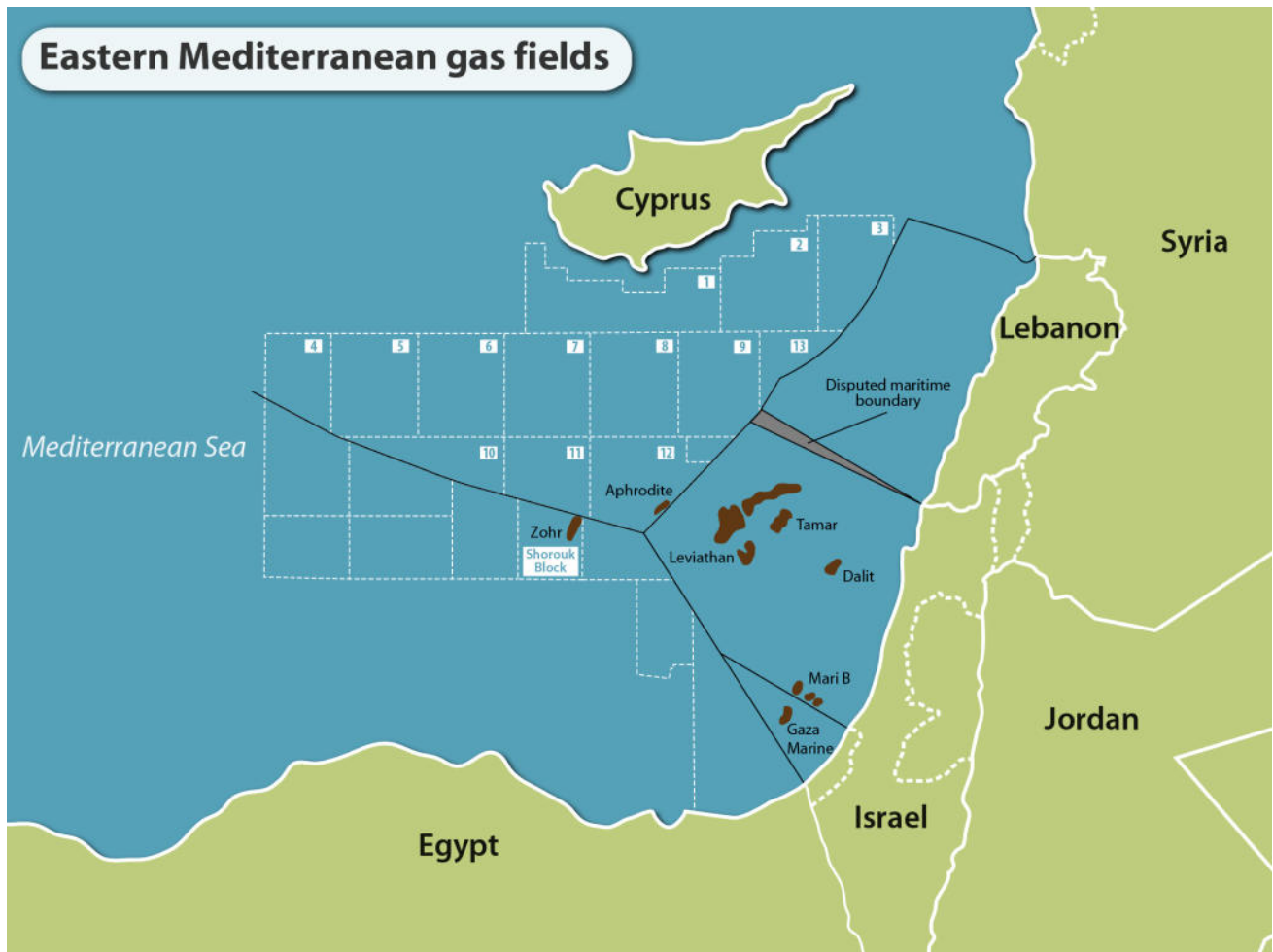


Lebanon Agrees to Talk with Israel on Maritime Borders

by Hugh Fitzgerald



For the last decade, Israel has been discovering huge undersea deposits of natural gas in the Tamar and Leviathan fields under the Mediterranean, and is now producing that gas both for its own use and for sale to Egypt and Jordan. Lebanon, meanwhile, has stood on the sidelines, needing to demarcate its maritime border with Israel before it can begin exploration, discovery, and production of its own gas, but afraid to have anything to do with the Jewish state, for fear of Hezbollah's reaction. Now that is about to change, as the story [here](#) describes:

Direct talks between Israel and Lebanon are slated to begin

next week [in mid-October] over the maritime border between the two countries. Finagling an agreement will allow Lebanon to explore offshore gas fields and potentially produce and sell gas, as Israel has long done.

Negotiations on the demarcation of the border could have taken place a decade ago when large gas fields were discovered in the waters of the Mediterranean. But Lebanon dragged its feet and refused any contact with Israel, as part of the notion that the very existence of negotiations between the two countries constitutes some sort of legitimization of Israel's existence...

In a case of geopolitical cutting-off-your-nose-to-spite-your-face, Lebanon put off by a decade any talks on demarcation of its maritime border with Israel. The Israelis pushed ahead in both exploration and production of undersea gas deposits, while the Lebanese sat glumly watching, its political class afraid of antagonizing Hezbollah by entering into talks with the Zionist enemy.

For the last few years, Lebanon's economy has been in free fall. Mismanagement and corruption have reached staggering levels. When Lebanese came out to protest against the "permanent government" last fall, Hezbollah fighters suppressed, with violence, the non-violent protesters. Hezbollah has a large presence in the Parliament, in the cabinet, and even controls, as one of its willing non-Shi'a collaborators, the Maronite President Michel Aoun. Hezbollah is part of the problem of, not the solution to, that mismanagement and corruption decried by the protesters. Hezbollah's head, Hassan Nasrallah, has amassed a personal fortune of \$250 million, which provides a good idea of how he views financial corruption. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 80% of its value in the last year; unemployment is above 20% (and among the young has reached 40%), more than half of the Lebanese now live below the poverty line. The capital,

Beirut, lies partly in ruins, the result of the catastrophic August 4 blast.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah rules the roost. It continues to hide its 150,000 missiles and rockets among, and sometimes deep underneath, residential buildings, hoping to hold Lebanese civilians as hostages, who may keep Israel from launching possible attacks. The terror group keeps threatening to drag Lebanon into a war with Israel, even more devastating than the one it started in 2004; it would be a war that the Lebanese do not want but cannot prevent if Hezbollah, itself a puppet of Iran, so decides. The Lebanese Armed Forces, outgunned and outmanned by Hezbollah, which has more conventional arms than 95% of the world's armies, refuses to move into southern Lebanon, for it doesn't dare confront Hezbollah fighters.

With the collapse of the pound, the spreading impoverishment of the people, the rise in unemployment, and the end of foreign aid from rich Sunni states that stopped giving Lebanon aid when Hezbollah, the ally of Iran, essentially took control of the country after it had murdered Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, the Lebanese government has now been forced to at long last negotiate with Israel over maritime borders. For the only possible bright spot for the Lebanese economy, it is now understood in Beirut, will be the discovery, and production, of its own offshore natural gas deposits.

Hezbollah is now at the nadir of its support in Lebanon. It is universally blamed – despite its continued preposterous denials – for the August 4 blast of 2,750 tones of ammonium nitrates that it had haphazardly stored in Hangar 12, which was under the exclusive control of Hezbollah, at the Port of Beirut. And now the Israelis have exposed three separate missile depots belonging to Hezbollah, consisting of workshops and warehouses deep beneath residential buildings. The Israelis even made use of a video of one of the workshops, in the Al-Janah neighborhood, released by Hezbollah itself. The terror group assumed that, since it had removed the missile

and missile parts, the video would appear to exculpate it. Instead the Israelis produced a point-by-point analysis of how the various machines seen on the video – to cut, smooth, and bend steel – were used in the production of precision-guided missiles. Revelations about these Hezbollah missile factories have further angered the Lebanese, and left Hezbollah reeling.

If you believe Arab media reports, Syria may not be far behind [in negotiating with Israel]. Despite the vigorous denials from Damascus, it is clear that given the chance, Syrian President Bashar Assad is more than willing to join the regional peace process if it gets his country out of the dire economic crisis it faces.

The notion that Syria, a country that has fought three wars with Israel, and given succor and refuge to several Palestinian terror groups, including the PFLP and As Saiqa, and is deeply beholden for its support in the civil war to Iran, Israel's mortal enemy, would now join "the regional peace process" with Israel is highly improbable. Tehran would stop any such move by Syria in its tracks.

Nor is it clear, were it possible for Syria to "join the regional peace process," as to how that would help Syria out of its economic crisis. Nine years of civil war have devastated Syrian cities and the countryside. It is estimated that merely putting Syrian infrastructure back in the condition it was in before the civil war began in 2011 would cost at least \$350 billion. The Western powers are neither willing, nor able at this point, given the economic damage caused by the pandemic, to provide Syria with funds. Nor would Syria's making peace with Israel lead Sunni Arab states to open their pockets for Damascus as long as Syria remains an ally of Iran. Could Bashar al-Assad do a volte-face, turn away from his closest ally, Shi'a Iran, without incurring the wrath either of the IRGC and of Hezbollah, both of which have fighters already entrenched in Syria? Of course not. Wouldn't

the scheming Iranians in such a case foment a coup against Assad within the Syrian army, in order that his replacement would not join any regional peace process, but continue the country's alliance with Iran, and Iran's policy of implacable hostility to the Jewish state?

Yes, both the UAE and Bahrain have been quick to make deals, both between governments and between private businessmen. Every day seems to bring a fresh announcement of a new agreement between a UAE business and an Israeli one. Both Bahrain and the UAE are keenly aware that they have capital to invest, and Israel, as the Start-Up Nation, offers many opportunities for such investment. Israel is a world leader in agriculture (including drip irrigation), waste water management, solar energy, medical equipment, cybersecurity and cyberwarfare, consumer apps of every kind, laser anti-missile systems, and much more. And Israel offers not just opportunities for Arab investment, but is eager to help train Emiratis and Bahrainis to build up their own R & D operations, and to turn those operations into successful companies. In other words, the Israelis stand ready to share what they have learned in creating the most successful Start-Up Nation.

If Lebanon begins to produce natural gas from offshore fields, Hezbollah's threat to drag Lebanon into war – and thereby to endanger those fields, which might naturally become the object of Israeli attacks in an attempt to cut off a major source of the terror group's revenues (for Hezbollah would certainly have claimed its cut of the gas revenues) – would be regarded as even more intolerable. And the Lebanese, once they are enjoying the fruits of a deal with Israel demarcating maritime borders, by selling gas from their own offshore fields, would be even angrier with Hezbollah as they ask themselves why such a deal was not reached a decade ago: "Why did we have to be so frightened by Hezbollah, and why did we have to wait so long because of Hassan Nasrallah, merely to claim what is rightfully ours?"

First published in