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## **Conference compares Iceland and Lebanon as nations on EU periphery**

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**By Rym Ghazal**

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BEIRUT: Iceland and Lebanon, though an unlikely pair, were compared and discussed at a conference at Beirut's Saint Joseph University Tuesday as the two nations on the periphery of the EU who are much affected by its emergence. "While it does seem like a strange link to make, there are several similarities between Lebanon and Iceland, such as the population size of both countries and their relationship with the EU," said Judge and Professor David Thor Björgvinsson in an interview with The Daily Star.

"And both countries derive their names from ice," added Björgvinsson jokingly.

The main objective of the three-day conference is to introduce Iceland to the Lebanese and learn how Iceland as a nation with a small population has adapted to the emergence of a huge and unprecedented construction like the EU and yet remains one of its most successful countries.

The EU recently turned its attention to Lebanon, when it was visited last week by the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner, where she pledged the EU's full support for Lebanon in terms of its economic, political and judiciary reforms.

"The EU probably views Lebanon as the gate to the Arab world," said Björgvinsson, who is a judge at the European Court of Human Rights.

The EU commission has put forward a new 10 million euro reform support program for Lebanon, making the EU one of Lebanon's leading donors.

As well as presentations about Iceland and Lebanon, the two countries' entrance into the EU was also debated during the conference.

For instance, while Iceland has met all the necessary requirements to join the EU, it has not.

"Iceland has a special agreement with the EU, the European Economic Area, that gives it access to the EU's internal market, without being a member, so what is the added benefit of joining?" said Björgvinsson, who suggested Lebanon may try to secure a similar agreement.

Representing Lebanon at the talks, Professor and [lawyer](#) Chibli Mallat concluded "Iceland focused on solely pragmatic reasons for not entering the EU, while discussions in Lebanon on issue have been ideological."

"Generally, there were two directions, one that favors Lebanon's entry into the EU as Lebanon speaks English and French and is European in many ways, and the other direction that views Lebanon as purely Arab," said Mallat.