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Speaking Cantonese: The Pasts and Futures of the Federalist Idea in Israel/Palestine

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Since 2012, proposals for cantonization, federalism, and confederalism have gained renewed attention as potential frameworks for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The resurgence of federal ideas in contemporary Israeli political discourse warrants a closer examination of their historical trajectories in Palestine, especially in the context of British imperial federalism. The article goes back a century, to the ideas of Jewish Zionist thinker Itamar Ben-Avi, who envisaged the cantonization of the mandate territory of Palestine. Through a detailed analysis of his ideas, alongside proposels from British political thinkers and civil servants, the article situates proposals for the cantonization and federation of Israel/Palestine in the historical context of the foundation of the Irish Free State (1922) as part of the British Empire. It offers a comparative framework to understand continuities and discontinuities in the century-long history of visions of federation and cantonization in Palestine.

Over the past decade, proposals for cantonization, federalism, and confederalism have gained renewed attention as potential frameworks for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These ideas have often emerged from the dovish-Left spectrum of Israeli politics, driven by peace activists grappling with the collapse of the Oslo Accords. The organization A Land for All (Arabic: بلاد للجميع, Hebrew: ארץ לכולם; formerly "Two States, One Homeland"), established in 2012, has advocated a two-state confederation with provisions for cooperation in areas such as security, civil rights, socioeconomic policies, and environmental protection.[1] In 2014, the public intellectual Carlo Strenger, a Swiss-born Israeli psychologist, proposed a cantonized Israel to address both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the deepening divisions within Israeli Jewish society. A system based on different cantons, he argued, could cater to diverse lifestyles and values, allowing gay marriage, shopping on the Sabbath, and legalized cannabis in one canton, while in a neighboring "Judea canton," driving on the Sabbath, nonkosher restaurants, and indecent advertisements could be outlawed (Strenger and Yadid 2014).

The Israeli novelist Nir Baram promoted similar ideas in his 2017 book *A Land Without Borders* (Baram 2017). In an interview, he stated, "I support any solution that includes equal rights, and I am not one of those who urgently need to argue over every small detail of the solution. This mainly interests Israelis who can discuss for hours whether 'One Homeland Two States' or just two states or one state is better. It is clear that as time passes, the one-state or confederation solution—those that start from the premise that the Green Line no longer marks a rigid border—becomes more plausible" (Baram and Shizaf 2017). The Israeli peace activist Hayim Katsman, murdered by Hamas on October 7, 2023, was also a proponent of a confederal solution, envisioning a non-ethnonationalist state that incorporates the interests and concerns of both Israelis and Palestinians.[2] In parallel, progressive Jewish groups in America also picked up the cause. In 2020, Peter Beinart, *Jewish Currents* editor and an influential political journalist, published articles announcing his conversion to the confederal cause. Given that a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel has been rendered obsolete by decades of settlement expansion and political intransigence, he argued, the only alternative was a shared homeland for both peoples (Beinart 2020a; see also Beinart 2020b).

The resurgence of federal and confederal ideas in contemporary political discourse concerning Israel and Palestine warrants a closer examination of their historical trajectories in the context of Palestine. Federalism, according to this diverse group of thinkers, offers an attractive political

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1 "A New Vision for Palestinian-Israeli Peace: From Conflict to Reconciliation." *A Land for All*, 2023, https://www.alandforall.org/.

2 Magid (2023, 1). For his posthumously published article, see Katsman (2023).

structure to overcome internal cultural and religious differences and avoid violent conflict. Contemporary public intellectuals tend to discuss their federal ideas very loosely, without providing much detail. Without constituting a school of thought or a coherent lobby group, the common denominator of all these schemes is the suggestion that a distribution of sovereignty among multiple quasi-autonomous regional units, under a limited central government, would rescue the region from its deadly political deadlock. Idealist intentions notwithstanding, an almost chronic lack of theoretical specificity and a very poor historical memory also characterizes much of this discourse. Unlike American founders and early jurists, who had the eighty-five essays written by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay to rely on, these contemporary advocates of federalism don't have a similar set of *Federalist Papers*. Indeed, the distinction between visions of federation, confederation, and cantonization is often unclear. More than a concrete and systematic theory, discussion of federal democratic systems outside the United States today tend to speak in broad terms about a "federal spirit," which the late Michael D. Burgess, the founder of the Centre for Federal Studies at the University of Kent, defined as "the existence of a particular mindset: a political predisposition to negotiate and bargain among equals."[3] The proposals we witness today in the context of Israel/Palestine partake in that "spirit" and are offshoots of the failure of the Oslo peace process, which was aiming—haphazardly and indirectly—at a two-state solution. They seek to adapt the concept of the territorial division of sovereignty to the reality of the Israeli/Palestinian political and spatial landscape in which partition into two separate states no longer seems a viable option.

The present article argues that the comeback of federalist thinking today warrants a closer examination. We approach this task as historians, wishing to examine the recent revival of these ideas against a longer trajectory of federalist proposals in the context of Palestine. Discussions of Israel/Palestine tend to be conducted in isolation from broader historiographical conversations, a trap we wish to avoid. We are helped by the fact that in the past two decades, historians have paid growing attention to federal visions, often analyzed in relation to imperial or national-statist political orders. Crucially, scholars have shown that federalism served different political goals: imperial administrators proposed federalism to deflect colonial independence, postcolonial leaders envisaged federalism as an alternative to a national conception of self-determination, and cosmopolitan thinkers saw federalism as a means to unite nation-states in a peaceful order. In the words of historian Merve Fejzula, instead of clinging to the standard assumption that portrays federalism as the cosmopolitan alternative to the nation-state, we need to acknowledge "federalist political thought's malleability and capacity to express competing political claims" (see Fejzula 2021). As Gary Wilder (2005) has shown in the French-African context, only a thin line separated the emancipatory promise of supranational federalism from a prolongation of imperial rule by other means.

In the British context, imperial federalism has been a solid intellectual and political tradition since the nineteenth century, aimed at transforming the empire into a supranational federation based on racial and civilizational hierarchies (Bell 2007). Chronology-wise, federalist thinking has made appearances on more than one occasion. Historians identified a sudden surge in the popularity of the federal idea during the mid-Victorian era, as a growing number of British thinkers advocated for imperial federation, and yet another vibrant federalist conversation developed during the 1930s, with the launch of India's Round Table Conferences—serving as a site of anticolonial nationalist debates on federation (Bell 2007; Burgess 1995; Mahajan 2007; Mantena 2018). Others point out a "federal moment" that accompanied post-1945 decolonization in several former British colonies, such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and the West Indies. Connecting the dots, Fejzula suggests that we might speak of a "global federal moment" spanning from the 1930s to the 1960s, culminating in the rise of nationalist independence movements. In all these cases, historical actors, searching for an alternative to imperial rule and nation-state sovereignty alike, turned their gaze to federations, which held the promise of alternative conceptions of economic independence, territoriality, and self-government (Watts 1966; Collins 2013; Parker 2025).

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Palestine entered the orbit of the British Empire. In that volatile context, Jewish and Zionist thinkers, political activists, and communal leaders began learning the empire and its ways. As historian Elizabeth Imber (2025) has shown recently, they moved in multiple directions, with some envisioning Palestine as a British dominion, leveraging an imperial federalist vision of a commonwealth for Jewish state-building, while others drew inspiration from anticolonial movements, contemplating independent national aspirations. Either way, they internalized quite quickly that they were part of the imperial fabric and became acute observers of British political discourse. Though proposals for federation had been circulating since the late nineteenth century, they reached a new sense of urgency during the 1920s and 1930s—that is, at the precise moment a stronger bond was forged between Zionism and Empire.

Federal proposals surfaced in various locations around the empire, with metropole proponents of federation hoping to overcome local conflicts and subvert claims for independence through a new form of territorial governance (Darwin 1999; Gerits 2023). The strategy of neutralizing

3 For a survey of theories of federalism, see Burgess (2012, 3). Traditionally, the difference between federalism and cantonization is that the first structure endows more power to the central government (as in the United States), while in the second system the cantons have greater autonomy and the central government has limited power (as in Switzerland).

breakaway nationalisms through federation inspired imperial administrators and thinkers from the late nineteenth century onward, including in the case of the Irish Free State, established in 1922. Later, as Banerjee has shown, the tradition of British imperial federalism generated political tools used also by those—like local Indian activists—who were excluded from the original federal visions for their supposed racial or civilizational difference.[4] The appeal of federalism, used both by those who wanted to prolong empire and by those who sought to end it, rendered it a particularly ambivalent and vague political idea. Thus, it is often difficult to pin down the political and conceptual legacies of federalist plans in an imperial context. As Fejzula argued, "the history of imperial federalisms provides ample confirmation of the way in which pluralist, cosmopolitan versions of citizenship and statehood were equally capable of justifying undemocratic rule" (Fejzula 2021, part II).

In this article, we suggest that the vast and growing intellectual history of federalism in the twentieth century can provide a stimulating context to examine contemporary federalist visions. As international relations scholar Beate Jahn has argued, intellectual and political history serve as an important foundation for thinking about international politics in the present. She suggested, however, that looking at past ideas can serve not only to highlight continuities across time or to apply the ideas of "Classical thinkers," in her terms, to resolve present problems. Rather, she suggested that examining political and intellectual lineages of international thought can also serve to pay attention to important *changes* between apparently similar past and present ideas (Jahn 2006). Instead of reading back present ideas into past thinking, or wholesale applying historical solutions to present problems, Jahn offers a more nuanced and sophisticated approach, which seeks to engage with discontinuity to uncover meaningful insights about key concepts, such as federalism, in our case. It is, she argues, "the identification of discontinuities which indicates the areas of necessary further research into the conditions of change" (Jahn 2006, 6).

The invitation to engage with history as a means of enriching our understanding of contemporary theory seems particularly apt in the case of federalist ideas in Palestine/Israel. This article returns to the early twentieth century and excavates the histories of federalism and cantonization in Palestine to provide a framework for the analysis of current visions. We examine the ideas of the Palestine-born Zionist Jewish journalist, linguist, and political activist Itamar Ben-Avi (1882–1943), who drew on the British tradition of imperial federalism and on the case of the Irish Free State to envisage a new order in Palestine based on national cantons under a federal government. Ben-Avi was no "Classical thinker," to use Jahn's terms, nor is he included in the first row of Zionist thinkers like Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, or Vladimir Jabotinsky. And yet his ideas provide a glimpse into how imperial federal conceptions influenced political thinkers to propose federalism as the solution for the political conflict in Palestine. As a prolific and influential public intellectual, publishing in widely read outlets in Hebrew, English, and French, Ben-Avi's ideas reached an international audience. Although his proposals were never realized, they illustrate the ways in which federation—or cantonization—aimed at political emancipation yet ended up enabling racial, religious, and civilizational discriminatory structures.

This article suggests that the contemporary revival of federal and confederal proposals should be understood within this broader intellectual and historical framework, which includes imperial histories of federalism. It tentatively frames the relations between past and present federalist thought in Palestine in terms of discontinuity yet recognizes that the scope of the comparison is limited by a lack of detailed information about contemporary federal schemes, which are often presented publicly in broad strokes without theoretical and practical specificity. Thus, the article identifies areas of future research that require more data about contemporary federalist visions.

"THE FREE STATE OF PALESTINE," OR: CANTONIZATION FROM A ZIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Itamar Ben-Avi was an exceptionally colorful and imaginative personality, who was often willing to bend conventions. His obituary suggested that "there was something of the romantic, the delusional, the knightly about him" (Binyamin 1943). He was born as Ben Zion Ben-Yehuda in late Ottoman Jerusalem, the eldest son of the lexicographer Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, and is remembered sometimes as the "first Hebrew child"—the first modern native speaker of Hebrew in Palestine.[5] Following his university studies at the Teachers' Seminary in Paris and later at the University of Berlin (1904–1908), he settled down in Palestine and began his journalistic career at his father's newspapers *Hatzvi* and *Haor*. In 1919, he founded his own Hebrew daily newspaper called *Doar Hayom*, serving as its editor in chief until 1933.[6] From 1924, he was also the editor of the English-language magazine *Palestine Weekly*. During this period, he engaged in political writing and activism. He traveled abroad as a reporter or representative of Zionist organizations, or a combination of both, and got involved in propaganda and

4 Banerjee (2010). Imperial citizenship was not unique to Britain and appealed also to political thinkers in the Ottoman Empire; see, for example, Campos (2017).

5 Ben-Avi changed his name in early adulthood as a tribute to his parents: Itamar was the name his mother wanted, and Avi, in Hebrew, is his father's initials.

6 The title emulates Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*.

fundraising initiatives. In this context, he formulated his vision for the cantonization of Palestine within the political structure of the British Empire.

When Ben-Avi began reflecting on federalism and cantonization, these ideas featured prominently in broader discussions on political order (Schlesinger 2013; Seixas 2020; Wheatley 2023). In the early twentieth century, federalism emerged as a potential solution to maintaining the British Empire amid rising nationalist and separatist movements. Advocates proposed that a federated empire could stabilize governance while accommodating cultural and national diversity. Ireland, due to its proximity and integration within the United Kingdom, was central to these debates, often seen as a domestic rather than an imperial issue. Nonetheless, discussions around Irish Home Rule effectively mirrored federalist logic, particularly in the proposals of E. A. Freeman, who advocated for the disaggregation of the United Kingdom into cantons—smaller federal units—to ensure equitable representation: "The only way to establish real federal equality would be to abolish England, Scotland, and Ireland as separate wholes, to cut up each country into several smaller cantons, and to make those cantons the constituent members of the federation" (Freeman 1886, 326; for discussion, see Jackson 2023, 247–93; Burgess 1995, 83–130).

This federalist vision faced significant challenges, notably concerns over England's dominance and the structural impracticalities of such a small-scale federation. Freeman's ideas found resonance with Victorian thinkers like John Stuart Mill, who supported federalism where there was "mutual sympathy" but doubted its feasibility for Ireland due to cultural and political divergence from Britain.[7] Federalist ideas gained traction among policymakers like Joseph Chamberlain, who proposed "Home Rule All Round" for all UK nations, inspiring intellectual groups like the Round Table. This notion saw federalism not just as administrative decentralization but as a model for maintaining imperial cohesion. Prominent Irish politicians, such as John Redmond, also endorsed the compatibility of Home Rule with imperial loyalty, reflecting the ongoing complexity of these debates.

A significant moment in the prehistory of Zionist calls for federalism, during which an imperial language of federalism was being developed, was the debate that erupted between the English-born Irish nationalist Erskine Childers and the conservative MP Leopold S. Amery in 1911. Childers, once a unionist, had come to support Irish Home Rule after witnessing anti-Irish sentiment firsthand. In his book *The Framework of Home Rule*, he argued for Irish autonomy within the empire but rejected federalism as impractical. Amery countered, viewing Ireland as analogous to Canada and advocating for a federal commonwealth that could maintain imperial unity through economic incentives and shared governance (Childers 1911, 147–48; Amery [1912] 1970). Amery's evolving federalism was pragmatic rather than ideological. He envisioned a decentralized, value-based union rather than a rigid constitutional framework. His interest lay primarily in economic integration and promoting tariff-based imperial trade zones. While supportive of federalism, he remained wary of liberal internationalism, favoring a strong, cohesive empire over a globally governed order.

World War I intensified the debate over federalism. The British Empire's reliance on Dominion support for defense highlighted the need for shared decision-making. Members of the British Round Table—an organization that united neo-imperial thinkers in a proto–think tank—argued that only a federated empire could ensure such cooperation (Morefield 2014; Bosco and May 1997; May 1995). While Amery pushed for economic federalism, others emphasized constitutional and moral integration, demonstrating the diverse visions within British imperial federalism. Ultimately, imperial federalism reflected both pragmatic and idealistic responses to the challenges of managing a vast and diverse empire. It served as a conservative strategy to preserve imperial unity in a changing world order, while simultaneously gesturing toward a post-national future rooted in voluntary association and shared traditions.

Zionist activists were avid listeners, following the news from Britain's vast empire and acutely aware of the emergence of a vibrant British political conversation, envisioning the gradual metamorphosis of the British Empire into a federated Commonwealth of Nations. Yet Britain was not their sole source of ideas and inspiration. In October 1918, Ben-Avi participated in the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities, presided over by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk with the blessing of President Wilson. In his memoirs, Ben-Avi recounted how his participation in the congress followed a direct call from Masaryk himself to leaders of the Zionist Organization of America, Justice Louis Brandeis and Rabbi Stephen Wise, asking to send Zionist representatives to the congress (Ben-Avi 1961, chap. 76). The carefully choreographed summit took place at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the US Declaration of Independence was signed. As one would expect, it attracted much media attention. Newspaper reports of the event described it as a particularly significant historical moment, when new nations would emerge in the "cradle of American liberty," reaffirming the American revolutionary principles of freedom and self-determination. Ben-Avi shared the hopefulness and optimism of the moment. He signed his name—alongside delegates who represented the Poles, the peoples of Yugoslavia, Ukrainians, Uhro-Rusyns (also known as Carpatho-Rusyns), Lithuanians, Romanians, "Italian Irredentists," Albanians, "Unredeemed Greeks," and Armenians—on a Declaration of Common Aims that

7 J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. Robson (Liberty Fund, 1963–91), XIX, 553, cited in Bell, "John Stuart Mill on Federalism."

stated commitment to the Allied cause in the war, demanded that each national group would have the right to organize its own government, and called for the formation of a League of Nations to cooperate in securing global justice and peace.[8]

Ben-Avi notably did not view the emphasis on small nations' autonomy as being at odds with the framework of the British Empire. The Philadelphia gathering occurred just eleven months after the Balfour Declaration, which Leo Amery helped draft and Ben-Avi regarded as a pivotal moment. He referred to it in his diaries as marking the dawn of modern Jewish liberty. By aligning himself with other oppressed national groups, he did not advocate for separation from the British Empire but envisioned it as a nurturing environment that could foster the development of national identities. This perspective aligned with that of Tomáš Masaryk, the Czech leader in exile, who at the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities and in various English-language publications proposed a "zone of small nations" in Central Europe to serve as a bulwark against German expansionism, or "Pangermanism," as he termed it (Ben-Avi 1961, chap. 76).

Masaryk had spent extensive time in London during the early stages of the war before traveling to America, promoting his vision of "small nations" among intellectual circles, including figures like R. W. Seton-Watson (who published Masaryk's ideas in the London-based journal *New Europe*) and future influential historians Arnold J. Toynbee and Lewis B. Namier (Dubnov 2021, 2023). His discourse was more than mere rhetoric; Masaryk framed a narrative of racial and cultural affinity to drive political transformation. In this respect, his ideas paralleled those of Lord Milner, who advocated for "the unity of the British race" and a grand imperial federation to unify "British nations." This perspective was further developed by members of the above-mentioned Round Table group, which was established by Milner's intellectual successors (who became known, half-mockingly, half-affectionately, as "Milner Kindergarten"), with members like Lionel Curtis, Leo Amery, and Reginald Coupland sharing these views.[9]

For Ben-Avi, the congress was an opportunity to engage with Masaryk's ideas and develop his own vision for a political structure that could accommodate diverse national identities in a new geopolitical setting: the Middle East. He was keen to situate debates on the future of Palestine along other transformations of the international order. In 1919, he served as an attaché to the Zionist delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. As a native Jerusalemite who later boasted intimate familiarity with Palestinian Arabs and with the "psychology of Arabs" in general, he sought to serve as a liaison between Arab leaders and the Zionist leadership but with limited success.[10]

Ben-Avi's thinking underwent a significant transformation with the establishment of the British Mandate over Palestine in 1922. Yet the decisive moment, as far as his thinking on federalism is concerned, accrued shortly before Palestine was formally incorporated into the British imperial framework, under the mandate of the League of Nations, with the establishment of the Free Irish State. It was in this context that he published his first article on the subject, entitled "The Free State of Palestine," which appeared in *New Palestine*, the official newspaper of the Zionist Organization of America.[11] Crucially, the Irish Free State emerged from the partition of Ireland, separating Northern Ireland from the new entity. Furthermore, despite its name, the Free State was a dominion of the British Empire—an autonomous entity with control over its domestic and external affairs but limited sovereignty under the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Members of the Dáil Éireann, the Free State's parliament, were required to swear allegiance to the Crown, a provision seen by many as a lingering symbol of British dominance (Foster 2011). The question of Ireland within the context of the British Empire was a key concern of British imperial federalists, as the debate between Amery and Childers suggested. Over time, the Free State gradually loosened its ties to Britain, beginning with the adoption of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland, which renamed the state Ireland (Éire) and introduced a president as head of state, and culminating in the 1949 Republic of Ireland Act, which marked its final legal break from the British Crown. In 1922, however, the Irish Free State was not yet an independent republic but an autonomous dominion within the British Empire (Bartlett 2018, vol. 4). Ben-Avi, drawing on the Irish model, envisioned a similar arrangement for Palestine—an autonomous dominion under British sovereignty. By situating Palestine within the framework of British imperial federalism, Ben-Avi proposed an innovative spatio-political vision for the region's future.

Ben-Avi outlined his vision of a federal state in Palestine, based on different "cantons" that would follow, according to his understanding, the existing national and geographic distribution of the population. The canton of Judea would accommodate the Jewish population, while three other cantons would have an Arab majority. A fifth canton, "the Far South," would be left for future exploration, following the model of the American "Far West." Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa would be "free cities" governed along the lines of the city of Danzig. Internal affairs in each

8 "To Proclaim Freedom in Independence Hall," *New York Times*, October 23, 1918, 8; "Independence Hall Sees Nations Born: New Declaration Signed There for Oppressed Peoples of Middle Europe," *New York Times*, October 27, 1918, 6.

9 Morefield (2014). The most detailed account of the first years of this group remains May (1995).

10 Ben-Avi (1922, 424). The authors would like to thank Mr. Hallel Yadin from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research for his assistance in locating the original manuscript.

11 While Ben-Avi's memoir claims that he introduced this idea in the aftermath of the "First Bloody Events in Jerusalem" (the Nebi Musa riots of April 1920), the timing of the publication, his choice of terminology, and other contemporary writings suggest that his concept of "The Free State of Palestine" was inspired by the newly formed Free Irish State.

canton would be managed according to the language, religion, and law of its residents. Yet in addition to cultural and educational issues, he endowed the cantons also with decision-making power in other issues, including, for example, immigration policies. The federal state would oversee the army, finance, railways, and external relations. "Possessing in the full political and civil rights, the citizens of the free state of Palestine," he affirmed, "would find no other place more agreeable to live in, or more useful in harmonizing within its majestic walls their diverse and sometimes opposed interests, in amity and peace." The scheme assumed that the British Empire would provide the political context for the development of the federation. Ben-Avi's article included a map outlining the cantons that the future federal state of Palestine would include.[12]

During the interwar period, Ben-Avi continued to follow closely European and imperial politics through his work as the editor of the Hebrew newspaper *Doar Hayom*. Often, he used his newspaper as a platform to disseminate his own political proposals, and especially to showcase his most precious political vision, the idea of a federation of autonomous cantons. In 1927, he outlined again his plan for the division of the Mandate territory into cantons according to the population's religious and geographic distribution:

> The next Zionist Congress should demand from the Mandate Government to divide the Land of Israel within its current borders into Swiss-like regions, into small or large "cantons" (depending on the area and population), some of which will immediately become entirely Hebrew cantons, while some will remain Arab for the time being. In this way, three Zionist regions, or more precisely: three Hebrew cantons, will be created almost magically, whose full independence cannot be doubted. The Galilee in the north from Metula to Nazareth, with Tiberias as its provincial capital. The "Valley" in the center, from the surroundings of Beit She'an to Nahalal and the entire Haifa Bay, with Afula or [Emek] Yizrael [Marj Ibn Amir] as the mother city to the surrounding villages. And the "Sharon" and coastal plain, from the foot of Mount Carmel, through Hadera, Caesarea, and Herzliya to Rehovot, Gedera, and Ashkelon on one side, and from Petah Tikva and its fertile lowlands to the outskirts of Jerusalem outside the walls with its wide Jewish suburbs, with Tel Aviv as its heart and major center. In these three cantons [...] the Jews will have their own majority, at least one hundred and fifty thousand people, compared to only sixty thousand Arabs, Christians, and Muslims, at most.[13]

Similar ideas appeared in an article Ben-Avi wrote for the *New York Times* on April 8, 1930, which outlined his spatio-political scheme to reorganize the territory between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean. He now foresaw fifteen cantons, which would become areas of autonomous self-rule with definite frontiers, modeled again after Switzerland. The American reporter Joseph M. Levy claimed that the first step toward the creation of the new canton system would be underway momentarily and would constitute the establishment of the Jewish canton on the shores of the Mediterranean. This approach seems to have had little foundation in the politics of the time, as no contemporary British source suggests that the Mandate government was intent on its realization. Nonetheless, the article reveals aspects of Ben-Avi's vision: The new canton, the article explained, would be given the name Judea, "a special Jewish district comprising Tel Aviv [...] also some forty colonies surrounding Petach Tikvah, Rishon Lezion [*sic*] and Rehoboth, forming a compact block with a population of more than 70,000 Jews." Creating the canton of Judea was described in the article as a pilot project. Instead of establishing the federation's central government and its regional cantons at once, the author proposed to set them up one at a time, followed by the central government in the end. In Ben-Avi's vision, the following steps included the establishment of seven future cantons for Muslims, three for Christians, and five cantons for Jewish residents, each with their own autonomous institutions and political structures (Levy 1930).

Ben-Avi advanced his ideas not only for the Anglophone audience but also in France, always in the context of debates on postimperial political reordering. In 1931, he published a series of pamphlets entitled *L'enclave: Pour Une Confédération Judéo-Arabe* (Ben-Avi 1931). The text did not merely translate into French his earlier ideas but also transformed them to appeal to French public opinion through additional arguments related to French imperial ambitions, such as a comparison between the Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine and the situation of the Maronite Christians in Greater Syria, who hoped to secede from it and create Lebanon as a kind of independent canton within the French Empire.

The main point of reference for Ben-Avi's thought remains the recent developments in the British Empire, where local federations remained attached to the "mother country" in a transnational federal system. While he often referred to Switzerland as a general model based on multiple cantons (rather than just two), he confirmed his vicinity to the British model in a letter to the editor of the *Palestine Post*: "In that article I propounded to follow for our country the example set by Great Britain in Ireland, where it solves its difficulties by dividing it into two autonomous zones, to with what the Irish state and Ulster. However, as Palestine is composed of three distinct elements—the Moslems [*sic*], the Jewish, and the Christians,—with well-limited agglom-

12 Ben-Avi (1922). Ben-Avi (1930) expressed similar ideas in numerous Hebrew essays and speeches, assembled under the title *Yehuda Miyadit (O: 'Kantonim' Ve'arim Ahaiot)* [Hebrew: Judea Immediately (Or: "Cantons" and Other Sister Cities)].

13 Ben-Avi (1927) (translation from Hebrew by the authors). Ben-Avi continued to explain that at a later stage, El Arish and the Sinai Peninsula would also be added.

erations for each of the villages and some of the towns, I thought it best to adopt the Swiss system of cantons. For indeed Switzerland has provided conclusively, how successfully its different people, French, German, and Italians have lived side-by-side, for centuries, forming together the Swiss Federation."[14]

Ben-Avi's ideas of cantonization thus emerged out of a deep-seated desire to maintain the empire by moving beyond old colonial models of domination, and at the same time, to imagine new forms of state-building. Drawing on British imperial federalists, he assumed that states and empire were compatible forms of political organization. Colonial regimes provided an environment boosting the building of self-government institutions and pushing the homogenization of peoples along ethnoreligious and linguistic lines—a commonality of blood and soil regarded as the decisive guarantee of the "state-ness" of a people. For local thinkers like Ben-Avi, a federation could be a midway level of political order, between nation-state and empire, benefiting from the advantages of both.

When situated within its historical context, Ben-Avi's cantonization proposal appears far less surprising—and indeed, it was not regarded as incompatible with the broader Zionist project. As historian Dmitry Shumsky and others have demonstrated, the commonplace assumption that Zionism was singularly oriented toward the establishment of a Jewish nation-state from its inception is undermined by ample evidence: leading figures of the pre-state movement actively envisioned and advocated for models of Jewish self-determination within a multinational Ottoman framework or through structures of multinational democracy (Shumsky 2018; see also Shenhav 2015). Ben-Avi's ideas marked not a break from that tradition but rather an outgrowth of it, as he was one of the first to respond and adapt to the new circumstances created by the British occupation of the land. Yet Ben-Avi's approach was equally limited by its imperial inspiration.

Even if Ben-Avi explicitly embraced an equally emancipatory approach toward the Arab population, which would enjoy political autonomy in its designated cantons, he implicitly prioritized the interests of the Jewish population, reflecting a hierarchical political conception. In 1927, he suggested that "some [of the cantons] will immediately become entirely Hebrew cantons, while some will remain Arab for the time being," implying an intention to challenge the federal structure at a later stage in favor of the Jewish population. In addition, he seemed to suggest a top-down establishment of the new federal order, without explicit interaction with the Arab population and its leaders or any attempt to secure their consent. By emphasizing the importance of reaching a Jewish demographic majority—at least in some regions—Ben-Avi's vision fell short on its promise of emancipation for all inhabitants of the land. While not aiming to displace the existing residents and replace them with settlers, his ideas remained trapped in the hierarchical logic of imperial political imagination, which undermined their political effectiveness and appeal.

BRITISH IMPERIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CANTONIZATION

The project that Ben-Avi outlined was not the only vision of cantonization in Palestine advanced at that time. Unsurprisingly, such ideas appealed to political thinkers operating in the intellectual sphere of the British Empire. Lionel George Archer Cust (1896–1962), a long-serving professional colonial administrator who knew Palestine exceptionally well, also advocated his own idea of the reorganization of the Mandate territory into cantons (A. Cust 1936). During his career, he worked closely with two high commissioners, Sir Herbert Samuel and Sir John Chancellor, and was a cousin of Sir Ronald Storrs (1881–1955), the famous governor of Jerusalem. In 1929, Cust was given the task of compiling a report on the "Status Quo in the Holy Places," which would provide a framework for an agreement among religious communities about the shared religious sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The report would be used to guide the Mandate government's administration of these holy places. Nevertheless, Cust was criticized by Zionists for his supposed bias against them, and in 1935, after fourteen years of administrative service, he resigned from his position at the Palestine Civil Service and returned to England. In London, he took on the role of the assistant secretary general of the Royal Empire (later renamed Royal Commonwealth) Society, a combination of a gentlemen's club and an educational forum that aimed to advance imperial federalist ideas. There, he began lobbying for the cantonization of Palestine.[15]

In March 1936, Cust gave a lecture to the *Royal Central Asian Society* in London. After providing his listeners with a historical overview of Palestine until the Mandate, he suggested dividing the territory into Jewish and Arab cantons, according to existing demographic distribution. He argued that functional collaboration between the two populations was possible, based on the experience of the municipal-

14 Ben-Avi (1935). On the influence of the British Empire, see also his comparison of Judea and Australia: Ben-Avi (1934).

15 Cust published an initial sketch of his proposal in an article in *The Near East and India,* a magazine for colonial policymakers and the general public. L. G. A. Cust (1935). For discussion, see Sinanoglou (2019, 44–64) and Wallach (2023). The work of Shmuel Dothan, exemplary of older Zionist historiography, presents cantonization proposals as a "weapon in Arab hands," due to the fact that it was part of the informal discussions taking place in 1935 between David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Shertok (Sharett), and Musa Alami, who served as the advisor for Arab affairs for Arthur Wauchope, Palestine's fourth high commissioner. Dothan seems to have been oblivious of the fact that cantonization was proposed as early as 1922 and emerged from within the Zionist camp. Dothan (1979); Dothan (1980). It is beyond the scope of the present article to survey all Palestinian responses to federalist ideas and the cantonization proposals in particular. Some of these responses and negotiations are analyzed in Osheroff (2021).

ity of Jaffa-Tel Aviv, which operated two distinct social and administrative systems, and argued that cantonization would not "involve any expropriation or forcible change of proprietorship" (A. Cust 1936, 207). He envisaged the new scheme as a regional transformation of the territory but did not propose its detachment from the British Empire, which would "retain full control over certain state services such as Defence, Customs, Passports, Railways, Posts and Telegraphs, Antiquities, and would continue to collect the receipts on their account."[16] Thus, cantonization would help to overcome internal conflicts in Palestine, while keeping it in the sphere of the British Empire.

The discussion that followed his lecture included various criticisms of Cust's ideas, which were judged as impractical or unnecessary; for H. A. R. Gibb (1895–1971), the Scottish Orientalist, his cantonization plan lacked constitutional rigor, and for Norman Bentwich (1883–1971), a Zionist British jurist who served as the first attorney-general of Mandatory Palestine, it ignored the potential for Arab-Jewish collaboration in a one-state solution.

When the news of Cust's plan reached Palestine, Ben-Avi felt that he had been plagiarized. In an article he published in his newspaper, *Doar Hayom*, and letters he sent to the editor of the *Palestine Post*, he insisted that he had proposed the idea as early as 1921, emphasizing that he was inspired by the Swiss model of cantons and the British partition of Ireland. Despite Cust's pro-Arab stance, Ben-Avi argued, he supported his advocacy for cantonization in the service of all Palestinian communities and concluded by expressing hope that Muslims, Jews, and Christians would convene a "round table conference" under British aegis to discuss and implement the cantonization plan (Ben-Avi 1936, 1935). Not all Zionists were as optimistic. The Latvian-born jurist Max M. Laserson (1887–1951) criticized the analogy to Switzerland as false: the Swiss system, developed gradually over centuries, depended on equality among ethnic groups and shared loyalty to the state, but such conditions were absent in Palestine. Cantonization raised the risk of creating two hostile independent states rather than a unified federation. Without mutual recognition and cooperation, Laserson concluded, cantonization was impractical (Laserson 1937b; see also Laserson 1937a). The Revisionist Zionist Yehoshua Heschel Yeivin (1891–1970) was bolder: proposing the idea of cantonization, he argued, was no less than a crime (Yeivin 1937). Others, such as the journalist Benzion Katz (1932), attacked Ben-Avi's cantonization plan as no more than a fantasy, lacking any real potential of actualization (Katz 1932).

The outbreak of a Palestinian anticolonial revolt in 1936 enhanced, in the eyes of the British government, the need for a new political order in Palestine. An article in *The Spectator* in May 1936, shortly after the beginning of the uprising, praised Cust's ideas for dividing Palestine into cantons as a pragmatic and pacifying approach that recognized and accommodated the diverse interests of its inhabitants.[17] In November, Cust presented his plan at the Anglo-Palestine Club and met with members of the Palestine Royal Commission (better known as the Lord Peel Commission) prior to their travel to the region.[18] Reginald Coupland and other members of the Palestine Royal Commission picked up ideas of cantonization, and in this way, albeit indirectly, federalist ideas laid the groundwork for the 1937 partition plan, which proposed to divide Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The commission's report devoted a whole chapter to cantonization schemes. Though praised for their theoretical elegance, these proposals were deemed unworkable in a context lacking shared identity and trust, leading the report to conclude that cantonization entailed all the difficulties of partition without its one redeeming promise: the hope for eventual peace.[19] Although this plan was quickly marginalized, ongoing debates in the British Parliament over policy in Palestine continued to refer to a "federal solution," considering the division of Palestine into autonomous regions or cantons, each with a degree of self-governance. As a London *Times* editorial argued, this approach aimed to balance the interests of both Jewish and Arab communities while maintaining overall British control.

COMPARING FEDERALISMS

Historical comparisons and the reconstruction of earlier historical cases in which federal proposals were discussed and were part of the political bloodstream can help us understand the logic of federal thinking. As we have argued in the opening of the present article, Beate Jahn advocates using comparative methods to highlight temporal discontinuities and change, rather than making claims about continuity and legacy. Put otherwise, one does not need to draw a direct, uninterrupted line connecting past and present to comprehend federal thinking. Similarly, the historian Arthur Asseraf proposed using spatial—rather than temporal—comparative methods to highlight change across different places. He examined the appeal of federal, partition, and cantonization visions in multiple synchronous imperial sites, suggesting that their comparison served to underline differences and distinctions, rather than continuity and similarity. Looking at different federal schemes was a means of justifying and explaining the uniqueness of federal proposals in specific contexts (Asseraf 2018).

16 A. Cust (1936, 209). *The Palestine Post* (Jerusalem) also offered detailed reports of Cust's lecture and ideas: "Foreign Shorts." *Palestine Post*, March 6, 1936, 1; "Cantonisation," *Palestine Post*, March 9, 1936, 4.

17 "The Palestine Turmoil," *Spectator*, May 22, 1936, 919–20.

18 "Cantonisation Scheme before Royal Commission." *Palestine Post*, November 27, 1936, 2.

19 "Palestine: Report of the Royal Commission, 1936." CMD 5479. *Records of the Cabinet Office*, 1937, chap. 21. For discussion, see Dubnov (2019); Parsons (2019); Parsons (2020).

Taking a page from Jahn and Asseraf, we reconstructed a historical antecedent of contemporary proposals for federation or cantonization in Palestine to identify elements of discontinuity and change. Without assuming a conceptual continuity between past and present solutions, we argue that looking at the past can highlight important changes in the meaning and aims of federal thinking in different periods and contexts. Such a move may challenge claims of novelty of current proposals of federalization and cantonization by showing that such ideas have already circulated in the past, but at the same time, may provide a new framework for acknowledging the specific ways in which past ideas were explicitly *different* from current conceptualizations. Thus, a historical gaze can provide current theorists an opportunity to identify points of weakness in past proposals and distinguish them from new visions.

The latest policy document issued by A Land for All, published on their website, offers an opportunity to confront their proposal with Ben-Avi's federal vision.[20] Obviously, some issues, such as the refugee problem and the Palestinian right of return, emerged following the war of 1948, after Ben-Avi's time. Yet some key differences can be identified. Importantly, the new federalist vision takes a distance from territorial governance by creating two self-determined polities without strict territorial and demographic separation. This is a fundamental step away from Ben-Avi's conception of cantons as basic geographic units. Yet some similarities exist: each state will be an independent democracy, which, similarly to Ben-Avi's vision, would guarantee political liberty and civil rights for all its inhabitants. While Ben-Avi, drawing on the notion of national minority as it emerged in 1918, emphasized the importance of cultural and political autonomy in each canton, the new proposal adds to this an emphasis on mutual cooperation on the supranational or federal level. The new proposal envisages a "shared capital district," resembling Ben-Avi's "free city" of Jerusalem, but not following his offer to enact the same regime in Haifa and Jaffa too.

Where Ben-Avi foresaw a joint government for the diverse cantons overseeing finance, army, and foreign relations, A Land for All suggests a vaguer "superstructure of effective, joint institutions," addressing "security, civil and socio-economic rights, economic issues, environmental protection, climate change and more."[21] No joint federal army or financial regime is currently planned, but other areas of cooperation are mentioned in the new proposal, which thus reflects a different but no less ambitious approach to joint institutions: interstate court, "welfare, economic development, customs and financial institutions, education, tourism, traffic and sea and air travel, environmental protection, natural resource exploitation and any other area the countries determine would be better served if managed jointly."[22] Finally, the main point of difference between these proposals is in the national identity of the proponents: while Ben-Avi's ideas received no interest from Arab Palestinians, the new federal visions are presented as Israeli-Palestinian, forged as a partnership between political activists on both sides, who seek to share their ideas with both societies in a joint effort for their realization.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined the historical trajectories of federal visions in Palestine by looking at the ideas of an early twentieth-century Jerusalem-based Jewish Zionist political thinker, Itamar Ben-Avi. We argued that his ideas about federalism, which he also discussed under the title of "cantonization," reflected a long-term legacy of British imperial federal thought. Often implicitly, he replicated the hierarchical and exclusionary patterns of imperial political order and envisaged a top-down solution that undermined local participation. By placing his views in the context of British imperial federal thought, we suggested that imaginaries of the future of Palestine have deep roots in imperial political and intellectual traditions, with global rather than local experiences serving as historical models.

Ben-Avi's proposals, like many alternative visions for Palestine's future that were circulating prior to 1948, ultimately faltered as the momentum shifted decisively toward partition—an approach that was introduced first in 1937, as we have seen, and gained renewed traction after World War II. By the time of the Biltmore Resolution (May 1942), David Ben-Gurion and the Zionist leadership in Palestine—as opposed to Zionist representatives in London—had made a decisive turn toward statehood, calling for the establishment of Palestine as a "Jewish Commonwealth," rallying growing support from American Jewry. Efforts to counter this shift with federalist alternatives—such as those advanced by Ihud (Unity), a group of intellectuals led by Judah Leon Magnes, Martin Buber, Moshe Smilansky, and Ernst (Akivah) Simon, who were advocating an Arab-Jewish shared state—proved marginal and failed to gain significant traction within the broader movement (Heller 2000, chap. 6). Ben-Avi, who died in exile in New York in April 1943, had little to say about the Biltmore Resolution, spending his last years in poverty, writing his autobiography. After Ben-Avi's death, his canton proposal—like his audacious bid to Latinize Hebrew script—was largely dismissed as a visionary yet impractical endeavor, emblematic of his singular imagination untethered from political feasibility. Yet it was against this backdrop that a different New York–based Jewish intellectual, Hannah Arendt, who was close to the

20 "A Land for All: Two States. One Homeland." https://www.alandforall.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/booklet-english.pdf Accessed June 24, 2025.

21 "A Land for All."

22 "A Land for All."

key figures of Ihud and sympathetic to their cause, began distancing herself from the national movement she had supported up to that point. The abandonment of a possibility of reconciliation based on federal ideas, Arendt warned, marked the "Revisionist landslide in the Zionist Organization" and "the uncritical acceptance of German-inspired nationalism" by the Zionists.[23]

Partition and state-making, in other words, went hand in hand, rendering Ben-Avi's ideas irrelevant. The idea of physically dividing the territory into two ethnonational states appealed not for its idealism but for its expediency: by 1947, Britain had grown weary of its costly mandate, facing both international criticism and an increasingly united Jewish resistance (Parsons 2020). No longer seeing Palestine as a strategic asset, the British handed the problem off to the newly established United Nations, as one drops a hot potato. Partition, first proposed but rejected in 1937, made a comeback a decade later as a politically convenient solution—framed not only as a means to resolve the Jewish-Arab conflict but also as a response to the mounting urgency of resettling Europe's displaced Jews after the Holocaust (Dubnov and Robson 2025). For the British Empire, the 1947 partition plan offered a "quick and dirty" exit strategy. The empire was in retreat; sovereign nation-states, endorsed by the United Nations, came in to fill the vacuum. Critically, the pivot to statist thinking and state-making was not the result of decisions made by local actors but rather had much to do with international power brokers and seismic shifts in global power relations after 1945.

Placing new federal visions in Israel/Palestine against the backdrop of a longer historical discussion offers, thus, an excitingly new way of contextualizing the conflict, without surrendering to methodological nationalist assumptions. This, however, does not imply that all federalisms are the same, nor that we need to frame federalist schemes emerging in the colonial world as nothing but a democratic, cosmopolitan alternative to the nation-state. We drew on the comparative methodological approaches of Jahn and Asseraf to argue that in some cases, a comparison can be useful to highlight differences and change rather than seeking origins and continuity. We briefly compared Ben-Avi's vision to a new federal proposal by the Israeli-Palestinian organization A Land for All to consider some of the similarities and differences of these visions. If more information about their vision would become available, future studies could extend the comparison. We suggested that a closer attention to the century-old history of federal visions in Palestine—within and beyond imperial experiences—can help situate contemporary proposals in a broader context of federal thought, generate informed awareness of past ideas to avoid replicating earlier discriminatory and exclusionary patterns, and highlight the actual political and conceptual novelty of recent proposals.

COMPETING INTERESTS

There are no competing interests to declare.

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23 Arendt (1978, 134, 156). Arendt's essay was originally published in the *Menorah Journal* in October 1944.

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