

# The Egg of Columbus

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I DON'T KNOW when the wheel was invented, or who invented it.

However, I have no doubt that it was invented again and again, with many happy inventors sharing the glory.

The same is true for the Israeli-Palestinian Confederation. From time to time it appears in public as a brand-new idea, with another group of inventors proudly presenting it to the public.

This just shows that you cannot suppress a good idea. It appears again and again. During the last few weeks, it has appeared in several articles, presented by new inventors.

Every time it happens, I would take off my hat, if I had one. As Europeans used to do when they met a lady or an old acquaintance.

ACTUALLY, the United Nations Partition Plan adopted by the General Assembly on November 29, 1947 (Resolution 181) already proposed a kind of confederation, though without using the term. It said that the two new states that it created—one Arab, one Jewish, with Jerusalem as a separate unit—would be united in an “economic union”.

A few days later, the “war of 1948” broke out. It was a bitter and cruel war, and when it ended in early 1949, nothing of the UN resolution remained. There were still some desultory negotiations, but they petered out.

The war had created “facts on the ground”—Israel controlled vastly more territory than was allotted to it, Jordan and Egypt had taken over what was left. Palestine had ceased to exist, the very name erased from the map, with half the Palestinian people evicted from their homes.

Immediately after the war, I tried to set up a group of young Jews, Muslims and Druze to propagate the setting up of a Palestinian state next to the new State of Israel. This initiative led nowhere. In 1954, when some Palestinians in the West Bank revolted against their Jordanian masters, I published a call for the Israeli government to support the creation of a Palestinian state. It was ignored.

It was three years later that the idea of an Israeli-Palestinian federation first took on a serious form. The

1956 Israeli attack on Egypt, in collusion with France and the UK, aroused the disgust of many Israelis. In the middle of the war, I got a phone call from Nathan Yellin-Mor. He proposed that we do something about it.

Yellin-Mor had been the political leader of Lehi (alias the Stern Gang) the most extreme of the three underground organizations that fought against British rule. I was the owner and editor-in-chief of a popular news magazine.

We set up a group called Semitic Action. As a first step, we decided to compose a document. Not one of those flimsy political programs that are published today and forgotten tomorrow, but a serious plan for the total overhaul of the State of Israel. It took us more than a year.

We were some 20 people, most of them prominent in their field, and met at least once a week for our deliberations. We divided the subjects among us. The subject of peace with the Arabs fell to me.

THE BASIS of the new creed was that we Israelis are a new nation—not outside the Jewish people but a part of it, much like Australia was a new nation within the Anglo-Saxon community. A new nation created by its geo-political situation, climate, culture and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

In our view, the new “Hebrew” nation was a part of the “Semitic Region” and therefore a natural ally of the Arab nations. (We categorically refused to call it “Middle East”, an Eurocentric, imperialist term.)

In a dozen detailed paragraphs we outlined the structure of a federation that would consist of the two sovereign states of Israel and Palestine and be in charge of their joint economic and other interests. Citizens of either of the two states would travel freely in the other one, but not be allowed to settle there.

We foresaw that this federation would in due course become part of a wider confederation of all the countries of the Semitic region in Asia and Africa.

Other chapters dealt with the total separation between state and religion, free immigration, relations with the Jewish communities around the world and a social-democratic economy.

The document, called “The Hebrew Manifesto”, was published before the State of Israel was ten years old.

<sup>1</sup>This idea itself was not quite new. In the early 1940s, a handful of poets and writers, nicknamed the Canaanites, had proposed something similar, but denied any connection with the world Jewish people and also denied the existence of the Arab nation or nations.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, the man who “discovered” America, was asked how to make an egg stand up. He knocked the end of the egg on the table and lo and behold—it stood.

Since then, the “Egg of Columbus” has become proverbial in many languages, including Hebrew. The idea of a federation in Palestine is such an egg. It combines two principles: that there would be one country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and that both Israelis and Palestinians would live in their own independent state.

The “Whole of Eretz Israel” and the “Whole of Palestine” are right-wing slogans. The “Two-state Solution” belongs to the Left.

In this debate, “federation” and “confederation” are often used interchangeably. And indeed, no one quite knows the difference.

It is generally agreed that in a federation, the central authority has more powers, while in a “confederation” more powers are vested in the component units. But that is a vague distinction.

The American civil war was fought between the Southern “confederacy” which wanted to retain the rights of the component states in many fields, (with the fields tended by slaves), and the federation of the North, which wanted the central government to retain most of the important powers.

The world is full of federations and confederations. The United States, the Russian Federation, the Confederation Suisse, the United Kingdom, the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (official translation: Federal Republic of Germany) and so on.

There are no two among them which resemble each other completely. States are as different from each other as human beings. Each state is the product of its geography, the special character of its peoples, its history, its wars, loves and hatreds.

Members of a federation do not have to love each other. Last week, in a bizarre way, the American civil war was fought again in a Southern city, at the foot of the statue

of a Southern general. Bavarians have no great love for the “Prussians” of the north, Many Scots would love to get rid of the bloody English, as would many Quebecois from Canada. But common interests are strong, and very often they prevail.

When it is not a marriage of love, it is at least a marriage of convenience.

Technical advances and the demands of the modern economy drive the world together into larger and larger units. The much-maligned “globalization” is a global necessity. People who today wave the “Bonnie Blue Flag” or the Swastika are ridiculous.

One day in the future people will pity them as people today pity the Luddites, who smashed the machines at the beginning of the industrial era.

BACK TO us.

The idea of a federation or confederation of Israel/Palestine may sound simple, but it is not. There are many obstacles.

First of all, there is the vast difference in the living standards of the two peoples. It would necessitate massive help from the rich world for the Palestinians.

The historical hate between the two peoples, not since 1967, not since 1948, but right from the beginning in 1882, must be overcome. This is not the job of politicians, but of writers and poets, historians and philosophers, musicians and dancers.

This looks like a daunting mission, but I am deeply convinced that it is easier than it looks. In Israeli hospitals (doctors and nurses), in universities (professors and students), and, naturally, in joint peace demonstrations, bridges between the two peoples are already in place.

The very fact that the federation idea crops up again and again shows its necessity. The groups of activists who are bringing it up now were not yet born when we first proposed the idea—yet their message sounds new and fresh.

May their cause prosper.