The time has come to begin “imagining” a truly New Middle East. Bereft of a peace process (if there ever was one), faced with an Occupation spewing violence and suffering in all directions, the inhabitants of both Palestine and Israel have sunk into a fatalistic hopelessness. It is precisely at this juncture, when there seems to be no way out, that both a vision and a practical solution are called for, if only to dispel the almost mystical notion, held by many, that the conflict is irresolvable.

As occupation and repression deepen, previously unthinkable thoughts have begun to percolate to the surface. What if Sharon has won? What if the Occupation is in fact irreversible? What if the two-state solution, clutched so fiercely by Israeli liberals, is no longer feasible, unless we accept a truncated bantustan on pieces of the West Bank as a legitimate Palestinian “state”? As the Occupation reaches a critical mass and the Occupied Territories become incorporated into the very fabric of Israel’s urban areas and highway system, it is difficult to envision any force capable of rolling Israel’s presence back to a point where a viable Palestinian state could emerge. As the two-state solution recedes, where can we go to avoid apartheid or the transfer of Palestinians out of the country? The PLO Negotiating Affairs Department recently circulated a working paper <www.nad-plo.org> suggesting that the Palestinian accept the “fact” that the country has been made into one and demand citizenship and equal rights – the secular democratic state arising on its creator, Sharon. Others have suggested a bi-national state, though the chance of such a proposal being accepted by Israel is about equal to ending the Occupation. Alternative Visions for Peace, a Palestinian-American group based at the University of Wisconsin, recently published a plan <www.ap-agenda.org> based on the idea of an Israeli-Palestinian federation.

This is the time, at the darkest hour ever known to both peoples, that we must begin searching for a way out. We must come up with our own road map and pursue it tirelessly, because to cling to outdated “solutions” helps no one. Pursuing old remedies that ignore current realities may be comforting, but it is the height of irresponsibility. And why should we wait for Bush to present a road map? Why should we allow Sharon, Peres and the rest to dictate our reality? Activism is fine, protest is good, resistance is necessary, but without a plan, a way out, a road map, and without a strategy to achieve it, all our activities are meaningless.

Since we are at the stage of brainstorming, of trying to cope with the seeming endlessness of the conflict, the downward spiral of violence, death, suffering and repression, I thought I would toss my own thoughts into the pot. They are meant to contribute to the emerging discussion over future possibilities, but are not meant to be part of a merely academic exercise. We should move quickly to consolidate our analyses into plans and strategies of action. I envision a two-stage process incorporating an Israel and a Palestine state into a regional confederation which encompasses all the countries of the immediate region – Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – with further future expansion possible. It is an approach
that has not been discussed much in the past, but it seems to me to offer a promising direction of thought.

**A Place To Begin**

Let’s begin by asking what broad needs and dynamics have to be addressed in a process of peace-making, reconciliation, political restructuring and development that involves not only Israelis and Palestinians but the wider region as well. Proposed solutions have to deal with dynamic processes of accommodation and structural problems of “fit.” Any workable political solution must take into account:

* The experiences, narratives, claims and needs of the major groups in the region – national, ethnic, religious and political – connected in particular to the issue of self-determination. For a sustainable political solution to emerge in our region, no party can “win.” Mutual accommodation means creating a process of inclusion and dialogue in which the voices of all the major groups may be heard, in which “ownership” of any peace program is shared. This does not mean that everyone will agree on each item, but that a process of accommodation that is transparent, inclusive and respective of others’ experiences and requirements will generate the trust and good will upon which any political arrangement must be based. Mutual respect, listening and accommodation are prerequisites to a just and lasting Middle East peace. They will lay the foundations for the regional system that must eventually emerge.

* The differential power each party wields in the proposed political system. Any agreed-upon political solution must be sensitive to historic experiences and the scars of past conflicts, as well as offering security and a meaningful measure of self-determination to the various parties.

* The economic viability and developmental potential of the entire region as well as its constituent parts. The reason why a regional solution is needed for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that the problems facing the two peoples are regional in scope – refugees, security, economic development, water, self-determination. They cannot be resolved within the confines of Palestine-Israel. At the same time the entire region must develop evenly or it will remain too unstable for any localized peace to succeed.

* Dynamic processes of everyday life, both collective and individual. Solutions cannot be mechanical. While particular issues of self-determination, cultural space and economic viability must be addressed, so too must the reality that the region’s states cannot be self-sufficient and self-contained. The massive displacement of Palestinians since 1948, together with the limited size and resources of their prospective state, has created a trans-state reality in the region. Peoples’ loci of personal life do not coincide with the loci of their national existence. A Palestinian state will not be able to accommodate all the refugees and Diaspora Palestinians who would seek citizenship, nor will all Palestinians seeking self-determination be willing or able to relocate from places in the region where they have lived for decades. A system is required whereby citizenship in a particular state does not limit one’s ability to move, reside and work throughout the entire region. It must also accommodate major economic developments and intra-regional labor movements.
*  The possibility that envisioned political and social forms that may evolve in ways as yet unanticipated. Any political “solution” must be viewed as a work in progress, just as its formulation must derive from a dynamic process of accommodation. Solutions that lock populations into static and inadequate units, as did Barak’s “generous offer,” are doomed to failure. With so much displacement, such major reconfiguration, such dormant economic potential and the need to integrate into a rapidly changing global reality, the ability to evolve in unexpected ways is crucial.

These are the overarching considerations that, I suggest, must be addressed if a sustainable peace in the Middle East is to be achieved. So where does this leave us in terms of the tragic mess we have made for ourselves?

**The Various Options**

Looked at in its regional context, the case of Palestine/Israel raises at least six possible political frameworks: two states, in which the Palestinian entity is either a truly independent state or a dependent bantustan; a federal bi-national state, an inclusive unitary state, apartheid or a regional confederation.

**Two “Real” States: Israel and Palestine.** This approach reverts to the idea of partition, the “two-state solution” traditionally favored by Israel’s peace camp, affirmed by the President Bush’s June 2002 policy statement US and accepted by Israel in a meeting of the UN on November 29, 2002. Its strength comes from recognition that the two peoples involved consider themselves national entities. The claims of each for self-determination require separate states. (Some proposals envision a limited confederal arrangement between the two states for purposes of coordinating trade, movement, fiscal affairs and the like.)

For practical rather than conceptual reasons, I would argue that the two-stated option cannot serve as a stand-alone solution for the following reasons:

1. The state of Israel comprises 78% of Mandatory Palestine, leaving the Palestinians with only 22%. Even if the Occupation ends completely (a dubious proposition), the viability of any Palestinian state is still doubtful. If the occupation does not end and Israel’s Matrix of Control remains, then the “two-state solution” becomes merely a guise for apartheid. The likelihood that Israel would cede major portions of its territory to a Palestinian state is extremely remote.

2. The major issues facing the Palestinians, Israel and the rest of region – refugees, the Palestinian population in Israel, security, economic development and water, to name but a few – are regional in scope, and cannot be adequately addressed within the limited framework of Israel/Palestine.

3. The two-state solution leaves Israel a “Jewish state,” and does not address the status of the Palestinians living in Israel. Indeed, it does address the tremendous intertwining and intermingling of the two peoples, who have been described as “intimate enemies.”
Despite its drawbacks, the “two-state solution” gains viability, and is even required, as a first stage of a more comprehensive regional solution, as we will discuss presently.

**Two States: Israel Over a Palestinian Bantustan.** But there is another, more dangerous twist to the “two-state solution;” its usefulness in imposing on the Palestinians a bantustan along the lines of those South Africa tried to create during the apartheid era. Sharon’s recent endorsement of the two-state approach does not mean he now accepts the need for Palestinian self-determination and is willing to relinquish major parts of the Land of Israel in favor of a viable Palestinian state that will live in harmony with Israel. Far from it. A bantustan fits well into Sharon’s “Greater Land of Israel” strategy. He would prefer outright annexation of Judea, Samaria and Gaza, foreclosing any possible Palestinian state. He (like the heads of all Israeli governments) rejects the notion that Israel has an occupation at all. After all, how can you occupy your own country? He (like the heads of all Israeli government) would never relinquish overall control over the entire country between the Mediterranean and the Jordan. But he and the others face two undeniable realities. First, that Israel cannot “digest” the three and a half million Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories. If it annexes the West Bank and Gaza and extends citizenship to their Palestinian inhabitants, Israel will turn into a bi-national state – the antithesis of the Zionist program and an absolute non-starter for Israelis. If, however, Israel annexes the Occupied territories and does not extend citizenship to their inhabitants, it has created an outright situation of apartheid – difficult to sustain and “sell.” The trick, then, is to create a Palestinian mini-state of truncated cantons that encompass the Palestinian population, thus relieving Israel of responsibility, while leaving it in *de facto* control of the entire country.

If Israel can “sell” the bantustan as a legitimate Palestinian state, then it has met the second reality: the insistence of the international community that some kind of Palestinian state be established, if only to get this eternal issue off the agenda. Israeli political leaders believe that the public – Israeli as well as international – is so fed up by this interminable conflict that it will welcome any resolution, even if it is not ideal. For that reason Israel believes that it can get away with creating a bantustan even where South Africa could not. This is the position of both major Israeli parties, Labor and Likud, and formed the basis of the “National Unity” government under Sharon, the most harmonious coalition Israel ever enjoyed. The only disagreement between the two is over how large the Palestinian bantustan should be. Labor, concerned about the economic viability of a Palestinian “state” and its potential drag on the Israeli economy, favors a larger bantustan on up to 85% of the territories, thus leaving the major settlement blocs – and overall Israeli control – intact. The Likud, loathe to concede any part of the Land of Israel, reluctantly agrees to a Palestinian mini-state on 42% of the West Bank and (perhaps) all of Gaza. This represents Sharon’s “painful concessions.”

The same “two-state solution” can cut either way, then. It can be a constructive step towards true Palestinian self-determination within a viable regional framework, or it can represent a permanent state of apartheid. The difference between the two is not only territorial. Leaving only a strategic 10-15% of the West Bank under Israeli control would spell the difference between a viable Palestinian state with the potential to develop, and a bantustan. Israel is banking on the anxiousness of the international community to remove this conflict from the agenda, and thus on its reluctance to “quibble” about a few percentages of land. This is why “viability” must be part of the equation, not merely Palestinian statehood.
A Federal Bi-national State. This is a variation on the two-state idea, favored by many Palestinians because it offers them self-determination and access to the entire country. Rather than two states, a single “bi-national” state would arise consisting of two discrete “Palestinian” and “Jewish” areas, or a connected series of cantons, that are granted a kind of autonomy (something like an American state). The bi-national state would provide a common citizenship and, presumably, the freedom to live anywhere within the state (although how the autonomous character of each canton would be preserved is unclear). Israeli settlers could remain in Israeli enclaves in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, while Palestinians could resettle areas such as the Galilee, Jaffa, Lydda, Ramle and perhaps the northern Negev. It also offers greater economic viability to the Palestinians who would not be confined to a resource-poor min-state.

Still, a bi-national approach contains probably fatal drawbacks:

(1) Palestinians and Israeli Jews constitute national entities, not ethnic groups. Their fundamental and competing claims of self-determination rule out a common state framework. A bi-national rather than unitary state assumes a certain incompatibility, a competition for hegemony, even simmering hostility, and as such is a kind of halfway measure that does not promise long-term stability. It falls short of both self-determination and full equality as citizens in a shared state

(2) The two populations are so intertwined that the creation of discrete population blocs is impossible. Any system of cantons relies on artificial and transient population clusters that stand in opposition to dynamic processes on the ground. Demographics create majorities and minorities that do not always coincide with political claims and counter-claims over territory, especially where large numbers of refugees must be accommodated. Populations also move in response to economic opportunities. Land ownership, transportation systems, sites of religious or historical significance often cross-cut neat territorial units. A bi-national scheme also locks members of dynamic societies into predetermined categories they may or may not accept. It assumes, for example, that Palestinian citizens of Israel would choose to live in Palestinian cantons, an assumption that remains to be seen.

(3) The problem of hegemony. The entry of the Palestinians into any common state framework with Israelis at too early a stage, without a semblance of economic, institutional or political parity, carries the risk of turning the Palestinians into a permanent underclass.

(4) Such a truncated state does not give the Palestinians the space to address the return of the refugees.

An Inclusive Unitary State. Before adopting a two-state approach, the PLO favored a “secular democratic” state that would encompass both the Palestinian and Jewish populations of the country. The PLO Negotiating Support Team recently circulated a paper suggesting that the “facts on the ground,” the massive presence of Israel’s Occupation combined with its virtual incorporation of the Occupied Territories into Israel proper, may be creating a situation where the two-state solution is no longer viable. It raises the question, suggested by Sari Nusseibeih and other Palestinian intellectuals, whether the Palestinians should not claim equal rights in a unitary state
covering the entire country, thus neutralizing the exclusivity and control inherent in the Occupation. If we can’t end the Occupation, this line of reasoning goes, let’s work around it. Israel has created one integral country by its own hand. Israeli refusal would expose the naked apartheid towards which its occupation policies are inexorably leading.

Demanding equal rights means creating, *de facto*, a secular democratic state. Whether or not the Occupation is reversible is a question well worth examining. But the unitary state approach, in my opinion, suffers from several fatal shortcomings:

(1) As mentioned, the attempt to place two national entities – and entities with a history of opposing claims and bitter conflict no less – in one political framework has little chance of success since each demands self-determination and cannot be subsumed to another civil identity, as can ethnic groups.

(2) As a political and economic entity Israel is much stronger than the Palestinian polity (Israel’s economy is currently more than 40 times larger than the Palestinians’), and the Israeli Jewish population enjoys far greater education, access to employment and income than does the Palestinian. Any attempt to rush the integration of the two peoples might result in the Palestinians being consigned permanently to an underclass, much like the black African population of contemporary South Africa. The issue of Israeli hegemony, present even in two-state and regional approaches, must be confronted.

(3) The notion of a unitary state contradicts completely the principle of Jewish self-determination as embodied in the Zionist movement and the Israeli state, a claim that Israel will not relinquish. If the Palestinians speak of a democratic state of all its citizens, what Israeli Jews hear is a state with a Palestinian majority in the entire country, realization of the refugees’ Right of Return and the subordination of the Jewish population to a hostile Palestinian population.

Some Palestinians, realizing this, have suggested a two-stage approach whereby an admittedly non-viable Palestinian state is created in as much of the Occupied territories as possible, with the understanding that after a period of trust-building and joint economic development, the two states would merge into a single unit, bi-national or unitary. The cogency of this approach stems from the fact that the geographies, economies and lives of both peoples are so intertwined, and that the Occupation will not be significantly rolled back. But it is a non-starter from an Israeli point of view, and separate nation-states almost never merge. This approach can easily be deflected by Israel. It will offer a two-state-cum-bantustan solution, as Sharon has done – perhaps even a “generous” bantustan as Barak had in mind -- thus effectively warding off demands for a single state that would imperil Israel’s existence as a Jewish state.

**A Unitary State: Apartheid.** Although a unitary state is advanced by those who favor an absolute end to occupation and the exclusivity of a Jewish state, it is also an approach advocated by the far right-wing of Israel, led by Netanyahu and proponents of “transfer.” Fearful that any Palestinian state would compromise Jewish claims over the land, they envision an Israeli state extending from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. In this version of “maximalist Zionism,” the “Arabs” (this camp would seldom
use the term “Palestinians”) would be “transferred” to other Arab states. There they would be “happier,” and if the Palestinians want to establish a state in Jordan (Sharon’s old plan), that would be fine. Arabs who wish to remain in the Land/State of Israel could do so, but only if they recognize Jewish sovereignty and accept a limited form of citizenship.

Since the international community demands a Palestinian state (in whatever form), and since a Palestinian mini-state is more “sellable” than outright apartheid and accomplishes the same thing, this option will be held in abeyance as long a bantustan is achievable. Continued Palestinian resistance or other forms of threat to Israeli control (demographic, for example) could easily trigger demands for transfer and the extension of Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan.

**A Regional Confederation** appears to me the most elegant and workable solution. It incorporates many of the positive elements of the other approaches (Palestinian self-determination alongside a secure Israel, the possibility of genuine peace-making and reconciliation) while providing the space necessary for wider accommodative processes to work (regional integration, relocation of displaced peoples, economic development, resource management). It offers the scope to handle complex, conflictual problems, issues and processes that cannot be adequately resolved within the narrow confines of Palestine/Israel.

Regional confederations can take many forms. Here I offer my “two-stage solution” involving the establishment of a Palestinian state followed by a Middle Eastern regional confederation.

**A MIDDLE EAST UNION (MEU)**

The notion of a regional confederation rests on several principles:

- “Greater Syria” is the geographical, historical and economic unit of the Levant. Combined with Egypt (which once entered into a federation with Syria and which has a long-standing peace agreement with Israel), the outlines of a Middle Eastern federation become apparent. Such a confederation could be extended to include other states in the future.

- The problems facing the various peoples of the region are regional in scope and cannot be solved in a piece-meal fashion within the artificial borders of each colonial-designed state. This is true of the Palestinian refugee issue, of course, but also of other fundamental problems in the region. Overall economic development, the development of each state’s economy, sustainable management of the region’s scarce resources, water first among them, all require a regional approach. So, too, do issues of security, both inter-state and intra-state. Not only must conflicts among the different states be resolved, but also those that affect the region’s many peoples. Artificial political borders imposed by colonial powers do not conform to national, religious or ethnic boundaries, leading to endemic tensions. And both development and security rest on the need to democratize every regime in the area. All this requires a free flow of peoples and economic activities that only a regional association can provide.
• Palestinian self-determination is a prerequisite for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as any regional peace. A Palestinian state must be established to provide the Palestinians with a national political space and parity with the other nations of the region, even if that state is less than viable and does not encompass the entire Palestinian population.

• The civil identities of each state in the region must be respected together with particular national, religious and ethnic identities. A distinct Israeli civil society has developed (both cross-cutting Jewish-Arab communities and distinctly for each), as has a Jordanian civil society that can no longer be defined merely along Hashemite Bedouin lines. A state of Lebanon may continue to exist, or its constituent communities may choose to realign with other configurations that might arise in the region when each state becomes incorporated into a free-flowing regional confederation. Only a regional arrangement that can be “sold” to the states of the region has a chance of being accepted.

A regional framework that accommodates processes of demographic, institutional and economic reconfiguration that will take place among and within the member states suggests a “two-stage” process.

Stage 1: A Palestinian state alongside Israel. The first stage would require an essential parity among the peoples of the region. The establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel (self-rule), preferably on all the lands conquered in 1967, is a necessary first step in that direction. No progress can be made towards either a just peace or a political arrangement able to cope with the complex issues of national, religious and ethnic self-determination and security until the greatest destabilizing element is addressed: giving the Palestinians the political space they require. All political schemes of the past century to resolve the issue of Palestine have attempted to by-pass the Palestinians themselves, and all have failed.

Although the creation of a political space in their own state is a prerequisite for any Middle East peace, the major problems confronting the Palestinians cannot be addressed in the mini-state that would emerge. Even if the entire Occupation were removed, a Palestinian state on only 22% of the country has little chance of economic development, let alone addressing the refugee issue. By shifting both the issues of viability and of the refugees to the region as a whole, a greater degree of latitude is available than confining them to the particular size, resources and characteristics of the Palestinian state.

Stage 2: A regional confederation comprised of the states of the region, but with an overarching coordinating structure. The key to the confederation approach, and its greatest advantage, is its ability to disassociate residence (and employment) from citizenship. This follows the European model, which was preceded by the Nordic alliance in Scandinavia and the Benelux arrangement. Once the Palestinians receive their political space in the form of an independent state, a parity would be created that would allow them to address the actual needs of their people.

Since 1948 the Palestinians have become a people of diaspora and exile. Only half the Palestinians live in Palestine (three and a half million in the Occupied Territories, one million in Israel). The key to resolving the issue of living in the Palestinian homeland
versus the diaspora (“diaspora” indicating a voluntary decision to live abroad, versus involuntary exile) is choice. Palestinian refugees would be citizens of the Palestinian state, but, like all the other residents of the region, would have the option of living and working anywhere in the Middle Eastern Union. (Because of overlaps between civil and national identities, Palestinians throughout the confederation would have the option of deciding whether they would retain the citizenship of the country in which they are living or adopting Palestinian citizenship.) Some Palestinians may prefer to live within their own state, others to remain where they are, still others to “go home” to areas inside Israel (yet others may prefer emigration to other countries). In the present system of states, each protective of its sovereignty, the Right of Return is considered by Israel to be a fundamental threat to its existence – as a sovereign national entity, as well as a Jewish one. Under a confederation, however, even a major influx of Palestinian refugees into Israel would not endanger Israel’s sovereignty, since the refugees would come as citizens of Palestine and would not vote in Israeli elections. Their status would be like that of citizens of one member state of the European Union who choose to live and work in another. Simply the fact of living in a country is not the problem; 350,000 foreign workers reside today in Israel without threatening its integrity as a country. The problem is citizenship. Having their political space in the state of Palestine, refugees could find substantive individual justice by living in any part of Palestine they choose, including parts within Israel, but would only enjoy the status of non-voting permanent residents. By the same token, Israeli Jews wishing to live in the settlements could continue to do so under Palestinian sovereignty (which would permit the settlements to be integrated, of course), but would lose their role as extensions of Israeli control by remaining Israeli citizens.

Such a system would encourage the even development of the region as a whole. Initially labor migrations would move heavily into Israel and Palestine, where their combined economies (the latter boosted significantly by tourism and heavy investment by Diaspora Palestinians) would attract workers from the less developed areas of the confederation. In this case the disassociation of citizenship from residency would protect both countries. Eventually, however, the resources of the other states in the confederation, including their extremely attractive tourist sites, would encourage a more even development, especially given stability, peace and an attractive investment environment. Needless to say, the countries of the region would have to pass through a thorough democratization process. A commission similar to the European Commission would administer the Confederation, with the help of appropriate inter-state agencies. In time, the MEU might develop political institutions of its own in line with the European Parliament, which would lend it the structure of a regional union.

Like the European Union, the MEU would establish a cooperative relationship with the other states of the Middle East. Like the Gulf States, it could provide a model for parallel regional confederations, among the North African countries, for example. And the MEU could expand to include other states in the region, Iraq and even Iran being logical candidates.

In this promising Middle Eastern Union, the Palestinians play a key role. After decades of bitter struggle, it is they who must signify the end of the conflict with the Israelis. (This will require, in addition to the complete end of the Occupation and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state, a process of reconciliation that must involve acknowledgement by Israel of its part in the tragic events since 1948, especially as they
relate to the refugees.) If the Palestinians are expected to compromise on the extent to which their state occupies historic Palestine (Israel within the 1967 borders occupies 78% of the country), they must be assured that their interests will not be by-passed yet again. They must be assured that a regional confederation in fact comes into being. Palestinian readiness to broker Israel’s integration into the Middle East must be dependent upon the transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2.

The Palestinians will also play a key role in the process of regional democratization. Despite their struggle with the autocratic Palestinian Authority (sometimes called the other Occupation) and a lack of democratic experience in the refugee’s experience, Palestinian civil society both within the country and without has strong democratic, secular and educated elements. Ironically, this is feared by the autocratic Arab regimes that, despite lip service, have often stood in the way of the Palestinian struggle. It is worth keeping in mind that Israel is not the only obstacle to full Palestinian participation in the region.

From Ethnocracy To A Democratic Israel

Of all the states in the region, Israel is being asked to take the greatest risks – indeed, to make the painful transition from an ethnocracy in which Jews have a privileged position to a country of all its citizens, most of whom in a few years will not be Jewish. It is becoming evident that a Jewish state is untenable, especially if it aspires to be democratic as well. There are several reasons for this:

- The vast majority of Jews chose never to come to Israel, preferring an ethnic existence in the Diaspora to a national life in Israel. The Jewish population of Israel accounts for less than one-third of the Jewish people, and that is counting the approximately 400,000 Israeli Jews who have emigrated.

- The Jewish majority is Israel is declining. Recent studies place the Jewish majority at only about 72%, taking into account emigration, an Arab minority of almost 20%, the 300,000 non-Jewish Russians who arrived at immigrants in the 1990s and significant numbers of foreign workers who are likely to stay permanently. These two developments mean that the discriminatory measures Israel must employ to artificially enforce its “Jewish character” will eventually destroy the moral basis of the society, transforming it into a Spartan fortress at war with its significant portion of its own citizens.

- In a region in which all the member states will be required to undergo a process of democratization, Israel too will be required to forego its exclusivist character and become a “normal” state of all its citizens. All forms of institutionalized discrimination (such as “state lands” reserved for Jewish use only) will have to be dismantled. A globalized world based on equal rights, together with the need to establish a democratic confederation, render ethnocracy unacceptable.

A key to a just peace and the emergence of a regional confederation, however, is a good faith acceptance of all the peoples of the region, despite the history of conflict (extending far beyond Palestinians and Israelis) and, if anything, because of the massive dislocations regional reconfiguration will involve. An Israeli readiness (or at least acquiescence) to undergo a democratization process and to allow significant
numbers of refugees to reside in the country (albeit not as citizens) must be met by a respect for the Zionist narrative and a tolerance of Israeli/Jewish national culture. Only a genuine policy and enactment of inclusion and parity will ensure regional stability, peace and development.

Thus Israel will go through a double transformation: into a state of all its citizens, and into a member state of a regional confederation, with far lower barriers and far more interaction with the peoples of the region than it has experienced (or welcomed) so far. Does the MEU pose a threat to Israel? Is it simply a means of destroying the Jewish state by more subtle ways? I would argue not. On the contrary, I would advocate to my fellow Israeli Jews that we welcome, embrace and facilitate the process of confederation.

The untenability of a Jewish state derives from the realities mentioned above, which have nothing to do with hostile external forces. The Jewish nation (again, representing a small minority of world Jewry) will have to find other ways of expressing its self-determination. To put a positive spin on the transformations required of Israel, relinquishing “ownership” of a state fraught with irresolvable tensions in favor of inclusion in a regional confederation offers them, for the first time, peace, security, acceptance and freedom of movement and economic activity. But in a more fundamental way, “Jewish” Israel as an expression of Jewish nationalism will continue to exist and flourish. The crowning achievement of Zionism has been the creation of a vibrant national culture and polity supported by strong traditions and institutions. Israeli culture – its symbols, expressions and institutions – will continue to exist even if the state is transformed. The European community of South Africa did not “disappear” with the coming of majority rule; in fact, it remained the governing force in the economic and civil life of the country, successfully maintaining its cultural expressions. The Israeli Jewish society, culture, economy and polity will also continue as a major force in Israeli life even after democratization. Indeed, as in the case of the Europeans in South Africa, Israeli Jewish hegemony will become an issue.

Ironically (and positively), the incorporation of a country informed by Israeli-Jewish culture will achieve another cardinal goal of Zionism: the complete integration of the Jewish nation as an integral part of the Middle Eastern mosaic. Jewish life will return to the area of the world where it originated and where Jews have lived for tens of centuries. Supported by the Diaspora, Israeli Jews will once again contribute to the culture and development of their wider Middle Eastern homeland.
Israeli culture and institutions are powerful but unappreciated elements of the peace process and transition to a regional confederation. They are what allow Israel to escape its either-or dilemma. Israeli Jews falsely believe that either they will retain their exclusively Jewish state or will face the destruction of Jewish national existence. If anything threatens Jewish life in Israel today it is the conflict with the Arab and wider Muslim worlds that threatens to turn into a religious war accompanied by weapons of mass destruction. Israel cannot continue to exist as a besieged ghetto facing Europe (and the US), its back (reinforced by a massive wall) to its own Middle Eastern “neighborhood.” True, it will have to undergo fundamental adjustments, but it will have to do that anyway, sooner or later. Its partner peoples in the region must sympathetically support a period of transition. Better than happen in a region committed to peace and development rather than afflicted with interminable conflict.

Is A Regional Approach Practical?

If Israelis fear the hidden agendas of a regional confederation, Arabs are wary of any political arrangement that may extend Israeli hegemony throughout the region. That is why a hiatus is necessary between the first and second stages of the confederation process; time for easing into new political, social, economic and geographic arrangements, time for economic development, time for reconciliation, time for democratization – all within the framework of existing states (including a Palestinian one) that will offer security during a period of transition. Regardless of the hostilities, the fears, the leap from the familiar landscape of “us-and-them” conflict, there seems to be little choice. Whether or not we accept his prescriptions, Powell has a point: Arab economies account for only 1 percent of the world’s non-oil exports, almost 30% of the people in the four countries surrounding Palestine/Israel live below the poverty line, and 65 million adults in the Middle East remain illiterate, including half the women. The Arab governments are far from democratic. If a just peace is not defeated by the Occupation, it will never succeed in such an environment even if a viable Palestinian state finally arises. Indeed, many Palestinian believe that the Arab governments themselves fear and oppose a truly independent Palestinian state because the Palestinian people constitute an educated and progressive population who, if free, might release fundamental social changes in the region.

What, then, are the chances that a regional confederation might actually emerge, given the opposition that is likely to arise from almost every direction? Needless to say, a Middle Eastern Union would be beneficial to the people of the region as a whole and to the Palestinians in particular. But what of the Arab governments and Israel?

The Arab Governments

If there is any common agenda between Palestinian and Israeli peace activists, it is the call to the international community to intervene in order to end the Occupation. But that, as I have mentioned, is only part of the problem. A small, sovereign Palestinian state surrounded by autocratic regimes and a stagnant regional economy, unable to accommodate its own refugees and raise the standard of living of all its citizens to an acceptable level, will lack viability regardless of the Occupation or Israeli hegemony. Nor would such a region ever accept Israel, even it is relinquished its Occupation completely and became a “normal” country of democracy, especially if it was the only state in the region to enjoy a European level of life. The Arab states will not willingly
accept democratization. This is a cause that our own Middle Eastern civil society must adopt – Palestinian and Israeli together, in partnership with other progressive, if besieged forces throughout our region, supported by the international community. We cannot shuffle our responsibilities off on Europeans or Americans. We need to begin immediately the “second stage,” the democratization of our region, as a precondition for any future of justice, peace, development and security. The time has come to put aside obstacles to activities that serve the interests of all the progressive forces of our region. Any “peace arrangement” will be still-born unless it includes regional transformation. In this sense Palestinians can be said to be living under two occupations: the Israeli and that of the autocratic Arab regimes that prevent the emergence of a healthy civil society. Eliminating one occupation without relating to the other represents a struggle only half won.

Israel

At his point in time, Israeli Jews (and their governments) have no interest whatsoever in a regional confederation. Israel faces Europe (and the US) with its back -- now fortified by a massive wall -- to the Middle East. The alienation is almost complete, despite the fact that more than a third of Israelis hail from Muslim countries. In fact, Israel, which has already been accepted as part of the “European Bloc” at the UN, could well be accepted as a member of the European Union in the not-so-distant future. Israelis see little benefit in either political or economic ties to the Arab world, and certainly would not trust their security to a wider regional confederation.

Unless, however, we are prepared for cataclysmic events in our region, Israel must be made to play its role in creating a stable, peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Part of that process, such as ending the Occupation and ensuring the emergence of a viable Palestinian state, must be accomplished by means of external international pressure, since Israel will not relinquish its Occupation willingly (this applies to withdrawal from the Golan Heights as well, a precondition to peace with Syria). Once that is concluded, however, and a process of regional democratization and development is underway, Israel will be helped to “back into” the other required changes. Though it may have close ties to Europe and the US, it will have to come to terms with the emergence of a regional confederation, and will have to address the regional problems that cannot be resolved solely between it and a Palestinian state: the refugee issue, water, regional development, security and the rest. This will be a difficult process because of the internal changes that will simultaneously be transforming Israeli society: the rise of a democratic state informed by strong Jewish-Israeli elements, but not defined by them.

In order to ease the process, to ensure the Israeli public that their integration into the region will be done in good faith, a number of measures will have to be taken:

* The State of Israel, which will have concluded a peace agreement acceptable to the Palestinian people, will be recognized within internationally agreed-upon borders;

* Steps will be taken to integrate Israel into the region, politically and practically, as well as economically, and its internal processes of national definition and transformation will be respected;

* Like the countries of Europe, Israel will be responsible for its own security even as
regional defense forces are developed; and

* Progress towards a regional confederation will be contingent upon processes of regional democratization.

Once these conditions are met, the thrust of developments in the Middle East will be towards regional integration. In fact, I am of the opinion that once the hurdle of the first stage is overcome, progress towards the second stage will be rather rapid.

An Inclusive and Transparent Process

If Israelis fear the hidden agendas of a regional confederation, Arabs are wary of any political arrangement that may extend Israeli hegemony throughout the region. The process of articulating the meaning and structures of regional peace is as important as the actual proposals. This process, which can begin immediately by progressive sectors of the Middle Eastern and international civil societies, must be inclusive of all the major parties to the conflict – Palestinians of the Occupied Territories, Palestinian citizens of Israel, refugees and members of the Palestinian Diaspora; Israeli Jews of various persuasions; and representatives of the major communities and political camps of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

The articulation of a regional confederation could begin with small working groups and gradually extend to include all the many constituent communities that will be asked to join. The process must be transparent and based upon tolerance of conflicting narratives, views, positions and visions. It will not arrive at a consensual position, but must aspire to a workable plan upon which a generally agreed upon common vision can emerge. But as in the process of consensus, parties must be ready to “stand aside” in favor of widespread consensus over a particular issue, while the participants as a whole must be willing to postpone decision on an issue if any of the parties feels strongly opposed. The process must be inclusive of all parties and views even if it becomes painstakingly slow. It should eventually include other major parties of reference as well: Iraqis, Iranians, Saudis and other Middle Eastern states, the “Quartet,” Muslim groups and countries, the Jewish Diaspora, development professionals and others. Only then will it have the legitimacy to form the basis of a truly new Middle East.

If we aspire to create a worldwide campaign for a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis, it must include more than merely ending the Occupation or seeing the establishment of a small Palestinian state. We must articulate a broader vision around which we can mobilize the international community. We have failed at doing that until now, a lack that has left many international groups floundering for an agenda, an effective program. We in the region must articulate what we want, where we are going and what we want from our supporters abroad. Without that we cannot give them a lead, and they cannot mount effective campaigns.

Indeed, even thinking beyond the horrors of our daily lives should bring us a measure of hope and purpose. Besides resolving the conflicts that beset us, we must define where we are going if we are to break the impasse, the distrust, the tunnel vision induced by the grinding conflict. The vision of an MEU should be integrated with other visions, plans and discussions in absolute refusal to allow the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict to defeat us.
These are the outlines of a vision that, unlike those of bi-national or separate states, has not been clearly articulated before. It holds, I believe, the best chance of success, even if it seems the most “idealistic.” If it simply serves to prod us to begin envisioning the future, however, it may help us transcend the immediate obstacles. I hope this piece contributes to a burgeoning debate.

(Jeff Halper is the Coordinator of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. He can be reached at <icahd@zahav.net.il>. Comments on this paper are welcome.)