



Winner in the Western Press category:

Dominique Moisi

'Middle Eastern Test of a European Unity'

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Twenty years ago the Middle East was a source of friction between the US and Europe. Led by France, Europe had issued the Venice declaration - a largely symbolic text that emphasised, rightly, the centrality of the Palestinian plight, but downgraded the importance of the peace treaty Jimmy Carter, then US president, had negotiated between Egypt and Israel. To American and Israeli eyes, Europe was ingratiating itself with the Arab world for the sake of oil. Its claim to be a helpful and fair-minded partner in the peace process was unconvincing.

Today, by contrast, Washington seems to want Europe to become more deeply involved in the Arab-Israeli drama.

There are several reasons for this shift. First is the shared frustration at the failure of international diplomatic peace efforts, and the return of violence.

That Europe presented itself in the 1990s as a complement to - and not a substitute for - US policy has also helped pave the way for this new transatlantic collaboration.

A new administration less willing than its predecessor to take a lead with daring initiatives is looking to a bolder and less divided Europe.

Thus, at a time when there is less hope than ever in the Middle East, Europe is gaining confidence in its ability to help - and not just as a banker. When a suicide attack killed more than 20 Israeli youngsters in the heart of Tel Aviv last month, the European statesman closest to hand was Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister - a coincidence, of course, but symbolic nonetheless. Who better than a German to convey the message that Europe is ready to assume a new role?

The present situation in the Middle East is born of despair and fear. The primary responsibility of the international community, and Europeans in particular, is to comfort the Palestinians and to reassure the Israelis. Europe must seek to distract both sides from the temptations of extremism.

To succeed, it must discourage two incompatible dreams. Some Israelis believe they can create both settlements and security at the same time. On the Palestinian side, the dream is that the Jewish state will one day disappear - that the Israelis, softened by westernisation, will somehow give up and leave.

To dispel these fantasies, Europe needs to hold out a more tempting carrot - and wield a tougher stick. It should offer the Palestinians better-planned and properly delivered economic aid. For the Israelis, Europe should hold out the prospect of a "privileged partnership", which would create stronger ties with the European Union.

As enlargement transforms the European Union in the coming years, Europe will have to decide how to handle a group of neighbouring countries that possess some European characteristics, but are not members of the Union, and are not likely to be in the foreseeable future. Turkey, Russia and Israel may all fall into this category.

Sport offers us a hint of such inchoate links. Just as the "ping-pong diplomacy" of China and the unification of East and West Germany's Olympic teams, prefigured political realignments, so too in the Middle East. As far as soccer and basketball are concerned, Israel has been in Europe for years. Israeli players have nowhere else to go.

The "Levantinisation" of Israel, predicted and even hoped for by some analysts, never took place. Shimon Peres's dream of turning Israel into a bridge between the developed and less developed parts of the Middle East remains a generous but distant vision. Having received more than 1m Russian immigrants in the past 10 years - they now account for one-fifth of its Jewish population - Israel is more European than ever.

Judged against the criteria established for membership of the enlarged EU, Israel fulfils more of the economic, social and even political requirements than many of the candidate countries in the European continent. One cannot, as some Arab thinkers do, denounce the western nature of the Jewish state and at the same time refuse to face some of the consequences of this reality.

Yet incentives alone will not work. They must be accompanied by the possibility of coercive measures. The Europeans could, for instance, threaten to limit aid to the Palestinians and they could threaten to restrict Israeli exports to the EU - though this combination would, of course hurt the Palestinians more than the Israelis.

It is clear what Europe should demand. On the Palestinian side, beyond the calculated manipulation of violence, what is unacceptable is the absence of the rule of law, the corruption, if not stopped, and the continuing use of educational texts filled with hatred. The EU, whose greatest source of pride is the success of the postwar reconciliation of its member states, cannot support an educational system based on the perpetuation of racial and religious intolerance. Aid should be made conditional to the respect of certain minimal rules.

On the Israeli side, the continued building of settlements on disputed land is unacceptable and should lead to trade sanctions, implemented by the EU. The Mitchell report was balanced. Giving its recommendations teeth is the responsibility of the international community, and above all of the EU as it attempts to gain greater international credibility.

The choice for Europe is to act as a union to support moderates on both sides, or to allow member states to pursue their national self-interest throughout the region.

The recent and difficult trip to Paris by Bashar El Assad, the new Syrian president, adds urgency to the issue. The time has come to bury the anachronism of France's pro-Arab stance in the name of an EU policy towards the Middle East.

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The Two honorable-mentions in the Western Press category:

* “A MidEast Partnership Can Still Work,” by Yossi Beilin & Yasir Abed Rabbo.
Published in the *New York Times*, August 1, 2001.

* “Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors,” by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha.
Published in *The New York Review of Books*, August 9, 2001. Subsequently in *Al Hayat* and *HaAretz*

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