the face of the unrelenting pressure brought to bear by Ben-Gurion to bring the relationship with Britain into maximum focus and to give him an absolute monopoly in determining what was contaminated by the spirit of the White Paper and what was free of it.

The decisions were endorsed by the Limited Zionist Executive by a majority of twenty-one to one. The result of the vote spoke eloquently to Mapai's strength in the Yishuv, to the extent that it managed to bring about a stance which satisfactorily reconciled the various positions prevalent in its midst. Henceforth, the degree to which the decisions of the Limited Zionist Executive could be implemented depended not only on the way in which they would be translated into the language of realities, but also on the rate at which things would evolve in the European war arena.

III

One of the vital aspects of the reconstruction struggle touched upon the issue of who would be the dominant player in shaping the picture of the future in the realities of Palestine. Beyond the political and economic struggle, with its party political and organisational implications, the question was who would determine the public agenda, bring about a sense of control over the political field of action, enjoy freedom of manoeuvre between a variety of alternatives according to the constraints of changing circumstances and acquire the legitimacy to direct and lead developments in the public arena. Since the bulk of the practical component in the reconstruction plan involved forging plans for implementation in the distant future, just as when this topic was originally addressed there was a struggle about what would happen in the 'here and now', so too there was a confrontation now about the content, nuances and extent of the horizon and about what might be expected beyond the horizon. When Ben-Gurion summed up the long months of confrontation over the subject of reconstruction, he explained to the Mapai activists:

Reality does not consist solely of what has been placed on the table, it does not consist of what exists today. Reality consists of what is evolving, reality consists of a historical process, reality consists of hidden forces and needs. This is what reality is built on—not on what exists, because sometimes we do not know what reality is built on. Distress and tragedy are reality, they are a major reality, and are equal to all realities.⁴⁵

As someone who on a number of occasions would allow himself to be carried away in flights of fancy in his speeches, and was able to evaluate the weight of the vision in political leadership and in shaping political reality,⁴⁶ it would appear that one of the factors which spurred Ben-Gurion into making his outspoken comments against the reconstruction plan at the Assembly of Delegates in March was the way in which MacMichael chose to conclude his speech on the subject the previous day. The high commissioner presented an existing situation, identified goals to be achieved and difficulties likely to stand in the way, and concluded his address with the following words:

Let us at least 'hitch our wagon to a star' and aim high in order that the scale of achievement may be such as to fill our citizens with the inspiration that is never lacking when a great endeavour is progressively and consistently pursued in an

atmosphere of freedom and with constructive intent. 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.'⁴⁷

In his April speech, in which he publicly presented his approach to reconstruction, Harris finished by quoting these very words by the commissioner, prefacing them by the following sentence: 'One cannot realize a dream unless one has dreamt it first.'⁴⁸ As Ben-Gurion saw things, the British attempt to snatch from under the labour movement's very nose one of the main stimuli for action and success in Zionist and settlement life—the dominance of the vision of an assured future for the Jews coming to the country—and to outline another, fundamentally opposing vision, contained a threat that must not be underestimated.

Senator continued to oppose the decision approved in the Limited Zionist Executive. *Inter alia*, Senator expressed his dissatisfaction at the fact that 'such a far-reaching political decision' had been taken without at the very least hearing the opinion of the president of the Zionist Federation, Chaim Weizmann.⁴⁹ Explaining his stand for the reconstruction plan, Senator wrote to Weizmann (and the British censorship tracked the letter) that the 'fact is clear beyond doubt to any responsible English official who had the opportunity to speak to any Jew' that 1939 White Paper will not prevail and added that he 'believe that an awareness of this fact is gradually exercising an influence on the minds of Englishmen here in Palestine.'⁵⁰ Senator was not being absentminded when he chose to make an outcry in Weizmann's name nor was he alone in what he expected of him in this context. Weizmann was the leading moderate among the Jews, with whom the British wanted to associate in order to promote the reconstruction plan. As soon as Weizmann returned in July from an extended visit of more than a year to the United States, the British minister resident in the Middle East, Richard Casey, who met Weizmann in London, expressed his desire for Weizmann to come to Palestine and promised to arrange a flight for him the moment he informed him that he was ready to travel. In this sense he was to experience a double disappointment. For his private reasons, Weizmann was not happy at the idea of leaving on another long journey, and, despite his pro-British ties, he refused even to pretend to be an interlocutor for discussions with them over reconstruction. Although acerbic wrangling between Weizmann and Ben-Gurion continued throughout the whole of 1943 over various policy issues, and the Mapai agenda contained a robust and protracted demand by Ben-Gurion to oust Weizmann from his position as president of the Zionist Federation,⁵¹ when it came to reconstruction their approach was similar. As far as industry in Palestine was concerned, Weizmann told Casey that the high commissioner did not understand 'that the development of industry depends to a great extent on one commodity: brain-power.'⁵² In a meeting with the colonial secretary, Oliver Stanley, Weizmann stated that the high commissioner's radio address about the reconstruction plan 'pre-supposes the continued existence of the White Paper as H. M. Government policy'. Weizmann went on to say with undisguised arrogance, mingled with scorn and bitter pain:

Who was Sir Douglas Harris that he should be empowered to decide what industries should or should not be maintained or developed in Palestine? He, Dr. Weizmann,

intended to build up a big chemical industry in Palestine, and would like to know who was going to prevent him from doing so? He had all the necessary data, and was willing to risk some five or six million dollars on the scheme.⁵³

If Weizmann, as the British came to realise, was not to be the saviour of their policy, then they could still hope to be saved by the committee for examining reconstruction matters, whose setting up was included in the decisions of the Limited Zionist Executive. In a report on the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive which took place on 18 July, the British civil service in Palestine revealed to the Colonial Office in London the beginnings of a process of incapacitating this committee by depriving it of substance, when just one week had elapsed from the agreement about its establishment. They provided an extremely detailed account of this discussion, whose subject was a fascinating, no-holds-barred struggle over the committee's composition. The British documentation, which is not contained in the minutes of the meeting available in Hebrew, described how the force of the sixth clause of the decision, which 'seemed at the time to leave the door open for a measure of cooperation in planning', dissolved and dissipated since, to the dismay of the British, 'Mr. Ben-Gurion and his clique are bent on packing the committee in order to ensure that there is no departure from his policy of rigid non-cooperation'.⁵⁴ Consultations between heads of the Yishuv about the committee's composition went on and on. On one occasion Ben-Gurion ascribed the protraction of the discussions to the fact that 'colleagues have gone away—some overseas on missions, others on holiday'. On 27 September, notification was sent to five members of the committee about their appointment—Shmuel Zochovitzky (one of the senior supporters of the Ben-Gurion line in the Farmers' Union), Berl Katznelson, Israel Rokach, Aryeh Shenkar and Levy Skolnik. A committee comprising Katznelson, Rokach and Shenkar could not have been considered in representative terms as a committee lacking serious weight in the life of the Yishuv. Ultimately, Ben-Gurion and his colleagues who shared his views had no intention of being perceived as distorting the decisions of the Zionist Movement's senior legislative institution between congresses. The committee met for the first time on 22 October 1943, elected Shenkar as its chairman and decided to hold its discussions once a week on Fridays. In practice, over four months or so it met just five times and invited a few specialists to appear before it. With that its business was concluded. The British administration's keenness for implementing the reconstruction plan could not cover up the absence of a meaningful clerical apparatus at the committee's disposal. As a result, it had absolutely no chance of successfully negotiating the bureaucratic hurdles lying in wait for it on its way to carrying out its remit.⁵⁵ As a result, the gloomy forecast of the British civil service came true in full measure, to the effect that Ben-Gurion 'has already been only too successful in dragooning those elements which opposed his policy into spineless acquiescence and it is doubtful whether they would in any event have the courage to place their cases for cooperation before the advisory committee'.⁵⁶

For the British, cooperation over industrialisation was the linchpin of the reconstruction plan. On 9 July, Britain's *Daily Mail* published an article by Walter Elliot, a Conservative MP and former minister of agriculture and minister of health, and a

leading supporter of the Zionist Movement in Britain. From the viewpoint of the British government in Palestine, Elliot's article appeared at the worst possible moment—on the very eve of the taking of a decision by the Limited Zionist Executive. Even worse, its content touched upon the most sensitive nerve of the reconstruction business from the British point of view—the argument prevalent in the Hebrew press that through the plan they were intending to leave Palestine a basically agricultural country, with negligible industry. Elliot spiced his argument with an explanation British ears, susceptible as they were to arguments about modernisation, understood only too well: 'Here is a country inhabited by two supremely ingenious, keen-witted, craftsman-nations, the Arabs and the Jews looking eagerly round for something to do, or they will be at each other's throats. . . . And the message of Britain, the citadel of Western industry, to this land. . . is—that it should concentrate on grape-fruits.'⁵⁷ The specific contrast of grapefruit with factories as the two alternative poles for developing the Palestinian economy hit the nail neatly on the head, achieving the article's purpose: to ridicule and mock the reconstruction plan.

The high commissioner authorised Harris to react to the repercussions triggered by Elliot's article in Palestine by means of a comprehensive letter of denial which, signed by him, was sent to the *Palestine Post*. Credit for the interpretation of British intentions to leave Palestine as an agricultural country must go to Ben-Gurion. His interpretation of this matter in his address to the Assembly of Delegates came to permeate the entire Yishuv political spectrum as an undisputed truth. British attempts to refute this charge over and over again were a resounding failure.⁵⁸ Harris, on the other hand, held working meetings with Shenkar on 19 and 27 August, at which he did his best to convince him of the vital need for cooperation between the manufacturers and the British. Harris promised that the fact that the reworked plan would be jointly submitted to London, under the auspices and on behalf of the Palestinian government, 'would probably put Palestinian industries in a privileged position compared with industries in other counties where this was not the case'. The amazingly disingenuous argument chosen by Harris in his attempt to convince Shenkar and his colleagues to hitch their wagon to the British reconstruction star was predicated on the assumption that Harris had control over what happened elsewhere in the world and over priorities to be set in London according to unknown interests. Shenkar informed Harris that he would provide him with an authoritative response by the body which he headed.⁵⁹ But his loyalty to the decisions of the Limited Zionist Executive guaranteed that this would be a negative response. Even though the Farmers' Union was considered the most steadfast economic bastion of the British in Palestine, its support for reconstruction collapsed as well. Despite a faltering gesture by its heads in favour of continuing dialogue on the subject with the British, they were also compelled to fall in line with the rigid Jewish policy adopted with regard to the reconstruction plan.⁶⁰

On 6 September, the local British civil service reported in despair to its counterpart in London on 'the extent to which political considerations have won the day over those economic elements which were anxious to give Government their cooperation'. Economic players who in late 1942 and early 1943 had time and time again expressed their desire to clarify matters in the economic sphere relating to Palestine's future, and

promised to help the British to the best of their ability in this respect (first and foremost among them the Palestine Manufacturers' Association under Shenkar's leadership), to the despair of the British now wriggled out of any discussions, cooperation or presentation of relevant data and information. Without them, the British found it difficult to work out a fact-based programme, without which any reconstruction plan was worthless.⁶¹ In this sense the industrialists' conduct was simply one example of a form of behaviour adopted by other economic and financial elements of Yishuv society which were not overtly affiliated with the Histadrut or identified with socialist ideology. Following receipt of the notes of the meetings between Shenkar and Harris, the internal correspondence between the Colonial Office's functionaries on the Palestinian reconstruction plan concluded with an assessment that this 'shows how certain hopes that the industrialists might adopt a more reasonable attitude towards post-war reconstruction are likely to be frustrated by the dictates of the Jewish Agency. No action is necessary, so? Put by.'⁶² As a result, the British reconstruction plan was removed from the Zionist agenda.

IV

The assumption which guided British policy on reconstruction was that sufficient support could be mustered among the Jews to make it possible to promote the planning of essentially economic steps while presenting them as separate from the political tension over Palestine's political future and the Jewish-Arab confrontation with regard to control over the country. Actually, on 7 July MacMichael asked the Colonial Office that expenditure of £50,000 over the next five years from United Kingdom funds be allocated for the maintenance of architectural staff to assist at once and subsequently to implement the programme for post-war reconstruction and development of Palestine. After consultation with Harris who visited London, the British treasury decided six months later, and Stanley confirmed, approval for this purpose of a grant of only £14,000 until the end of 1945.⁶³

In between the two days of discussions on reconstruction that took place at the Limited Zionist Executive in July, Ben-Gurion took advantage of a countrywide meeting of Mapai branch representatives to warn his fellow participants not to delude themselves that the passing of the formal decision at the Zionist institution would bring the confrontation to an end. 'This is just the beginning,' he said, 'because the struggle against the policy of the White Paper is an uncompromising one.'⁶⁴ The successful instilling in Jewish public consciousness of the view that there was an inseparable bond between the White Paper and reconstruction was Ben-Gurion's major achievement in terms of consciousness-raising, an achievement which was the upshot of tempestuous struggles fraught with agonising crises. However, as someone who sought to educate those of his listeners who were well down the party hierarchy to prepare for other days and other decisions as well, and was aware that then he would be forced to present them with political alternatives which would be described differently in public terms, Ben-Gurion was careful to make the following point: 'I consider compromises to be important. I think that if

we do not acquire the ability to compromise where necessary, we will not implement our undertaking.⁶⁵

Notes

- [1] 'Planning Palestine's Future', *Palestine Post*, 24 March 1943.
- [2] On Palestine, Britain and the Jews during the Second World War see, for example, Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*; Zweig, *Britain and Palestine*.
- [3] See, for example, Cohen, *The British Cabinet*; Cohen, *Palestine*, 160–71; Zweig, *Britain and Palestine*, 170–75. An exception is Hacothen, *From Fantasy to Reality*, 64–81, which addresses a few issues discussed in this article.
- [4] Louis, *Imperialism at Bay*, 251–58; Butler, 'Reconstruction, Development and the Entrepreneurial State', 29–55.
- [5] 'Notices', *The Palestine Gazette*, 25 March 1943, 263.
- [6] 'Official Communiqué', *Davar*, 23 March 1943; 'Planning Palestine's Future: High Commissioner, in Broadcast, Outlines Reconstruction Programme', *Palestine Post*, 24 March 1943.
- [7] Winston Churchill, 'A Four Years' Plan', 21 March 1943, in Eade, ed., *Onwards to Victory*, 33–45.
- [8] Carr, *Conditions of Peace*, 280.
- [9] See, for example, Bevin, *Job to Be Done*; Einzig, *Can We Win the Peace?*; Jordan, ed., *Problems of Post-War Reconstruction*.
- [10] Brooke, *Labour's War*, 171–72.
- [11] See, for example, Addison, *Road to 1945*, 164–89, 211–28; Calder, *People's War*, 524–50.
- [12] 'Planning Palestine's Future', *Palestine Post*, 24 March 1943.
- [13] Horowitz, *Palestinian Economy*, 180–237; Gross and Metzger, 'Palestine in World War II', 59–82.
- [14] Letter, MacMichael to Stanley, 21 Jan. 1943, The National Archives, London (TNA), CO 852/506/22. See the remarks added to this letter in the file.
- [15] Letter, Macpherson (officer administering the Palestine government) to Stanley, 19 April 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/12. See the remarks added to this letter in the file.
- [16] Minutes of Assembly of Delegates, 24 March 1943, Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem (CZA) J1/7220.
- [17] 'From Day to Day: The Government and the Future of the Country', *Ha'aretz*, 25 March 1943.
- [18] R. G. C[asey], 'War Cabinet: Palestine—Memorandum by the Minister of State', 21 April 1943, in Cohen, *The British Cabinet*, 131.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 128; Gelber, 'British and Zionist Policies', 342–4.
- [20] See, Alan Saunders, Palestine Police Inspector General, 'Jewish Affairs: The Jews and Reconstruction', Criminal Investigation Department (CID), 28 May 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [21] Porat, *Blue and the Yellow Stars*, 56–87.
- [22] Letter, Sir Douglas Harris to Aryeh Shenkar, 28 April 1943, CZA S53/1874.
- [23] Harris, *Post-War Reconstruction*, 8.
- [24] Harris, *Supplies in War-Time*, 1.
- [25] Harris, *Post-War Reconstruction*, 10–11.
- [26] Peretz Berenshtein, 'The Hour Questions: Construction or Reconstruction', *Ha'boker*, 9 April 1943; Letter, Shenkar to Shmorak, 7 May 1943, CZA S8/856.
- [27] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive, 9 May 1943, CZA.
- [28] Letter, Robert Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to E. B. Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 2 June 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [29] Saunders, 'Jewish Affairs', 28 May 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [30] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive with some participants to discuss the reconstruction plan, 16 May 1943, CZA.
- [31] Saunders, 'Jewish Affairs', 28 May 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.

- [32] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive, 18 May 1943, CZA.
- [33] On Ben-Gurion's faint, see Teveth, *Zeal of David*, 111–12.
- [34] On the notes exchanged between Ben-Gurion and Shertok, see Sharett, *Personal Diary*, 184–6.
- [35] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive, 9 May 1943, CZA.
- [36] See letter, Harold MacMichael to Oliver Stanly, 17 July 1943, PRO, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [37] Teveth, *Zeal of David*, 112.
- [38] Letter, Auster, Hoofien, Sapir, Rosenblitt, Rokach and Shenkar to the Jewish Agency Executive, 23 May 1943, CZA S53/1786; letter, Hoofien to the Secretary of the Jewish Agency Executive, 28 May 1943, CZA S25/300.
- [39] Minutes of the limited Zionist Executive Committee, 11 July 1943, CZA.
- [40] Letter, MacMichael to Stanley, 17 July 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] Minutes of the limited Zionist Executive Committee, 5 July 1943, 11 July 1943, CZA.
- [43] 'The Decisions of the Zionist Executive Committee on the Reconstruction', *Davar*, 13 July 1943.
- [44] *Ibid.*
- [45] David Ben-Gurion lecture in a seminar to Jewish immigrants from Central Europe in Kfar Yedidya, 5 Nov. 1943, Ben-Gurion Archives, Sede Boqer (BGA), Department of Lectures and Articles.
- [46] See, Tzahor, *Vision and Reckoning*, 211–33.
- [47] 'Planning Palestine's Future', *Palestine Post*, 24 March 1943.
- [48] Harris, *Post-War Reconstruction*, 14.
- [49] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive, 18 July 1943, CZA.
- [50] Letter, Senator to Weizmann, 24 Aug. 1943, TNA, CO 733/443/24.
- [51] See, for example, Teveth, *Zeal of David*, 116–38.
- [52] Memo on Casey-Weizmann interview, 15 July 1943, Weizmann Archives (WA), Rehovot.
- [53] Minutes of the Political Committee of the Jewish Agency Executive in London, 8 July 1943, 9 July 1943, WA.
- [54] Letter, Robert Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to E. B. Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 19 Aug. 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [55] Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive, 25 July 1943, 12 Sept. 1943, 19 Sept. 1943, CZA; Minutes of the Vaad Leumi Executive, 12 July 1943, CZA J1/7256; Minutes of a special consultation on the Reconstruction Committee, 9 Aug. 1943, CZA S53/1786; Minutes of the Committee for examining Reconstruction matters, 22 Oct. 1943, 12 Nov. 1943, 10 Dec. 1943, 23 Jan. 1944, 2 Feb. 1944, CZA J1/3023.
- [56] Letter, Robert Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to E. B. Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 19 Aug. 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [57] Walter Elliot, 'A Time for Greatness', *The Daily Mail*, 9 July 1943; letter, Robert Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to E. B. Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 29 July 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [58] Douglas Harris, 'Readers' Letters: From the Commissioner For Reconstruction', *Palestine Post*, 21 July 1943; letter, Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 29 July 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14; Minutes of Assembly of Delegates, 24 March 1943, CZA J1/7220.
- [59] Douglas Harris, 'Note of two interviews with Mr. Shenkar', 19 Aug. 1943, 27 Aug. 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14; Letter, Shenkar to Ben-Gurion, 12 Oct. 1943, CZA S53/1786.
- [60] 'The Farmers' Union Won't Collaborate with the Reconstruction', *Ha'aretz*, 30 July 1943.
- [61] Letter, Robert Scott, Deputy Chief Secretary, Jerusalem, to E. B. Boyd, Colonial Office, London, 6 Sept. 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.
- [62] Internal correspondence between the Colonial Office's functionaries, 6 Sept. 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/14.

- [63] Letter, MacMichael to Stanley, 7 July 1943, TNA, CO 733/449/12; letter, Secretary of the Colonies to MacMichael, 3 Dec. 1943, *ibid.*
- [64] Minutes of a countrywide meeting of Mapai branch representatives, 8 July 1943, BGA, Department of Lectures and Articles.
- [65] *Ibid.*

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