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### **George Weidenfeld's bright idea**

Conferences on the Middle East are plethoric. When it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, they tend to be even more unalluring, quickly collapsing into a polarized debate over history or over solutions, the parameters of which have been repeated forever. With one territory and two people fighting over it, the solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has long jelled into a bifurcated, preternatural and lasting form. Depending on whether your reading of the crisis starts in 1948 or 1967, the rest, including the full spectrum of compromise solutions, follows as night follows day: Either one divides the area under Israeli control into two, and you have resolutions 242 and 338, the Rogers Plan, the Oslo process or the Palestinian-Israeli "road map," or Palestinians and Israelis agree to live in a binational entity. As the Harvard historian Roger Owen once put it, all the arithmetic of the conflict is known. Finding new ideas is almost impossible.

This might have been disproved at a Bertelsmann Foundation conference this past weekend at Kronberg, Germany. There, the publisher and tycoon George Weidenfeld, a member of the British House of Lords, a grand old man of Churchillian grandeur, offered a new idea: Why not work on joint entrance of Israel and Lebanon into the EU? If enacted, his proposal could potentially open interesting doors in Palestinian-Israeli relations.

Israel has been knocking at the European door for years. One can go back to 1975 to see the first free-trade agreement signed between Israel and the then nine states of the European Community. This subsequently developed into the partnership model now current in the region. For political reasons having to do with Israel's increasingly authoritarian occupation policies in the West Bank and Gaza, the estrangement between Israel and many European countries has grown to the point where few states are eager to see Israeli officials come their way.

So, the idea of Israel as part of the EU is not new. What is, however, is that Lebanon and Israel should join the union together. The idea is worth probing, if only because the most attractive achievement of joint Lebanese-Israeli entrance would be its potentially allowing the freedom of movement of 1948 Palestinian refugees from Lebanon into Israel, and perhaps at some stage settlement there - a situation that would address the central theme of the Palestinian tragedy. It would mean an end to humiliation for those who now live in the West Bank, and total legal equality for non-Jews in Israel. In brief, the fairy tale would allow Israel to be democratic, which it cannot claim to be until the multi-layered legal discrimination, domination and exclusion of non-Jews finds

“European” remedies.

As an old style Zionist, Weidenfeld’s proposal was based on an assumption that Israeli Jews, especially those originating from Europe as well as Westernized Sephardim, could be reintegrated in some way with their brethren who remained in Europe.

But what about Lebanon? In my inaugural lecture to the Jean Monnet Chair, I argued that Lebanon’s future was European.

Some consistency with that statement is required. Many obstacles are evident, whether in terms of Lebanon’s economy or its Arab nature. However, one can see the allure of a European Lebanon for all Lebanese. EU membership can represent a model for other Arab countries, and help lead to such things as the adoption of Arabic as a European language. This is not out of the question as it now appears inevitable that Malta, Cyprus and Turkey will be part of the EU sooner rather than later.

For Europe, Lebanon and Israel are countries probably less painful to integrate than Turkey. After all, the Turkish-Syrian territorial dispute over the Sandjak of Alexandretta has yet to be resolved and could find itself in a European forum once Turkey joins the EU. There is also the fact that Lebanese and Israeli societies are demographically much smaller than Turkey, with its large Muslim population - the latter a factor that has already provoked much debate at the level of senior EU officials.

A more difficult question is whether joint Israeli and Lebanese entrance into the EU could or should come before or after a final Middle East settlement. Even in Weidenfeld’s novel scheme, it would only occur after the emergence of a Palestinian state. Yet one thing is clear: Peace, which has been elusive for the past half-century, could well be possible for the first time because of the unprecedented geopolitical earthquake represented by the emergence of Europe.

As in the Balkans, torn asunder through wars of wounded identities, or in Cyprus, or even in Northern Ireland, Weidenfeld’s proposal is worth examining as a possible solution to what is now the longest conflict in modern history: the question of Israel-Palestine. Nor is the idea totally strange from a European perspective. Perhaps the most intriguing article in the would-be European constitution is article I-56, which envisages “a special relationship” with the immediate neighbors of an enlarged Europe. Will joint Israeli-Lebanese entry into the EU help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? It’s not clear, but George Weidenfeld, who has seen many pennies in his life, deserves one for his thoughts.

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