

Gas in the Levant Basin: Prosperity or Curse?

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Gas in the Levant Basin: Prosperity or Curse? by LTC Ali A. Mohamad, 48 pages.

The Eastern Mediterranean is rich with maritime disputes among regional actors regarding offshore oil and gas fields, Lebanon and Israel are an example. The geostrategic importance of these offshore natural gas discoveries provides an opportunity to formulate alliances or exacerbate regional tensions in the Levant Basin. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel depended on imported energy resources. By the end of the 20th century, Israel discovered vast offshore gas reservoirs that not only fulfill its domestic needs, but also provide the incentives for Israel to become a natural gas exporter. Moreover, Israel anticipates these massive energy discoveries, mainly the Leviathan gas field, to play a significant role in shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean in its favor. However, security dilemmas confront Israel and hinder the achievement of its strategic objectives. Besides undermining international law, Israel counts on interdependent great power interests in the Levant Basin as a guarantor to ensure maintaining a stable political environment. Consequently, being a regional gas hub provides an opportunity for Israel to advance its diplomatic and military presence within a hostile surrounding. This paper discusses the main drivers behind Israel's interest in commencing gas exploitation in the Leviathan field before settling the maritime dispute with Lebanon.

Contents

Acknowledgments.....	v
Abbreviations.....	vi
Figures.....	vii
Introduction	1
Israel’s Economic Fortune on the Horizon	9
A Legitimate Cause to Enhance Maritime Strategies.....	21
A Good Reason Not to Demarcate Borders: Regional Domination.....	27
Great Power’s Regional Interests: Conflict or Intersect?	33
Conclusion.....	40
Bibliography	44

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Abbreviations

EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
TCF	Trillion Cubic Feet

Figures

Figure 1. Location of Lebanon and the Levant Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean.	2
Figure 2. Dispute Points and Contested Area on the Blue Line.	4
Figure 3. Lebanon-Israeli Maritime Dispute.	6
Figure 4. State Maritime Boundaries with Relevant Articles of UNCLOS.	7
Figure 5. Gas Blocks and Contracts in the Eastern Mediterranean.	11
Figure 6. The Arab Gas Pipeline.	12
Figure 7. Israel’s Offshore Gas Deposits.	14
Figure 8. The Egyptian Option.	17
Figure 9. The East Med Pipeline.	19
Figure 10. Israel Domestic Supply Pipelines.	23
Figure 11. Israel’s Territorial Expansion in 1967.	28
Figure 12. Border Wall Construction Facing the Town of Adaisseh, South Lebanon.	30
Figure 13. Rights Holders in Oil and Gas Blocks on Cypriot Israel Maritime Border.	31
Figure 14. Full Promised Land of Israel.	32
Figure 15. Belt and Road Initiative.	39

Introduction

Let me tell you something that we Israelis have against Moses. He took us forty years through the desert in order to bring us to the one spot in the Middle East that has no oil.

— Golda Meir, 1973

This quote attributed to the former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was still considered valid until the previous two decades. Until recently, oil and gas exploitation in Israel did not historically achieve any significant commercial success. While Israel's exploitation efforts were futile, the Middle Eastern Gulf States were successful regarding oil and gas exploitation since the early 1930s.¹ By the end of the 20th century, Israel discovered vast offshore gas reservoirs 40km west of Ashkelon in 1999.² This "Noa-1" field was followed by the discovery of the "Mari-B" gas field in 2000, the Tamar gas field in 2009, and culminated in the discovery of the substantial Leviathan gas field in 2010.³ However, this massive field spreads out into Lebanese territorial waters, with that country's Parliament passing a law claiming ownership rights.⁴ This claim by the Lebanese Parliament is where the problem begins.

Located in the Levant Basin on the intersection of the oldest three continents, Lebanon, with an area of 10,452 km², is bordered by Syria to the north and east, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and Palestine/Israel to the south (see figure 1).⁵ Israel, or the Palestinian occupied

¹ Roger E. Owen, "One Hundred Years of Middle Eastern Oil," Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, January, 2008, no. 24, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB24.pdf>.

² Israel Ministry of Energy, "Exploration History," accessed September 13, 2019, <http://www.energy-sea.gov.il/English-Site/Pages/Oil%20And%20Gas%20in%20Israel/History-of-Oil--Gas-Exploration-and-Production-in-Israel.aspx>.

³ Simon Henderson, "Israel's Natural Gas Challenges," The Washington Institute, September 7, 2012, accessed September 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israels-natural-gas-challenges>.

⁴ Alexandros Petersen, "Leviathan in the Levant," Atlantic Council, February 4, 2011, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/leviathan-in-the-levant>.

⁵ Nations Online, "Map of Lebanon, Middle East," accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/lebanon_map.htm.

territories as identified by Lebanon, shares the majority of its northern borders with Lebanon over a distance of 81 km.⁶ Lebanon never recognized the state of Israel, and with no direct negotiations occurring between the two states, they remain at a state of war.

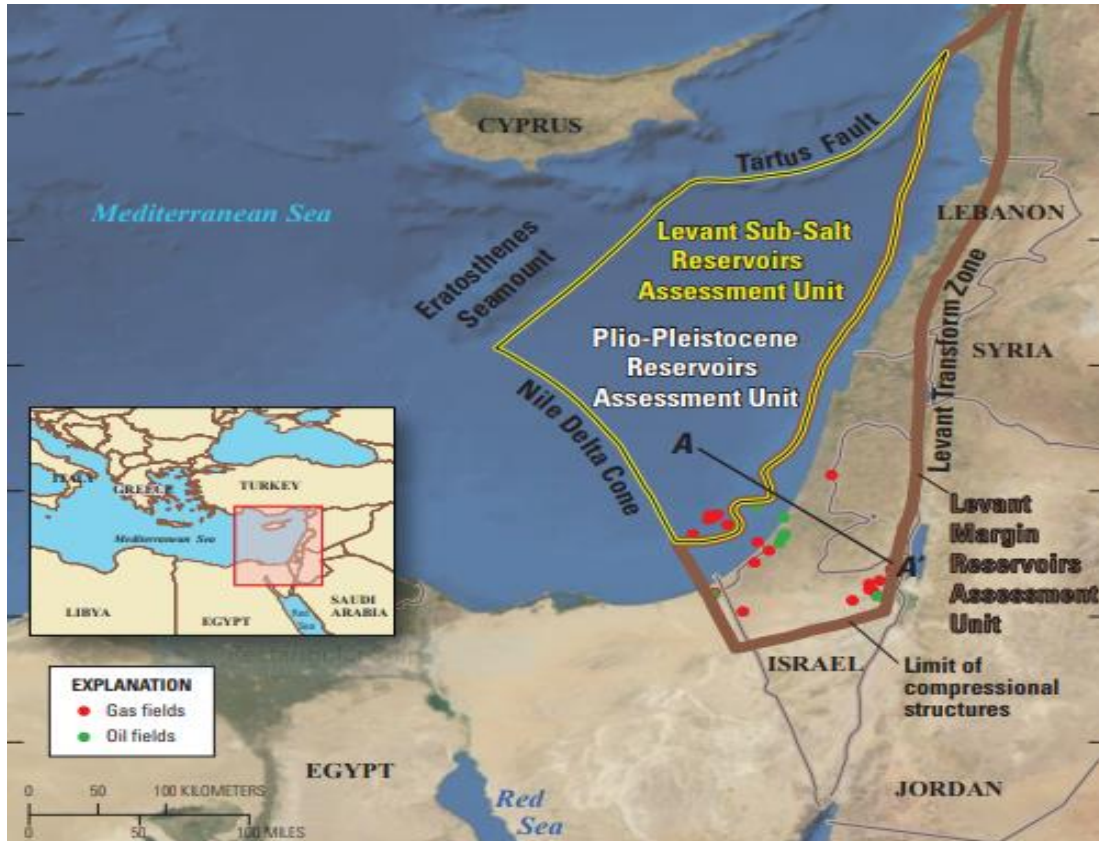


Figure 1. Location of Lebanon and the Levant Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean. Data from The World Petroleum Resources Project, “Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean,” US Geological Survey, March 2010, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3014/pdf/FS10-3014.pdf>.

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has acted aggressively multiple times against its surrounding Arab countries.⁷ In 1949, after the armistice agreement between Lebanon and Israel, a boundary line was drawn identical to the 1923 Mandate Line, also known as the Paulet-Newcombe Agreement (see figure 2). This separated the British Mandated Palestine from the

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Lebanon,” CIA, accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_le.html.

⁷ Israel, along with France and the United Kingdom, conducted the 1956 tripartite aggression against Egypt due to the Suez Canal crisis. Later a six-day war with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, followed by another aggressive act towards Lebanon in 1996, and ending with the 33-day war with Lebanon in July 2006.

French Mandate of Syria and Greater Lebanon.⁸ After ending an occupation of south Lebanon extending from 1978 to 2000, followed by the 2006 war, Israel withdrew its forces behind another boundary line known as the Blue Line.⁹ Lebanon objected on thirteen points along this Blue Line accusing Israel of not fully completing its withdrawal (see figure 2).¹⁰ This withdrawal did not comply with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 425, making significant deviations to the Armistice Line of 1949.¹¹ One of these thirteen points was in the vicinity of the coastal town of Al-Naqoura in south Lebanon, considered as the start point of the Armistice Line.¹²

⁸ Frederic C. Hof, "A Practical Line: The Line of Withdrawal from Lebanon and Its Potential Applicability to the Golan Heights," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (2001): 25–42, accessed September 17, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/4329580.

⁹ The Blue Line is the United Nations-demarcated border between Lebanon and Israel and the occupied Golan Heights on June 7, 2000. The Blue Line is not an international border but was established with the purpose of verifying the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

¹⁰ UNIFIL Press Kit, "The Line of Withdrawal: Blue Line," accessed September 15, 2019, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/20170113presskit.pdf>.

¹¹ Following the Palestinian guerrilla operation led by Dalal al-Mughrabi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), on March 11, 1978, on two Israeli buses near Tel Aviv, killing and wounding several Israelis civilians, Israeli forces entered southern Lebanon under the pretext of removing PLO bases south of the Litani River. The UN Resolution 425 was adopted and forced an Israeli withdrawal in addition to establishing a United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

¹² U.S Department of State, "International Boundary Study: Israel – Lebanon Boundary," February 15, 1967, no. 75, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://fsulawrc.com/fall/collection/LimitsinSeas/IBS075.pdf>.

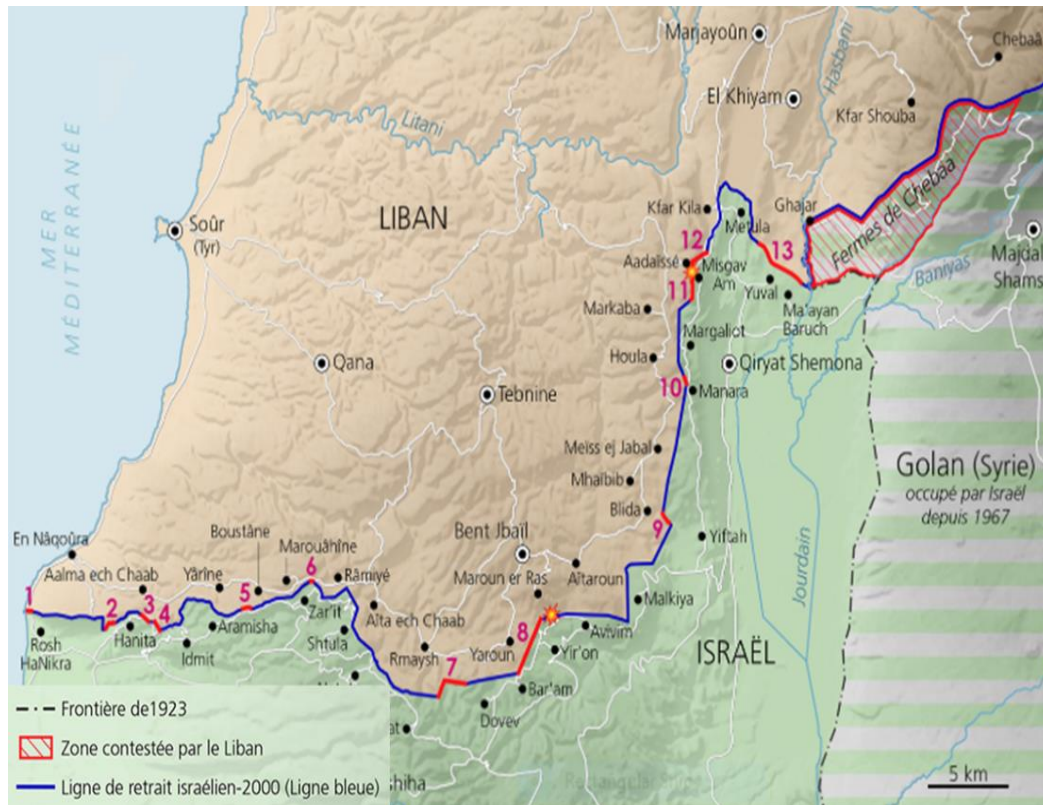


Figure 2. Dispute Points and Contested Area on the Blue Line. Data from Daniel Meier, “In South Lebanon, the Blue Line as a post-conflict marker?” *Online Journal of Political Geography and Geopolitics*, 2017, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/4451#tocto1n1>.

Based on the difference in locating the coastal point, Lebanon and Israel have not defined their adjacent maritime boundaries. The disagreement on the location of the coastal point is based upon a 22-meter variation between the Lebanese and the Israeli territorial claims. If this variation extends into the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), it grows to approximately 17 kilometers, thus making the total maritime disputed area to be 850 km² (see figure 3).¹³

Lebanon and Israel, however, each settled its territorial water borders through bilateral agreements with Cyprus, with whom they share their western boundary of the EEZ. In January 2007, Lebanon signed an agreement with Cyprus delineating its maritime boundaries. Lebanon considered Point 1 the temporary southern extent of its EEZ, in order to avoid the recognition of

¹³ Hana Krhovská, “Conflict Resolution in the Disputes over Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Case of Israel and Lebanon,” Masaryk University, May, 2014, accessed September 24, 2019, https://is.muni.cz/th/bcvpm/text_HK_final.pdf.

the state of Israel (see figure 3).¹⁴ Since Point 1 is not the permanent southern extent for Lebanon's EEZ, as claimed by the Government of Lebanon (GoL), a clause within the agreement kept the options of amending this point further south to represent later the equidistant between Lebanon, Cyprus, and Israel.¹⁵ Cyprus ratified the agreement, but Lebanon did not in order to preserve strong relations with Turkey, who opposed this agreement. Due to historical ties, stability in the Lebanese-Turkish relations acquired a priority for both countries based on mutual interests, especially in the trade sector.¹⁶

Due to the Cypriot-Turkish tension, Turkey does not recognize agreements drafted by Cyprus that do not encompass economic benefits to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹⁷ Later, in May 2009, the GoL passed a law that abandoned Point 1 and referred to Point 23 as being equidistant between the three states based on the findings of Lebanese Army geographers in April 2009 (see figure 3).¹⁸ These geographical coordinates were then submitted to the UN Secretary-General in July 2010 as a proposal for Lebanon's maritime boundary with Israel.¹⁹ On the other hand, Israel, based on the 2007 Lebanese-Cypriot agreement, adopted Point 1 as its EEZ northern boundary and concluded an agreement with Cyprus in December 2010. This move disregarded the Lebanese proposal to the UN.²⁰

¹⁴ Alan Craig and Clive Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas Fields and their Geopolitical Implications," *The Emirates Occasional Papers*, 2013, accessed September 17, 2019, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/1be207ffa956a75cc99e8f18778f7621/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=135362>.

¹⁵ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "The Maritime Boundaries and Natural Resources of the Republic of Lebanon," UNDP, December, 2014, accessed September 24, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Governance/Publications/Legal%20section%201-6.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Turkey and Lebanon," Republic of Turkey, 2011, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-lebanon.en.mfa>.

¹⁷ The island of the Republic of Cyprus is divided with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) since 1974. While Cyprus is a member of the European Union, the TRNC is only recognized by Turkey that has a considerable number of armed forces on the island.

¹⁸ UNDP, "The Maritime Boundaries of Lebanon."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

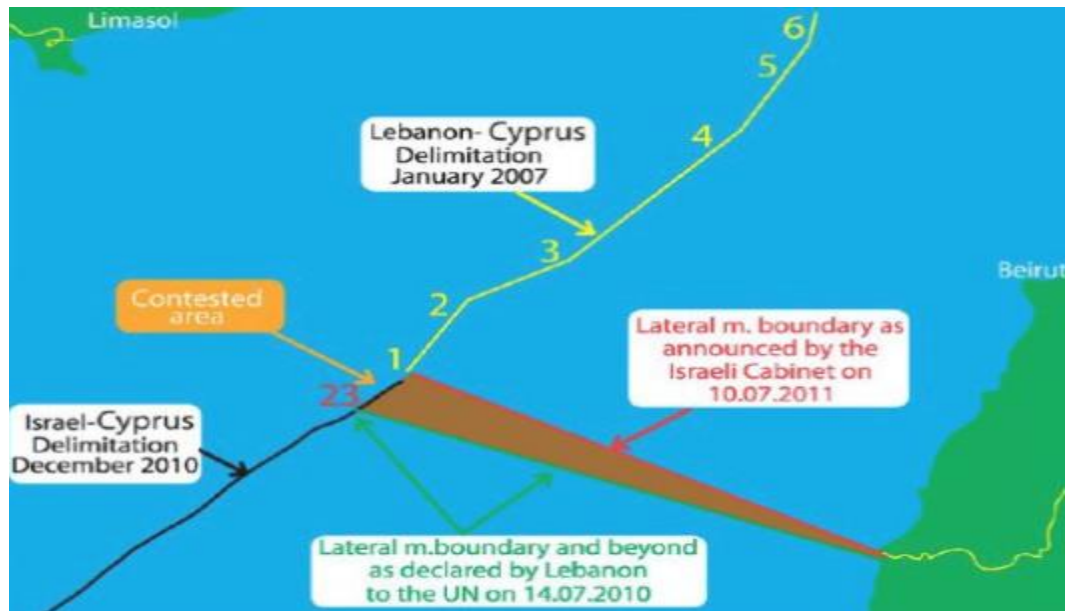


Figure 3. Lebanon-Israeli Maritime Dispute. Data from Fondation Orient Mont-Pelerin, “The Legal Framework of Lebanon’s Maritime Boundaries: The Exclusive Economic Zone and Offshore Hydrocarbon Resources,” November 2012, accessed February 20, 2020, <http://orientmontpelerin.ch/the-legal-framework-of-lebanons-maritime-boundaries-the-exclusive-economic-zone-and-offshore-hydrocarbon-resources/>.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), signed in 1982, defines the countries’ responsibilities over maritime rights.²¹ The UNCLOS considers the final land point as the initial point in dividing adjacent maritime areas (see figure 4).²² This is further reflected in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that states “The title of a State to the Continental Shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is based on the principle that the land dominates the sea and the land is the legal source of the power which a State may exercise over territorial extensions to seaward.”²³

²¹ Within territorial waters that extend for 12 nautical miles, a country has similar responsibilities to that of its land boundaries. In the contiguous zone, a country has the right to apply its regulations and customs to prevent external violations. The EEZ extends for 200 nautical miles from territorial baseline with the right to exploit and manage natural resources. In the continental shelf, considered as an extension to land territory, a country exercises full sovereignty over extraction of natural resources within 200 nautical miles.

²² Pierre-Emmanuel Dupont, “Lebanon’s Southern Maritime Border Dispute: Legal Issues, Challenges, And The Way Forward,” Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, January, 2019, accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/working_papers/2018-2019/20190212_lebanon_southern_maritime_border_dispute.pdf.

²³ Ibid.

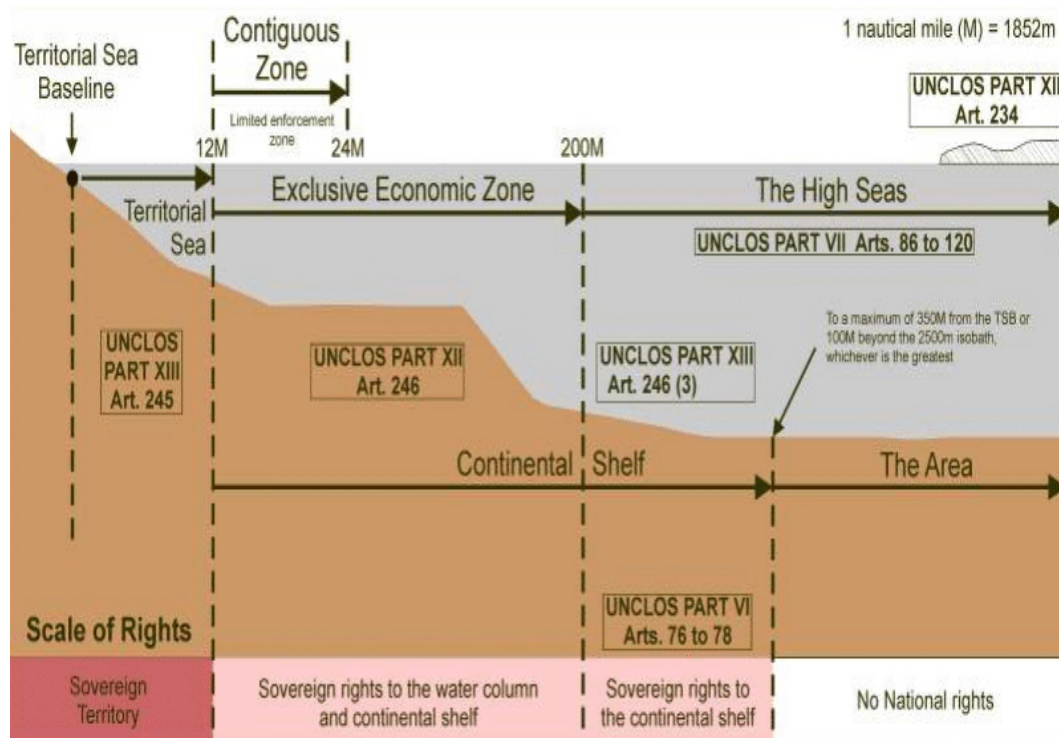


Figure 4. State Maritime Boundaries with Relevant Articles of UNCLOS. Data from The National Oceanography Centre, 2019, accessed August 15, 2019, <http://www.unclosuk.org/noc-and-unclos>.

The distribution of oil and gas wealth in the Levant Basin lies between Cyprus, Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. Cyprus, Lebanon, and Israel share an overlapping EEZ since the distance separating between their territorial sea baselines is less than 200 Nautical miles (NM).²⁴ Since the discovery of significant energy resources in the Levant Basin in 2009, increasing amounts of aggressive rhetoric occurred between Lebanese and Israeli officials. Uzi Landau, the former Israeli Minister of National Infrastructure, stated: “We will not hesitate to use our force and strength to protect not only the rule of law but international maritime law.”²⁵ On the other hand, Lebanon, in January 2018, stated:

²⁴ زينب شاكر السماك. "سباق الطاقة في البحر المتوسط: يرسم حرب الخرائط الجيوستراتيجية." مركز النبا الوثائقي. Zeinab C. Assammak, “The Energy Race in the Mediterranean Draws a Geo-Strategic Mapping War,” Annabaa Network, October 7, 2017, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://annabaa.org/arabic/strategicissues/12707>.

²⁵ Martin Wählich, “Israel-Lebanon Offshore Oil & Gas Dispute – Rules of International Maritime Law,” American Society of International Law 15, no. 31 (2011), accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/15/issue/31/israel-lebanon-offshore-oil-gas-dispute---rules-international-maritime>.

The Republic of Lebanon will not hesitate to avail itself of its inherent right to self-defense if an armed attack occurs against the economic activities carried out in its maritime areas. It will not hesitate either to take all appropriate measures against Israel nor its private concessionaires, including Energean Oil & Gas, should they decide to take advantage of their activities in the so-called Israeli blocks 13 and Alon D, where the Karish field is located, to exploit the natural resources of the Lebanese seabed by way of directional drilling.²⁶

This verbal escalation from both sides calls into question the extent that such tension can stay controllable before a military conflict. Tension, along with the threatening of military action, should urge the great powers, mainly the United States and Russia, to assume their responsibilities based on the interests they have in the region. There is no doubt that settling the dispute might provide better energy security for Israel. However, Israel may not be willing to settle this dispute in order to increase its military expenditures based on the threat available. Accordingly, these military improvements enhance its territorial hegemony in the region. Ironically, the state of Israel lacks adherence to international law as it has not signed the UNCLOS and rarely abides by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling.²⁷

Compared to other fossil fuels, natural gas is reasonably priced, cleaner, and more flexible in usage and transportation. Thus, the demand for natural gas is anticipated to increase in the coming decades. Natural gas exporters benefit from energy resources to better shape their international diplomatic presence, influence financial quarrels, and augment their military capabilities. In the current globalized political world, abundant energy resource countries are nominated to play a critical role in shaping their diplomatic and economic futures. With the discovery of the Leviathan gas field, Israel is looking forward to grasping this opportunity in order to boost its geopolitical status besides domestic economic interests. Furthermore, gas export revenues enhance Israel's military capabilities, thus leading to additional regional domination.

²⁶ Oded Eran, "Could Natural Gas in the Mediterranean Spark the Third Lebanese War?" *Institute for National Security Studies* (2018): 1-5, accessed September 16, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17045.

²⁷ Amnesty International, "Israeli Settlements and International Law," accessed September 18, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>.

This study discusses the main drivers behind Israel's interest in commencing gas exploitation in the Leviathan field before settling the dispute with Lebanon. The main research question arising in this regard is: What underpins Israel's interest in exploiting oil and gas in the Levant Basin? Also, the following sub-guiding questions provide supportive information for the analysis throughout the paper: How does Israel's continued occupation to territories in south Lebanon influence the sea border dispute? What role could the great power countries, such as the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union (EU) play in shaping the outcomes of this tension based on their interests in the region? Instruments of national power, diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) will provide the framework to investigate Israel's interest in the Levant Basin energy resources.

The discovery of oil and gas in the Levant Basin is one of the most promising developments in the energy sector in the last decade. Based on mutual economic benefits, these discoveries have the potential to advance peace agreements in the region. On the contrary, with the Arab animosity towards Israel, and Israel's lack of adherence to international law, these discoveries may further complicate international relations and renew conflicts in an already volatile region. Therefore, a safe operational environment based on political stability is a prerequisite for the gas industry.

Israel's Economic Fortune on the Horizon

Among the instruments of national power; diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME), the latter is considered the heart of national power. A 2008 study advocated that governments incorporate natural gas in their future strategies.²⁸ Called the "Pickens Plan," it

²⁸ Laid in 2008 by its founder the U.S oilman billionaire T. Boone Pickens, the Pickens Plan called for the building of wind farm networks in the United States to generate electricity, thus replacing natural gas which would be used to power automobiles, consequently avoiding possible OPEC oil embargo.

underlined beyond doubt, that electricity, industrialization, and automobiles will be heavily dependent on natural gas in the future.²⁹ In the Eastern Mediterranean, the discovery of significant gas fields has the potential to influence the geopolitical situation in the region, in addition to altering energy usage aspects.

Although Israel's economy is amongst the most developed in the region, it is dependent on imported energy supplies. Therefore, Israel's national security favors regional stability that not only secures its energy imports, but also facilitates future energy exportation. Energy imports render Israel vulnerable to security issues, especially within a region of political instability. Having insufficient domestic production, Israel's government prioritized energy security. Since its establishment, Israel's security confronted multiple intertwined challenges such as national security, energy security, and geopolitical concerns.

In the Levant Basin, oil and gas offshore discoveries hold substantial economic benefits for the region's countries. The interest reflected by Eastern Mediterranean countries to enhance and maintain these offshore energy discoveries restore hope within their populace for better economic conditions. The Aphrodite gas field overlapping the Cypriot-Israeli EEZ, the Zohr gas field within Egypt's EEZ, and the Leviathan gas field along the Lebanese-Israeli maritime boundary provide the potential for these countries to satisfy their domestic needs and additionally export natural gas (see figure 5).³⁰ According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in 2010, seismological reports estimated an amount of 122 Trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil in the Levant Basin.³¹

²⁹ Fen Montaigne, "A New Pickens Plan: Good for The U.S. or Just for T. Boone?" Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, April 11, 2011, accessed October 24, 2019, https://e360.yale.edu/features/a_new_pickens_plan_good_for_the_us_or_just_for_t_boone.

³⁰ Michael Ratner, "Natural Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean," Congressional Research Service, September 20, 2016, accessed September 2, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44591.pdf>.

³¹ Christopher J. Schenk, Mark A. Kirschbaum, Ronald R. Charpentier, Timothy R. Klett, Michael E. Brownfield, Janet K. Pitman, Troy A. Cook, and Marilyn E. Tennyson, "Assessment of Undiscovered

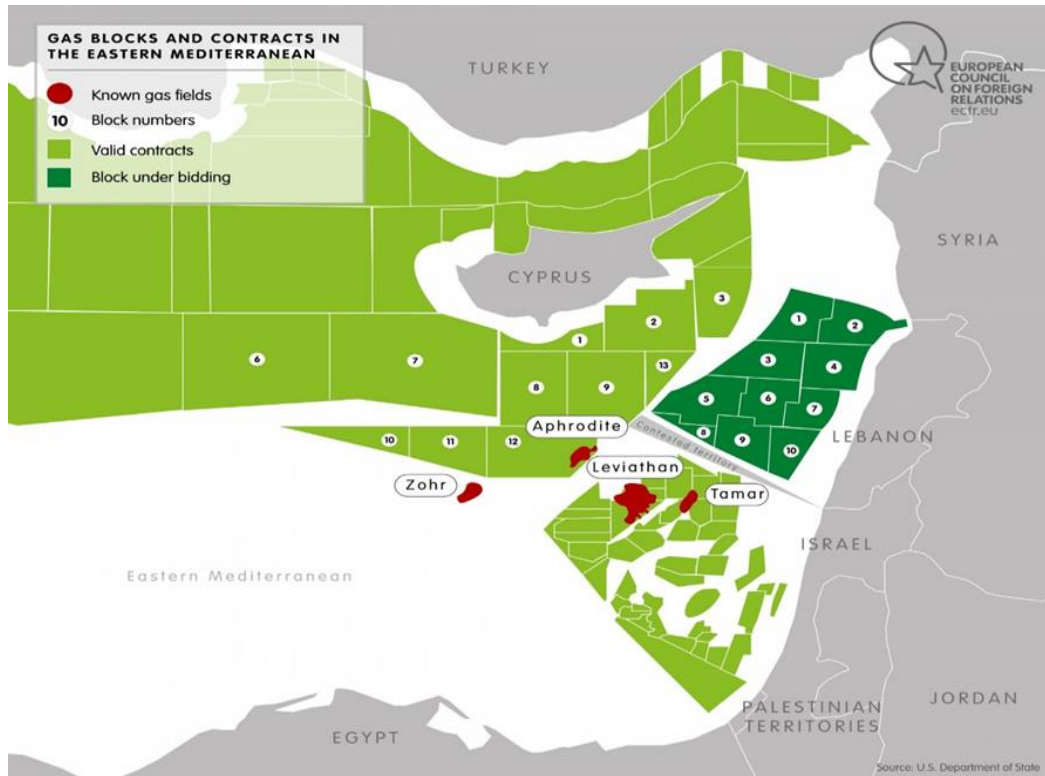


Figure 5. Gas blocks and contracts in the eastern Mediterranean. Data from Tareq Baconi, “Pipelines and Pipedreams: How the EU Can Support a Regional Gas Hub in the Eastern Mediterranean,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2017, accessed October 11, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/pipelines_and_pipedreams_how_the_eu_can_support_a_regional_gas_hub_in_7276.

The Sheshinski Committee, responsible for recommending the policy for Israel’s natural resource sector, stated that two-thirds of these discoveries in the Levant Basin lie within Israel’s territorial waters.³² Alone, the Leviathan gas field is assessed to have approximately 22 TCF of natural gas, which is capable of providing Israel with its domestic energy needs for the coming twenty-five years.³³ Although these discoveries create opportunities for regional cooperation, they might also lead to tensions between Israel and its surrounding countries.³⁴

Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean,” U.S Geological Survey, March 2010, accessed September 21, 2019, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3014/pdf/FS10-3014.pdf>.

³² Murat Ağdemir, “Israel and the Gas Resources of the Levant Basin,” (January 2015): 138, accessed October 7, 2019, https://orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/7muratagdemir.pdf.

³³ US Energy Information Administration, “Israel: Natural Gas,” EIA, Last Updated: July 2016, accessed September 23, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=ISR>.

³⁴ Walid Khadduri, “East Mediterranean Gas: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 2012): 111.

Israel, with these energy discoveries, seeks to reduce its reliance on Arab gas imports, thus improving its energy security. Therefore, energy independence avoids possible monopoly by the members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), similar to what happened in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Since the Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP) that supplies Israel with gas from Egypt was subject to several sabotage attacks after the Arab Spring in 2011, Israel had renewed motivations to seek energy independence (see figure 6).³⁵

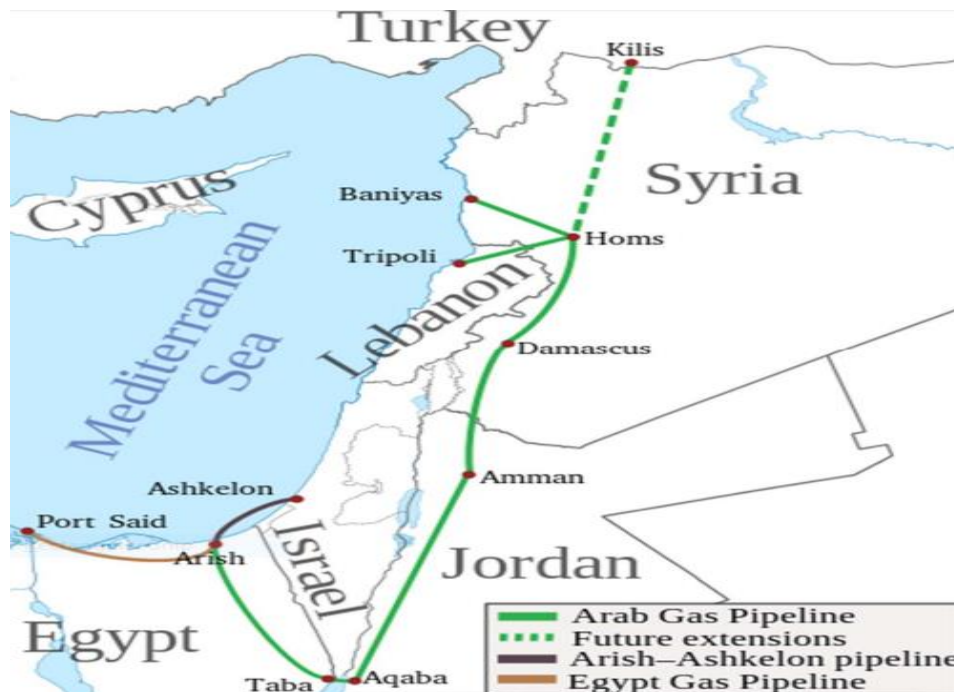


Figure 6. The Arab Gas Pipeline. Data from Jessica Obeid, "Prospects for Offshore Gas in Lebanon," The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Eastern Mediterranean Offshore Gas, June 27, 2018, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.spe-london.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Lebanon-Offshore-Gas-Jessica-Obeid.pdf>.

Israel views these discoveries not only as a chance to free itself from strategic intimidation and unstable energy transactions imposed by its surrounding countries, but also becoming a natural gas exporter. Israel is expected to undergo an economic revolution by having revenues of approximately \$140 billion due to natural gas exports.³⁶ However, in order to benefit from this energy wealth, a safe operational environment based on political stability is a

³⁵ Krhovská, "Conflict Resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean," 47-48.

³⁶ Craig and Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas," 1.

prerequisite. By this, Israel will strengthen its political and military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel long sought to enhance its political presence in the region through war, but now is using the economy as its means. Therefore, gas fields within Israeli territorial waters provide multiple domestic and international benefits.

Domestically, natural gas exploitation should have significant repercussions on Israel's energy plans. First and foremost, Israel would save \$4 billion annually by utilizing its domestic gas fields while eliminating energy imports.³⁷ These energy discoveries will not only free Israel from any possible Arab energy embargo in the future, but also reduces energy production and industrialization costs by \$1 billion annually. Accordingly, Israel's industrial productivity increases and improves its trade balance. Moreover, natural gas may have an impact on dwindling water resources in the region. If desalination plants were to use natural gas in the future, these energy discoveries would influence water conflicts in the Middle East. Additional positive outcomes from gas investments include improvements in Israel's agriculture and transportation sectors, increasing job opportunities for building gas lines, in addition to the reduction in air pollution. Most importantly, economic improvements and anticipated revenues will contribute to the development of Israel's military capabilities in general and the navy's effectiveness in particular. Such capabilities strengthen Israel's presence within a hostile regional environment.

For the above-stated reasons, Israel, in 2004, commenced drilling in the Mari-B gas field by granting exploration licenses to the US Noble Energy and Israeli Delek Group (see figure 7).³⁸ These companies operated in the "Mari-B" field and shifted Israel's reliance on coal and oil for electricity production to the usage of natural gas-fired power stations.³⁹ When the Tamar field started production in 2013, Israel's reliance on natural gas increased gradually from 33 percent to

³⁷ Guy Seemann, "Israel's New Gas Discovery: A Diplomatic and Geopolitical Nuance or Revolution?" Institute for Policy and Strategy, February 6-9, 2011, accessed October 20, 2019, <https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/Documents/2011/ניירות/GuySeemann-2011.pdf>.

³⁸ Delek Group is an Israeli consortium composed of Avner Oil and Delek Drilling companies.

³⁹ Israel Ministry of Energy, "Exploration History."

42 percent.⁴⁰ This shift, in addition to eliminating gas imports, will not only improve Israel's trade balance but also lessens carbon dioxide emissions.⁴¹

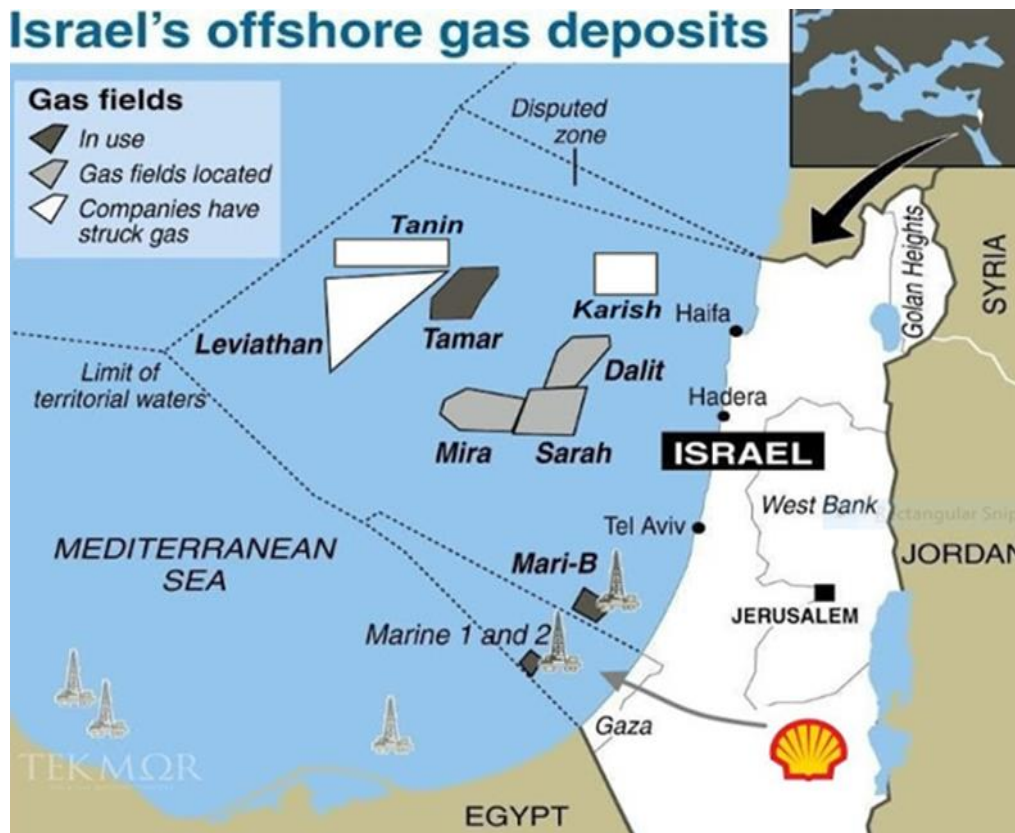


Figure 7. Israel's Offshore Gas Deposits. Data from Joziyah Thayer, "Let's Talk About the Gaza Marine Gas Field," June 22, 2018, accessed December 6, 2019, <https://wedacoalition.org/2018/06/22/lets-talk-about-the-gaza-marine-gas-field/>.

Currently, Israel's domestic gas supplies are wholly sourced through the Tamar field pipeline. By commencing exploitation from the Leviathan field, anticipated by early 2020, additional diversity is provided to meet Israel's domestic needs, consequently its energy security increases. By launching the production process from the Leviathan gas field, the incentive for Israel to emerge as a natural gas exporter increases. To sum up, the diversity of domestic energy resources, ensuring gas supplies, and avoiding a future OPEC embargo are Israel's long term objectives. However, since the capacity of Israeli gas exports is dependent on political stability and status

⁴⁰ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Israel: Natural Gas."

⁴¹ Ağdemir, "Israel and the Gas Resources of the Levant Basin," 149.

quo amongst the countries in the region, the question now becomes: where and how to export the gas?

Israeli officials consider gas exportation to be more politically than economically oriented. For that reason, Israeli policymakers believe that exports of natural gas are incentives that not only fulfill the idea of economic peace, but also enables Israel's political integration with its regional foes. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claims that the Leviathan gas field exports "will promote cooperation with countries in the region, and the ability to export gas would make Israel more immune to international pressure. We do not want to be vulnerable to boycotts."⁴² Moreover, Uzi Landau, the former Israeli Minister of National Infrastructure, sees that exporting gas to regional countries strengthens Israel's political presence in the region and enhances the peace agreement process.⁴³

Internationally, these energy discoveries allow Israel to be a gas hub in the Levant Basin, enhancing its role as a crucial regional player. Israeli gas has several potential markets, such as Europe, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. Also, East Asia is a possible market that may be exploited by Israeli gas exports. However, the issue is in securing sea lanes of communication that confronted by multiple geostrategic dilemmas, especially in projecting force through the Arabian Peninsula. With unstable political situations in the neighboring Arab countries, Europe is considered as the most reasonable and attractive destination for the Levant's natural gas due to its stable political ties with Israel. The Director of the Institute for National Security Studies Oded Eran stated that "Supporters of export to Europe will argue that Israel's economic, cultural, and scientific future is anchored in Europe. The natural gas exports should be directed there so they can be leveraged to build a balanced, deep, and more established relationship with the European Union."⁴⁴ However,

⁴² Sujata Ashwarya, "Israel's Mediterranean Gas Governance: Evolution of Domestic Regulations and Emerging Regional Issues," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 92, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/25765949.2017.12023319>.

⁴³ Craig and Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas," 4.

⁴⁴ Seemann, "Israel's New Gas Discovery," 5.

Israeli gas exports to the European market will compete with Europe's traditional suppliers such as Russia, Algeria, and Norway.⁴⁵

Regionally, the Jordanian market is considered to be the first and most secure target for Israeli gas. Although faced by significant parliament opposition, the Hashemite Kingdom concluded a \$10 billion energy import contract in 2016 for fifteen years with the Leviathan gas developers once production commences.⁴⁶ This agreement, the first Leviathan purchase, has mutual interests by providing additional funds for the Leviathan project and relieving Jordan from its reliance on unstable Egyptian gas transported through the AGP. Concerning Egypt, the Zohr gas field, operating since December 2017, is the most significant offshore discovery in the Mediterranean Sea with 30 TCF of gas.⁴⁷ This massive gas field provides the possibility for Egypt to be a regional hub, thus competing with Israel. However, Egypt's growing domestic needs will keep the necessity for Israeli gas. On the other hand, Israel also needs Egypt's export terminals located in Idku and Damietta as a gateway to Europe (see figure 8).⁴⁸ This mutual interest leads to stabilizing the Israeli-Egyptian relations after fluctuating in the previous years.

⁴⁵ Ağdemir, "Israel and the Levant Basin," 140.

⁴⁶ Ashwarya, "Israel's Mediterranean Gas Governance," 92.

⁴⁷ Ibrahim G. Aoudé, "Conflict Over Oil and Gas in the Mediterranean: Israeli Expansionism in Lebanon," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2019): 96, www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/arabstudquar.41.1.0095

⁴⁸ Ashwarya, "Israel's Mediterranean Gas Governance," 93.

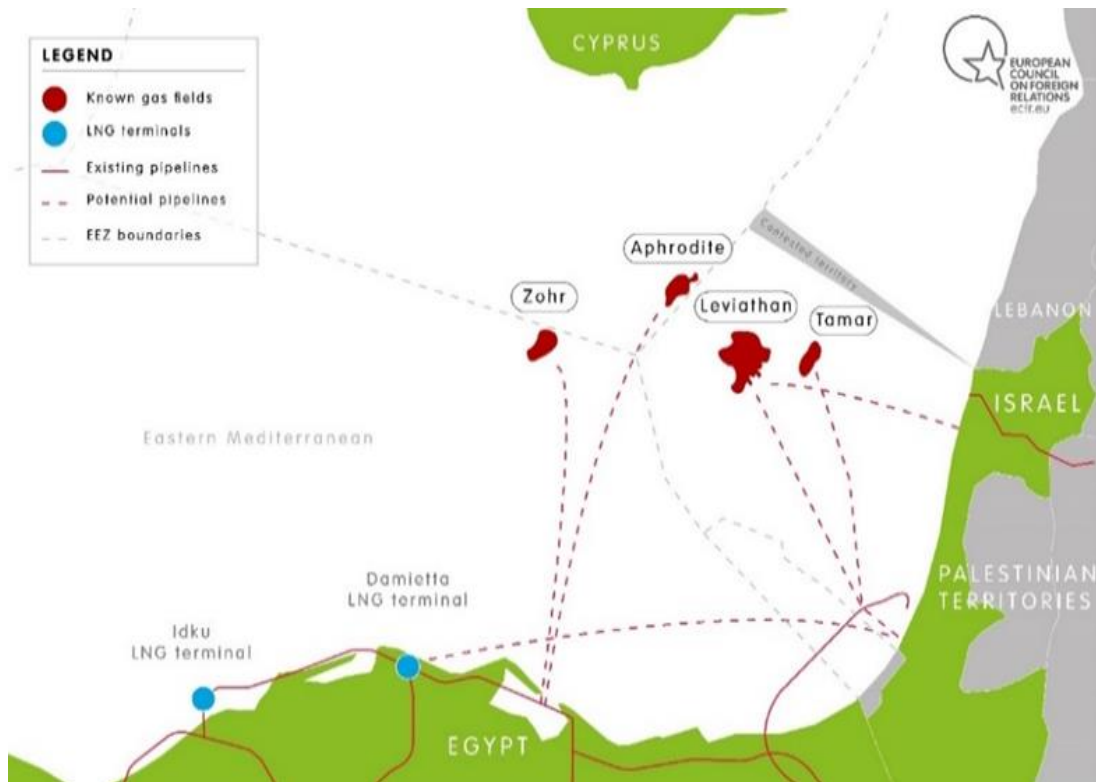


Figure 8. The Egyptian Option. Data from Tareq Baconi, “Pipelines and Pipedreams: How the EU Can Support a Regional Gas Hub in the Eastern Mediterranean,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2017, accessed October 11, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/pipelines_and_pipedreams_how_the_eu_can_support_a_regional_gas_hub_in_7276.

Trans-regionally, Israel can benefit from Turkey as a link between its gas exports and Europe. Turkey, like Egypt, has the ambition to be a significant energy hub in the region. Turkey’s strategic location enables the country to play this role. With the Port of Mersin in Turkey being the final destination, an underwater pipeline running either along the coasts of Lebanon and Syria or crossing through the Cyprus EEZ are the two potential solutions.⁴⁹ Therefore, the Leviathan partners have two options to supply Turkey, hence Europe, with gas. However, the former route is politically unfeasible, and the latter requires solving the Turkish-Cypriot problem.

Regardless of the final destination of Israeli gas exports, the ultimate concern remains in the method of exporting. Still, all possible exportation methods, requiring further funding and

⁴⁹ Ashwarya, “Israel’s Mediterranean Gas Governance,” 97.

security considerations, will be in Israel's economic, political, and military favor. As stated by the Sheshinski Committee, "The large-scale uncovering of deposits will also allow the export of Israeli gas to other countries, whether by its liquefaction and transport in tankers or through the laying of appropriate pipelines. The export of gas is likely to change the strategic status of the State of Israel."⁵⁰

Concerning the procedures, Israel has multiple options to export its gas. While supplying gas to Jordan is relatively secure by utilizing Israel's national pipeline network, gas exports to Egypt confront risk, moreover, exporting through Turkey is currently unrealistic. Therefore, the first option can be to reverse the flow of natural gas in the AGP to stock the regional market. This option is not without risking potential attacks launched from the Sinai Peninsula; however, it makes commercial sense since the infrastructure is already available. Former Minister Uzi Landau stated, "Naturally, the immediate export of natural gas will be to our neighbors the Palestinians and the Jordanians, and I believe that this connection will be an important step in building trust and peace in the region."⁵¹ Another option is building a regional undersea pipeline connecting Israel to Egypt's Liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities in Damietta and Idku, known as the Egyptian option (see figure 8). Still, this option may not be worth the investment, especially with Israel viewed by its surrounding neighbors as a hostile entity.

A third possibility to enable the export of Israeli gas is by constructing the underwater East Med Pipeline to connect Israel, Cyprus, and Greece gas fields with Italy, and subsequently to the European market (see figure 9). This option might be in Europe's interest to free itself from Russian gas supplies that provide 40 percent of Europe's natural gas imports.⁵² Still, pipeline construction expenditure burdens, estimated at \$7.3 billion, besides the deteriorating Turkish-

⁵⁰ Ağdemir, "Israel and the Levant Basin," 141.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Eurostat, "Shedding Light on Energy in the EU," 2019, accessed October 25, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/energy/bloc-2c.html>.

Cypriot and fluctuating Turkish-Israeli relations, may delay the project.⁵³ The last option is through the construction of coastal liquefaction plants in any of Cyprus, Israel, Greece, or even by establishing a floating liquefaction plant. Such liquefaction plants along the Israeli coast or within Israel's EEZ must consider possible retaliatory strikes from the Lebanese or Palestinian resistance organizations in case any conflict occurs. Due to these national security concerns, the Israeli government stated that "Export facilities should be located in Israeli territory; if not, they should be built in the framework of bilateral agreements between countries."⁵⁴



Figure 9. The East Med Pipeline. Data from Tareq Baconi, "Pipelines and Pipedreams: How the EU Can Support a Regional Gas Hub in the Eastern Mediterranean," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2017, accessed October 11, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/pipelines_and_pipedreams_how_the_eu_can_support_a_regional_gas_hub_in_7276.

⁵³ Ashwarya, "Israel's Mediterranean Gas Governance," 95.

⁵⁴ Murat Ağdemir, "Relations Between Israel and the South Cyprus Greek Administration: A New Alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean?" *Perceptions*, *Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 114, accessed October 12, 2019, http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Perceptions_Summer2016_butun.pdf.

These energy discoveries influence the paradigms of hostility and friendship in the Levant Basin. With Israel's steadily increasing production, natural gas, this powerful tool provides an incentive for regional reconciliation. Energy interests are the means for Israel to improve its political presence in the region, especially with the Arab's hostile view towards Israel. Based on mutual interests, Israeli gas exports will play a significant role in stabilizing and further advancing Israel's previously fluctuating relations, with Egypt and Turkey as an example. The link between economic and diplomatic benefits is further expressed by the Journal of Energy Security stressing that:

The increased use of natural gas will lead Middle Eastern nations to cooperate in order to develop secure energy markets. Constructive diplomatic exchange in the Middle East will continue to increase due to improved regional energy security, achieved in part through trans-regional pipelines. This diplomatic exchange will significantly contribute to regional integration in the Middle East. Such integration will graduate progressively from energy security to economic cooperation. Strong economic cooperation will encourage political rapprochement. These domestic markets will cooperate to secure downstream European markets for the export of Middle Eastern natural gas.⁵⁵

All previous methods for exporting natural gas have a common thread; they lead to the enhancement of Israel's economic status and consequently reinforces its political presence in the region. As a result, these improvements support the negotiations taking place behind the scenes between Israel and some Gulf states to cooperate in implementing what is known as the "the deal of the century." This "deal" is primarily rejected by Lebanon and a broad spectrum of Arab countries.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Israel views current conditions as the most appropriate to exploit diplomatically and economically. However, no matter the procedure followed, security risk will remain Israel's primary concern.

⁵⁵ Mary E. Stonaker, "Energy Infrastructure as a Diplomatic Tool: The Arab Gas Pipeline," *Journal of Energy Security*, December 14, 2010, accessed October 24, 2019, http://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=270:ene.

⁵⁶ Although it did not have any significant impact since its unfolding in June 2019, the deal of the century is a plan proposed by the US President Donald Trump as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan calls for economic incentives for Palestinians to achieve political aims that are in Israel's favor. The plan is rejected by the Palestinian Authority since it ignores Palestinian rights based on the UN Resolution 194.

In comparison with other energy export countries, Israel walks a fine line within the region regarding security threats. Whether by pipelines or LNG, gas export routes are subject to threats not only due to Israel's animosity in the region but also because of a possible anti-west sentiment. By this, Israel not only seeks to benefit economically from the discovery of the massive Leviathan gas field but also to augment its naval capabilities in order to maintain the security of its offshore energy facilities. This military preparation, especially in the naval service, will provide Israel with a responsive action that ensures its freedom of navigation and access to the Red Sea through the Port of Eilat or in projecting power within the Mediterranean Sea. This military boost contributes to its regional hegemony as a strategic objective.

A Legitimate Cause to Enhance Maritime Strategies

The ongoing quest for oil and gas not only enhances the economic and diplomatic status of a state but also impacts defense strategies and military budgets. Since its establishment, Israel's military strategy focused on improvements in both air and ground forces. Based on all previous Arab-Israeli wars, the Israeli Navy's role was secondary. Traditionally, the Israeli Navy's mission has always focused on denying the infiltration of smugglers along the coastline, supporting land forces in their invasions to Lebanon and Sinai, while enforcing a maritime blockade on the Gaza Strip. Given these missions, Israel's Navy is being the smallest branch in the Israeli Defense Forces and overshadowed by air and land forces.⁵⁷ The Navy's inferiority made sense since Israel did not have any seaborne interests in the previous decades.

Energy discoveries in the region spurred countries to invest in strengthening their naval capabilities. The discovery of the Leviathan gas field heightened Israel's security measures to

⁵⁷ Sarah Vogler and Eric V. Thompson, "Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Regional Maritime Security," Eastern Mediterranean Energy Project, March 5, 2015, accessed November 11, 2019, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/gas-discoveries-eastern-mediterranean-implications-regional-maritime-security>.

guarantee the protection of its offshore energy infrastructure. Israel's navy is currently preparing to play a significant role in the process of defending strategic resources that will shape Israel's economic and political future. However, Israeli memories remain raw concerning the disabling of a Sa'ar 5 corvette by the Lebanese resistance in the 2006 war.⁵⁸ This act resulted in establishing an equivalence in deterrence and setting a new framework for the rules of engagement between Lebanon and Israel that differed from the past. Therefore, security threats imposed by Hezbollah are taken seriously by Israel and has its drones patrolling offshore platforms of the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields daily.⁵⁹ The 2006 Sa'ar incident not only increased Israel's concerns regarding its naval effectiveness, but also questioned the status of its anti-missile defense system. Besides major security threats lying on the horizon, Israel confronts other dilemmas in ensuring the flow of natural gas from its offshore infrastructure through gas lines to its domestic market. Technical contingencies limit the flow of gas through the only pipeline available from the Tamar field (see figure 10). As an example, in 2017, a crack in a pipeline resulted in cutting the Tamar field's gas production by half, lasting for five days.⁶⁰ Therefore, security and technical concerns confirm Israel's interest in diversifying its energy resources, such as the gas provided from the Leviathan field. Currently, Israeli naval capabilities are steadily increasing to meet the demands of securing distant offshore hydrocarbon facilities by having a responsive defense system. Accordingly, the expansion of naval capabilities heightens the risk of possible future conflicts.

⁵⁸ During the 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war that lasted 33 days, from July 12 to August 14, Israel's Navy patrolled Lebanese territorial waters besides contributing to the land battle. On July 14, 2006, the Lebanese resistance used the Chinese C-802 anti-ship missile to damage the Israeli Sa'ar 5 corvette. As a result, four of the crew members were killed. See: <https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/hizbullah/pages/israel-hizbullah%20conflict-%20summary%20of%20events%20july-aug%202006.aspx>.

⁵⁹ Craig and Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas," 3.

⁶⁰ Seth Cropsey, "An Israeli Maritime Strategy Benefits the U.S.," Real Clear Defense, May 29, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/14360-an-israeli-maritime-strategy-benefits-the-u-s>.

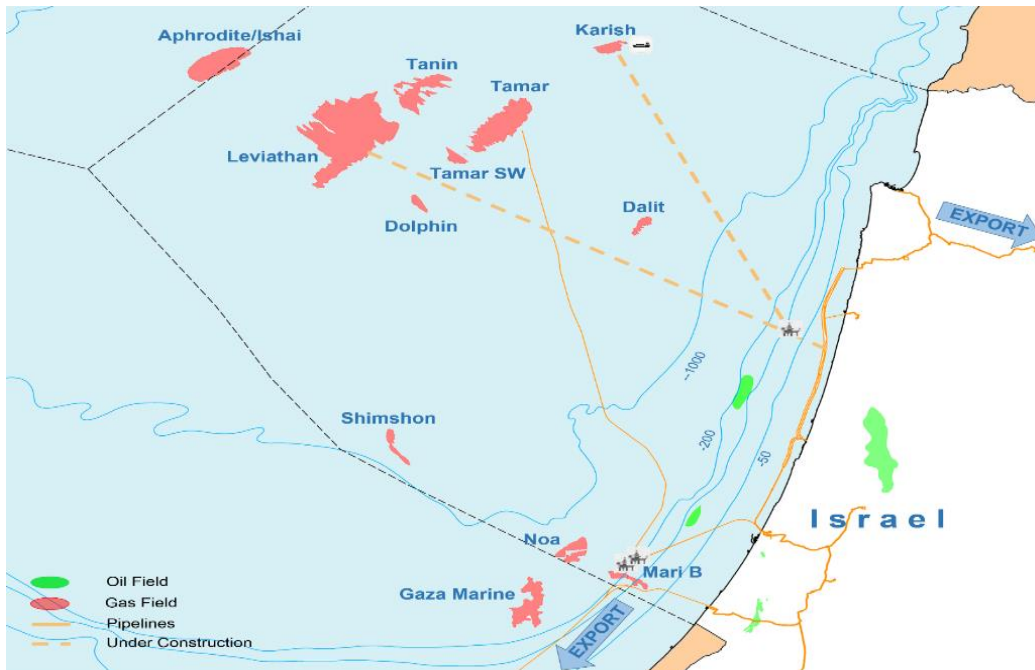


Figure 10. Israel Domestic Supply Pipelines. Data from Israel Ministry of Energy, “Exploration History,” accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.energy-sea.gov.il/English-Site/Pages/Oil%20And%20Gas%20in%20Israel/History-of-Oil--Gas-Exploration-and-Production-in-Israel.aspx>.

Regarding the Israeli security threats, offshore energy infrastructure targets are not only confined to the material assets, laying some 50 km from the coast, but also to hundreds of employees operating within these facilities.⁶¹ Israeli offshore rigs are subject to retaliatory missile attacks by the Palestinian Resistance Movement, Hamas in the Gaza strip, and the Lebanese Resistance represented by Hezbollah.⁶² Knowing the vulnerability of its naval assets, in addition to the essential role in securing offshore facilities, Israel is giving more attention to a maritime strategy that minimizes risk from possible shore-to-sea missile attacks. Accordingly, to meet the increased requirements of maritime protection, Israel began to benefit from gas revenues and invest in naval modernization. The focus shifted from developing large cruisers that are vulnerable to rocket attacks to small, high-speed interdiction vessels. After the discovery of the

⁶¹ Seemann, “Israel’s New Gas Discovery,” 6.

⁶² Hezbollah is a Lebanese resistance movement established in 1985, three years after the Israeli invasion to Lebanon. Despite the political debate in Lebanon on Hezbollah’s role as a resistance movement, Hezbollah is considered as a pillar within the Lebanese golden trinity, composed of the Army, the People, and the Resistance.

Tamar and Leviathan gas fields, and with the ongoing search for natural gas, the Israeli Navy force structure expanded to maintain patrolling Israel's EEZ.

Since 2013, strengthening Israeli naval capabilities included the adding of eight Seahawk SH-60 helicopters and three Dolphin-II submarines considered among the most advanced in the world.⁶³ The effort to ensure protecting offshore facilities was further augmented by equipping offshore gas rigs with the Indian-Israeli designed surface-to-air Barak-8 missile.⁶⁴ In January 2017, the Israeli Navy not only cooperated with NATO members and the US Navy to develop capabilities, but also announced in May 2017 the purchase of thirteen naval guns worth \$440 million.⁶⁵ These 76mm naval guns employed on the Sa'ar corvettes provide additional security while patrolling Israel's EEZ.⁶⁶ Additionally, the unmanned Typhoon naval gun, with a 25mm cannon, is to be employed on patrol boats, further mitigating risk and the loss of personnel operating it.⁶⁷ In March 2017, Israel developed the unmanned ship, referred to as "Sea Knight", capable of patrolling for 12 hours and equipped with rockets, machine guns, and water cannons as a means to complement manned ship patrols while mitigating risk in personnel loss.

Furthermore, based on the Israeli government proposals, the Iron Dome Missile Defense system has a new sea-based version called the C-Dome. This anti-rocket defense system, stationed on the Sa'ar 5, defends gas rigs vulnerable to rocket attacks.⁶⁸ Based on an agreement with Germany in 2015, Israel will also equip its navy with four Sa'ar 6 corvettes named Magen,

⁶³ Cropsey, "An Israeli Maritime Strategy."

⁶⁴ Vogler and Thompson, "Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean," 3.

⁶⁵ David Hanovice, "Israeli Navy: History & Overview," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed November 16, 2019, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-the-israeli-navy>.

⁶⁶ Hanovice, "Israeli Navy: History & Overview."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Yaakov Lappin, "Israel's storied Iron Dome system goes naval, vying to defend gas rigs," Jewish News Syndicate, December 5, 2017, accessed November 18, 2019, <https://www.jns.org/israels-storied-iron-dome-system-goes-naval-vying-to-defend-gas-rigs/>.

Oz, Independence, and Victory, considered the central element of the growing Israeli Fleet.⁶⁹

These corvettes will be released by 2021 and will employ several combat systems and surveillance capabilities such as the C-Dome, electronic warfare systems, sea and air detection, and high trajectory interceptors.⁷⁰ With a total cost of around \$700 million, profits from Leviathan partners help procure these items, especially with budget austerity in Israel.⁷¹

Currently, the Israeli Navy, along with ships from the United States Navy's 6th Fleet stationed in Naples, Italy, conducted a series of exercises that addressed modern maritime challenges. Noble Dina and Noble Melinda exercises are examples of this multinational cooperation.⁷² The US-Israeli Navy cooperation traces back to the 1980s with the US Navy providing financial assistance, procurement of systems, and exchanging intelligence concerns.⁷³ Currently, Israel spends \$20 billion yearly for the defense budget. Additionally, Israel is receiving military funding from the United States worth \$38 billion for the period between 2019 and 2028. This is an increase from the previous spending of \$34.4 billion from 2009 to 2018.⁷⁴ This financial aid reflects the US interest in the region. While drills improve Israeli naval capabilities, Israel's Navy is still reliant on US naval support in providing the extended surface protection required until the fulfillment of Israel's naval force structure.

Although Israel is aware that clarity of ownership and security are prerequisites for energy exploitations, Israel lacks these two conditions on its northern boundary with Lebanon.

⁶⁹ Israeli Defense Forces, "Meet the new Sa'ar 6 ships," April 19, 2018, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/israeli-navy/meet-the-new-sa-ar-6-ships/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Craig and Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas," 32.

⁷² United States Department of the Navy, "U.S. 6th Fleet commander Strengthens Bonds with Israeli Navy Partners," June 20, 2019, accessed November 17, 2019, https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=109967.

⁷³ Dov S. Zakheim, "The United States Navy and Israeli Navy," Center for Naval Analyses: 33, February 2012, accessed November 20, 2019, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/D0026727.A1.pdf.

⁷⁴ International Trade Administration, "Israel - Aerospace and Defense," August 14, 2019, accessed November 16, 2019, <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Israel-Aerospace-and-Defense>.

Hezbollah possesses the military capabilities to target the Tamar and Leviathan gas platforms. Armed with various maritime assets, the Iranian surface-to-surface Shahab rockets, speed boats, and submarines represent Hezbollah's threat to Israel's Navy and is continually growing.⁷⁵

Along with the increase in confidence regarding its naval capabilities, increasingly aggressive rhetoric was espoused by Israeli officials. Earlier in 2011, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that "There is no doubt these resources are a strategic objective that Israel's enemies will try to undermine, and I have decided that Israel will defend its resources."⁷⁶ In January 2018, Israeli officials warned energy companies, Eni of Italy, Total of France, and Novatek of Russia, which won the tender on Lebanese blocks four and nine to "Stay away from the disputed area of block 9."⁷⁷ Besides, the Israeli Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman announced in 2018 that "Lebanon would pay the full price should Hezbollah attack."⁷⁸ In response, The Hezbollah Secretary General threatened to punish Israel by targeting its offshore infrastructure as retaliation for any threat to Lebanon's gas exploitation process.⁷⁹ Hezbollah not only contributes to defending Lebanon's land borders but is also willing to ensure securing Lebanon's maritime border and energy resources by stating, "It would not allow Israel to loot Lebanese gas resources and is ready to wipe out Israel's Navy."⁸⁰ This verbal escalation from Hezbollah was already backed by the Lebanese President Michel Aoun in February 2017, who stated that "The resistance's arms are not contrary to the state project; otherwise, we could not have tolerated it. It is an essential part of Lebanon's defense."⁸¹ This same rhetoric was espoused

⁷⁵ Craig and Jones, "Discovery of Israel's Gas," 29.

⁷⁶ Ağdemir, "Israel and the Gas Resources of the Levant Basin," page 146.

⁷⁷ Aoudé, "Conflict Over Oil," 105.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁷⁹ Mor, Amit, "Lebanon's first offshore oil & gas exploration round: Challenges & Opportunities," Institute for Policy and Strategy, March 2018, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/Documents/publication/5/AmitMor21.3.18.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Krhovská, "Conflict Resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean," 39.

⁸¹ Mor, Amit, "Lebanon's first offshore oil & gas," 5.

by Lebanon's Prime Minister Said Hariri, stating that "Hezbollah is present. It is in the government, and it has support in the country."⁸²

Israel's investment in naval enhancement is anticipated to expand even further as the security dilemmas increase. Once exporting natural gas from the Leviathan gas field commences, more sophisticated maritime defense systems to escort gas exportation assets may be required. Interests in boosting naval capabilities are not limited to securing gas rigs but also to protect a large portion of the population that settles along the coast. In addition to benefitting Israel's economy, military, and political presence in the region, these energy discoveries will also contribute to achieving Israel's persistent historical aim of expansion and acquiring more territories, whether on land or sea.

A Good Reason Not to Demarcate Borders: Regional Domination

Since 1948, Israel confronted multiple border dispute issues with surrounding Arab countries. The Jewish state is no stranger to security matters that accompanied its territorial expansion. As a rival to some countries or an enemy to others, Israel's history is one of expansion. For an entity that lacks strategic depth, Israel always sought to shift the war outside its borders. Such aggressive actions, along with the intent of acquiring more Arabian territory, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and south Lebanon, are examples. However, the United States, Israel's closest ally and supporter, sometimes opposes aggressive Israeli actions. In 1989, the US Secretary of State James Baker, in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), pressed Israel to lay aside its vision of Greater Israel expansionist policy in favor of a peace settlement.⁸³

⁸² Mor, Amit, "Lebanon's first offshore oil & gas," 5.

⁸³ Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 193.

Historically, Israel's established state on Palestinian territory witnessed the building of settlements through ethnic cleansing. By forcing indigenous Palestinians outside their land in 1948, Israel laid the foundation for regional expansion. Preceded by the Egyptian blockade of the Strait of Tiran in 1950, the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, cutting Israel's only link between its naval bases in the Mediterranean with the Port of Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba (see figure 11).⁸⁴ Israel viewed this as an existential threat and invaded west towards the Suez Canal in order to regain freedom of navigation. Israel replicated this territorial expansion again in the six-day war in 1967 while further extending its invasion north to include the Golan Heights in Syria. As a result, in contrast to 1956, Israel kept its occupation of the Sinai Peninsula instead of withdrawing its forces to a UN Emergency Force. Moreover, Israel occupied the Golan Heights with its strategic water resources, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, which includes the Western Wall, one of the Jewish holy sites, and the West Bank.



Figure 11. Israel's Territorial Expansion in 1967. Data from Michael Barak, "Israeli-Egyptian Security Cooperation on the Sinai Peninsula as Seen by Egyptians on Social Media," accessed November 22, 2019, <https://steemit.com/israel/@socioecohistory/israeli-egyptian-security-cooperation-on-the-sinai-peninsula-as-seen-by-egyptians-on-social-media>.

⁸⁴ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Sinai Campaign – Operation Kadesh – 1956," 2013, accessed November 22, 2019, [https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/history/pages/the%20sinai %20campaign %20-%201956.aspx](https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/history/pages/the%20sinai%20campaign%20-%201956.aspx).

A closer look at Israel's geographical location ensures that the Jewish state never had a demarcated border for a reason. Expansion into Arab land was always based on Israeli concerns related to strategic depth, capturing resources, religious allegations, or existential threats. After the July 2006 war, Israel continued its historical territorial expansion by acting as if the Blue Line defines its border with Lebanon. As discussed earlier, the Armistice Line of 1949 is what separates Lebanon from the occupied territories of Palestine. The sea disputed area with Lebanon is as an extension to the disagreement on the proper location of the thirteen points along the Blue Line. However, it is in Israel's favor to refer the Blue Line since this disagreement is what Israel builds upon to extend its border north, claiming rights to Lebanon's energy resources. In his narrative, Amos Harel, an Israeli military analyst, confirms the argument that Israel did not withdraw behind the Armistice Line with the intent to rob Lebanon's offshore gas.⁸⁵

Recently, Israel is building a wall barrier along its northern border with Lebanon, similar to the barriers built around the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In violating Lebanon's sovereignty, Israel placed six cement blocks in the vicinity of disputed points 11 and 12 near the Lebanese town of Adaisseh, facing the settlement of Miskaf Aam (see figures 2 and 12).⁸⁶ By neglecting the presence of disputed points, Israel is trying to unilaterally confirm the Blue Line as its northern boundary, thus enabling the capture of Lebanon's maritime energy resources. Moreover, Israel's concrete border wall rises nearly ten meters to provide security from Hezbollah's attacks. However, the effectiveness of the border wall as a security barrier is debatable, based on how Israel views its existential threats. In sum, the Lebanese-Israeli conflict on land and maritime borders is related to Israel's objective to expand its strategic depth besides grabbing strategic energy resources. As a result, Israel reinforces its regional dominance.

⁸⁵ Aoudé, "Conflict Over Oil," 104.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 105.



Figure 12. Border Wall Construction Facing the Town of Adaisseh, south Lebanon. Data from Charles Bybelezer and Terrance J. Mintner, “Israel's border walls: A case study for Trump’s mantra,” December 17, 2018, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israels-border-walls-A-case-study-For-Trumps-mantra-574517>.

Control over water and land has always been the core of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel’s expansion is not only land focused. On its southern boundary, Israel, at sea, controls natural gas fields in the territorial waters of the Gaza Strip. In 1999, the British Gas Group discovered a gas field that lies within a distance of 17 to 21 nautical miles (NM) from Gaza shores, named Gaza Marine (see figure 7).⁸⁷ However, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pressured the British company not to exploit the “Gaza Marine” for security reasons until concluding a peace treaty.⁸⁸ The British company gave further excuses stating that since the Palestinian authority lacks sovereignty, the UNCLOS denies Palestinians the right to exploit energy resources. On the other hand, the Oslo Accords in 1994 gave the Palestinian Authority a 20 nautical mile (NM) maritime jurisdiction to include economic activities. Hence, these energy discoveries belong to the Palestinians. This Israeli act denied the Palestinian Authority the

⁸⁷ Anais Antreasyan, “Gas Finds in the Eastern Mediterranean: Gaza, Israel, and Other Conflicts,” *Institute for Palestinian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2012/13): 31, accessed November 23, 2019, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/162608>.

⁸⁸ Seemann, “Israel’s New Gas Discovery,” 6.

opportunity to enhance its economic status and seek for sovereignty, which aligns with the “the deal of the century” objectives. Additionally, the “Noa-1” and “Mari-B” gas fields lie within Palestinian territorial waters, but negotiations between Israel and the British company led to the former’s full control and investment in these gas fields.⁸⁹ These examples confirm Israel’s continuous pursuit to grab additional resources disregarding international agreements.

Moreover, Israel is seeking ownership in Cyprus’s gigantic Aphrodite gas field (see figure 13). Israel is again trying to replicate the ongoing Leviathan scenario by encroaching on Block 12 along the Cypriot-Israeli EEZ border.⁹⁰ Despite Cyprus’s willingness to negotiate, Israel is delaying gas exploitation projects by demanding economic gains. However, due to the anticipated critical role for Cyprus in future Israeli gas exports to Europe via the East Med Pipeline, disagreements may be settled between the two states due to mutual interests.

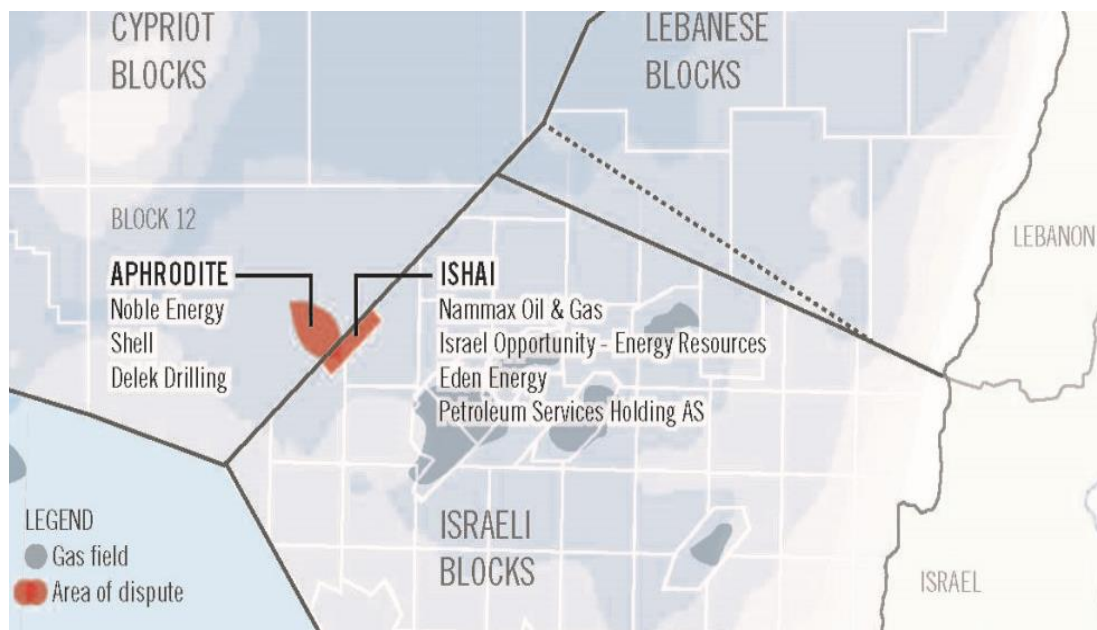


Figure 13. Rights Holders in Oil and Gas Blocks on Cypriot Israel Maritime Border. Data from Ira Ryk-Lakhman, “Gas Discoveries in the East Mediterranean Basin and the acquisition of EMG’s pipeline in context: A Review of Domestic and Geopolitical Challenges,” DAVA Strategic Analysis, October 2, 2018, accessed December 7, 2019, <https://davastrat.org/2018/10/02/gas-discoveries-in-the-east-mediterranean-basin-and-the-acquisition-of-emgs-pipeline-in-context-a-review-of-domestic-and-geopolitical-challenges/>.

⁸⁹ Krhovská, “Conflict Resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean,” 33.

⁹⁰ Aoudé, “Conflict Over Oil,” 101.

All Israeli concerns discussed earlier have religious and ideological roots. Jews allege that they are God's chosen people and that their promised land by God stretches from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River in Iraq (see figure 14). The Islamic religion considers these beliefs as illusions. Consequently, the Levant Basin gas exploitations are the means that Israel employs towards fulfilling its political, economic, military, and even religious objectives. Therefore, a better understanding of Israel's interest in the Levant Basin reflects the critical role these energy discoveries play in achieving regional hegemony through orchestrating the elements of DIME. Beyond doubt, these Israeli interests cannot be separated from the already complicated regional and global ongoing disputes. Great powers, such as the United States, Russia, China, and the EU, reflect an interest in the Levant Basin, each from a different perspective.



Figure 14. Full Promised Land of Israel. Data from Joyce Lester, "Who's Calling the Shots Concerning Israel's Promised Land?" Koinonia House, June 8, 2015, accessed November 24, 2019, https://www.khouse.org/enews_article/2015/2400/print/.

Great Power's Regional Interests: Conflict or Intersect?

The competition for regional hegemony has long overshadowed the Middle East. The substantial energy discoveries in the Levant Basin beside the Lebanese-Israeli sea-border dispute has raised concerns among the great powers on future security. The maritime border conflict lies within a region considered the intersection of interests of major players. Therefore, the United States, Russia, the EU, and even China are expected to exert efforts to ensure maintaining the status quo without further escalation. However, world powers will each pursue respective strategic objectives. The United States, Israel's closest ally and supporter, views these energy discoveries to be within their vital interests. From Russia's perspective, natural gas in the Levant Basin is the means to expand its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, consequently increasing tension with the United States since the end of the Cold War. China, a new player in the region, seeks to benefit from these energy discoveries to facilitate the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU, with its proximity to the conflict region, intends to utilize the energy discoveries to diversify its gas sources and free itself from the Russian monopoly. A closer look at the world powers' incentives behind their interest in the Levant Basin gas discoveries provides a better understanding of the complexities and interdependency of interests among key players.

Position of the United States

Although the United States is independent in its energy resources, its presence in the Middle East as a historical ally for Israel makes it a permanent player in the region. The United States first expressed interest in the Levant Basin gas resources by establishing the US-Israel Energy Center as a result of the 2014 Partnership Act. This act states, "The United States-Israel energy cooperation and the development of natural resources by Israel are in the strategic interest

of the United States.”⁹¹ Although the US strategy is recently shifting its focus towards the Indo-Pacific region, especially with the rising of China, it still views the Eastern Mediterranean as having strategic ramifications. Having US energy companies, notably Noble Energy, being a significant player in exploiting Israeli gas, the US economic interests are not only tied to energy security but also Israel’s overall security. However, with the ongoing political instability after the Arab Spring in 2011, the principle US interests in the region “seeks to uphold its allies’ economic and physical security, keep the area integrated with global markets, and ensure the safety of the US citizens and energy workers.”⁹² To meet these demands, the United States is leveraging the military instrument of national power as a means to secure its interests through a robust military presence. In April 2019, the United States had two aircraft carriers, Abraham Lincoln and John C. Stennis, deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean for the third time in the last two decades.⁹³

On the other hand, the United States also relies on its active diplomatic role to secure its interests. The United States is playing mediator to revitalize negotiations regarding the Turkish-Cypriot island dispute. This reconciliation will be in Israel’s favor since it will stabilize the fluctuating Turkish-Israeli relations. Consequently, this will facilitate the export of Israeli gas to Europe via Turkey, a NATO ally. Also, the United States, being a partner to Lebanon, is mediating the Lebanese-Israeli sea-border dispute to ensure regional stability. This strong diplomatic and military presence ensures the US commitment to protect its vital interests, defend Israel, and guarantee regional stability. However, US interests are in a continuous challenge with Russia who is considered as Israel’s largest oil supplier.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ratner, “Natural Gas Discoveries,” 14.

⁹² “Trouble in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea: The Coming Dash for Gas,” Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, March 20, 2013, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://wcfia.harvard.edu/publications/trouble-eastern-mediterranean-sea-coming-dash-gas>.

⁹³ Mark Faram, “Why the US Navy has 10 ships, 130 aircraft, and 9,000 personnel in the Mediterranean,” *Navy Times*, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/04/24/why-the-us-navy-has-10-ships-130-us-aircraft-and-9000-personnel-in-the-mediterranean/>.

⁹⁴ Vogler and Thompson, “Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean,” 6.

Position of Russia

Geopolitical and ideological factors have long been among the main drivers behind Russian interest in the Middle East. Historically, the quest for warm water ports, protecting Orthodox Christian believers from Ottoman suppression, and arms sales revenues from Arab countries kept Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, wholly engaged in the region.⁹⁵ In the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, the Soviet Union supplied the Egyptian government with arms and money to confront the Tripartite aggression.⁹⁶ Although temporarily, this act enabled the Soviet Union to secure its first foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean. Until the 1967 “Six-Day War,” the Soviet Union, supporting an Arab coalition, gradually and persistently increased its military presence, mainly in the form of naval squadrons and advisors.⁹⁷ Recently, benefiting from a possible United States pull-back, Russia seeks to ensure its role as a power broker in the Levant region and reestablish the status lost by the end of the Cold War. Accordingly, to reassert itself as a regional power, Russia has the ambition to regain a diplomatic, economic, and military presence in the Middle East. Currently, considered among the top three global energy players, Russia has the largest natural gas reserves in the world.⁹⁸ Despite the political disagreement over Syria and Iran, Russia and Israel share several economic interests to include trade, agriculture, and socio-cultural relationships as an example.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Eugene Rumer, “Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2019, accessed January 21, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>.

⁹⁶ The Tripartite aggression was a French, British, and Israeli invasion of Egypt as a response to the Egyptian President Jamal Abdel Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal and threatening to cut Europe’s oil supply from the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

⁹⁷ Robert Everton Cushman Jr., “Soviet Policies in the Middle East and Mediterranean Area,” Central Intelligence Agency, March 5, 1970, accessed December 11, 2019, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000273218.pdf.

⁹⁸ Seemann, “Israel’s New Gas Discovery,” 2.

⁹⁹ Joshua Krasna, “Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel’s Relationship,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2018, 14, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/krasna2018.pdf>.

It is doubtless that the recent energy discoveries in the Levant Basin pose a threat to the Russian energy hegemony. To mitigate this threat, Russia is seeking to exploit natural gas developments that consequently increase its footprint in the Eastern Mediterranean. A result, in 2013, Russia's Gazprom, the world's largest natural gas extractor, signed a twenty-year agreement with Leviathan partners to purchase Israeli natural gas. This is a way to restrain Israel's dream of becoming an energy hub in the region. Moreover, Russia's increasing military presence in Syria due to the civil war in that country and the political support to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad ensure Russian presence in the near future. This is further accompanied by economic investments to explore Syria's EEZ resources. In 2013, the Russian energy company SoyuzNefteGaz signed a twenty-five-year agreement worth \$90 million with the Syrian regime to exploit natural resources.¹⁰⁰ In January 2018, Russian Novatek, as part of a consortium, won the tender on Lebanese blocks four and nine to exploit for natural gas.

With these commitments, Russia intends to protect its strategic interests and presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, by avoiding competition from new energy exporters, such as Israel, Russia is capable of maintaining its position as the world's natural gas monopoly. Therefore, regional stability is in Russia's interest. Most importantly, Russia's strong relations with feuding actors in the Middle East enables it to be in a position of a potential mediator, challenging the US role, and restore its pre-Cold War presence. However, as stated earlier, Russia is not only Israel's most significant oil supplier, but it also provides Europe with 40 percent of its natural gas demands, a fact the EU seeks to manage.

Position of the European Union

The European countries' involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean has its origin with the French and British Mandates. However, the EU also has agreements and close relations with East Mediterranean countries. Moreover, the EU is a member of the Middle East Quartet established in

¹⁰⁰ Vogler and Thompson, "Gas Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean," 6-7.

Madrid 2002, aiming to facilitate mediating the Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations along with representatives from Russia, the United States, and the UN.¹⁰¹ As a result, the EU has not only economic interests in the Levant Basin but also political incentives to intervene. Additionally, the proximity of Greece and Cyprus, as EU members, to the disputed region draws the EU’s attention.¹⁰² Also, with Turkey being an EU candidate, the Turkish-Cypriot and Turkish-Israeli disputes bring additional concerns to the EU. With Turkey’s military presence on the Cypriot island, along with its effort to deny Cyprus the extraction of natural resources unless the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) receives economic gains, it is in the EU’s interest to intervene and settle these disputes. If the EU succeeds in resolving these sea-border disputes, economic stability in Cyprus and Greece will assist their economies and alleviate EU vulnerability.¹⁰³ In contrast, if the EU is reluctant to intervene, it risks losing access to the Eastern Mediterranean, especially if Cyprus and Greece were to withdraw from the EU.

Diversifying Europe’s energy resources besides minimizing dependence on Russian gas, are additional incentives for the EU to intervene and settle these maritime disputes. However, to achieve these strategic objectives, the EU must balance its interests in the Levant Basin. The EU has the potential to play the mediator in managing complexities between Greece and Cyprus as EU members, Turkey as an EU candidate, and Israel. Therefore, the EU has an interest in maintaining economic and political stability in the Eastern Mediterranean by encouraging the development of energy resources as a means to avoid future tension. However, the EU has no

¹⁰¹ United Nations, “The Quartet: The Question of Palestine,” accessed December 7, 2019, <https://www.un.org/unispal/un-system/un-system-partners/the-quartet/>.

¹⁰² In 2008, Greece suffered a financial crisis. After threatening to default on its national debt, the EU forced Greece to follow austerity measures in return for an EU loan, thus putting further pressure on EU countries and organizations.

¹⁰³ International Monetary Fund, “The IMF and the Greek Crisis: Myths and Realities,” September 30, 2019, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/10/01/sp093019-The-IMF-and-the-Greek-Crisis-Myths-and-Realities>.

time to waste if it was to exploit these opportunities since China, a rising economic power, is unfolding its plan to expand its influence in the Levant Basin.

Position of China

China's economy is rising and transforming into a global superpower. With the Eastern Mediterranean as a historical hub for trade routes, the former Chinese Silk Road establishes the economic and cultural ties between China, the Arabian Peninsula, southern Europe, and eastern Africa since the 18th century. Today, China is reviving this project by establishing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that aims at building a robust economic presence in the Levant Basin (see figure 15). The BRI encompasses nearly sixty countries, many having either economic or military partnership with the United States.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, this project will not be without geopolitical ramifications, especially as the US-China rivalry intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region.

With the Chinese government endorsing the use of natural gas as the ideal energy source, the Chinese interest in recent gas discoveries in the Levant Basin increased. According to a study by Dr. Christina Lin, a scholar at the Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of California, the Eastern Mediterranean, "Is a strategic logistics and trade hub for China's exports and market access in Europe and Africa, it is a site of vast energy reserves to fuel China's continued economic growth."¹⁰⁵ By not taking sides in the ongoing tension in the Middle East, precisely the Syrian Civil War, China's neutrality facilitates its investment in major infrastructure projects throughout feuding countries in the region. In alignment with its policy, and in order to achieve market access, China is focusing on building rail lines, pipelines, and gaining access to ports in the Levant Basin.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2019, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹⁰⁵ Christina Lin, "China's Strategic Shift towards the Region of the Four Seas: The Middle Kingdom Arrives in the Middle East," The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, April 2013, accessed December 6, 2019, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/163381/226_Lin.pdf.

In 2018, after six years of rehabilitating north Lebanon's Tripoli port, the China Harbor Engineering Company expanded the facility.¹⁰⁶ The port of Tripoli is anticipated to play a crucial transit role in the future reconstruction of Syria. Also, China is working with Israeli authorities to establish a 350 km Red-Med rail project to connect the port of Eilat on the Red Sea to the Haifa and Ashdod ports on the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁷ This rail connection has mutual interests since it diversifies China's trade routes to Europe and relieves Israel from fluctuating relations with Egypt in bypassing the Suez Canal. Moreover, the Red-Med rail project facilitates the future export of Israeli gas to Asia and Europe. Therefore, China's strategic interests in the Levant Basin favor political and military stability to ensure the safety of its trade routes and achieve economic prosperity.

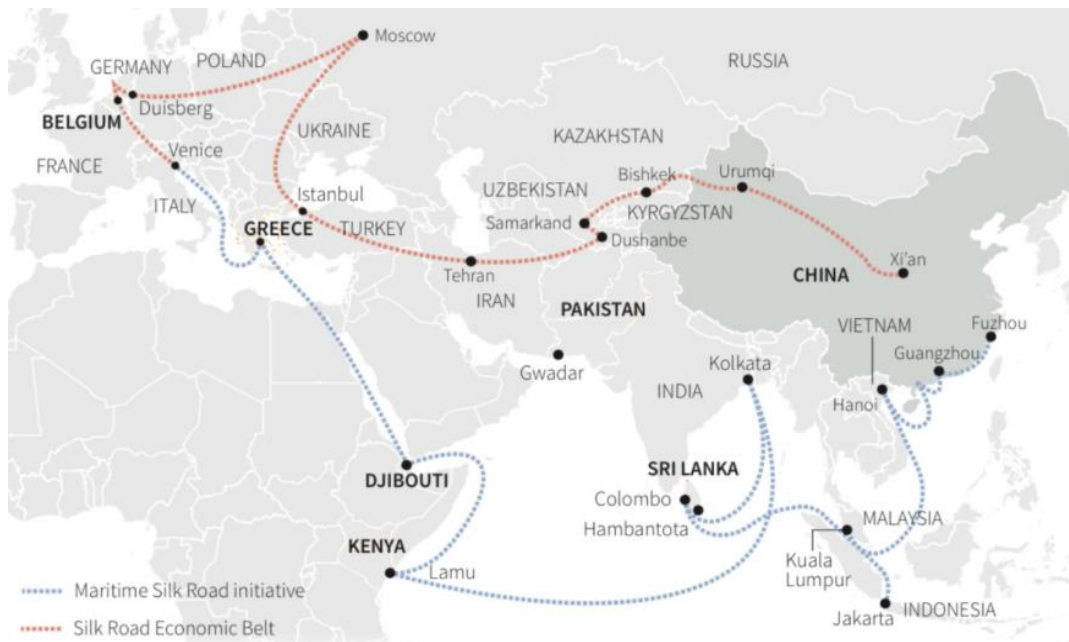


Figure 15. Belt and Road Initiative. Data from David Sandalow, "Guide to Chinese Climate Policy: Belt and Road Initiative," Center on Global Energy Policy, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://chineseclimatepolicy.energy.columbia.edu/en/belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹⁰⁶ Belt and Road Initiative Chamber of Trade and Commerce, "Tripoli port becomes central destination from China to Eastern Mediterranean," December 26, 2018, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.bricham.org/tripoli-port-becomes-central-destination-from-china-to-eastern-mediterranean/>.

¹⁰⁷ Mordechai Chaziza, "The Red-Med Railway: New Opportunities for China, Israel, and the Middle East," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, December 11, 2016, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/385-chaziza-the-red-med-railway-new-opportunities-for-china-israel-and-the-middle-east/>.

Keeping in mind the region's history of armed conflict, in addition to having each of the great powers following a different approach based on their interests in the Levant Basin, conflict management will remain a priority for the international community. Therefore, an intersection of great power interests is what prevails currently in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, Israel walks a fine line trying to balance between advancing its strategic interests in a complex environment and increasing its naval capabilities. This provokes enemies in a hostile environment while trying to manage stable relations with great powers that have different perspectives and approaches to their interests in the region.

Conclusion

The discovery of substantial offshore oil and gas fields in the Levant Basin could have a considerable impact on the region's economic, security, and geopolitical future. Tensions regarding the maritime delimitation dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean encompasses several countries. These countries share a background of longstanding conflicts such as Lebanon and Israel, Cyprus and Turkey, and Palestine and Israel. The main factor behind the maritime border dispute between Lebanon and Israel is that Lebanon does not recognize the state of Israel since its establishment in 1948. Consequently, no direct negotiations ever occurred between the two states to settle this dispute; they are at a state of war.

After several Israeli invasions into Lebanon and an occupation that lasted from 1978 until 2000, followed by the 2006 war, the land border is still undefined since the Armistice Line of 1949. However, in 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from south Lebanon behind a boundary line known as the Blue Line. Lebanon objected on thirteen points along this Blue Line accusing Israel as not fully completing its withdrawal to comply with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 425. One of the thirteen disputed points lies near the coastal town of Al-Naqoura. The UNCLOS considers the final land point as the initial point in dividing adjacent

maritime areas; it is the land that dominates the sea. As a result, the sea disputed area, estimated to be 850km², between Israel and Lebanon is an extension to the disagreement on the delineation of the land border. Israel lacks adherence to international law, has not signed the UNCLOS, and rarely abides by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling. Accordingly, Israel commenced its offshore exploitation process driven by economic incentives while neglecting the Lebanese Parliament's proposal to the UN Secretary-General on maritime geographical coordinates.

In a region long familiar with conflicts, complex international relations, and interdependent great power interests, the Lebanese-Israeli sea border dispute increases the risk of armed conflict. As a result, increasingly aggressive rhetoric occurred between Lebanese and Israeli officials. Israel warned the consortium of international oil companies expected to operate in the Lebanese EEZ to stay away from the maritime disputed area. On the other hand, Lebanon responded by threatening to target Israeli offshore facilities through the resistance movement, Hezbollah, if Israel hinders Lebanon's exploitation process. At present, verbal threats between Lebanese and Israeli officials are still within the threshold of a media or information war.

With the demand for natural gas anticipated to increase in the coming decades, and based on the massive offshore hydrocarbon discoveries in the Leviathan gas field, Israel seeks to become a natural gas exporter. Therefore, in order to fulfill its strategic objectives, border delineation complexities did not restrain Israel from exploiting its offshore gas fields until settling the maritime border dispute with Lebanon. Moreover, it is not only the significant economic outcomes, but also the considerable diplomatic, military, and territorial consequences that are considered the main drivers behind such Israeli acts. Generally, natural gas exporters benefit from energy resources to better shape their international diplomatic presence and augment their military capabilities. Therefore, this new Israeli economic status not only enables the Jewish State to free itself from possible Arab oil and gas embargo in the future but also enhances its diplomatic and military presence within a hostile environment.

Surrounded by political animosity within the region, Israel is counting on an economic boon from its offshore hydrocarbon resources not only to improve national living standards but also to promote trade and industry cooperation with Arab countries. Consequently, by being a regional gas hub, Israel views this as an opportunity to forward the “deal of the century.” This deal enhances Israel’s diplomatic presence and advances the peace process with the Palestinians. However, the majority of Arab countries rejected this agreement. Moreover, the offshore natural gas discoveries are emerging opportunities to improve Israel’s political status by stabilizing its fluctuating relationships with regional countries, such as Egypt and Turkey. However, with the ongoing existential threat from Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel’s natural resources are no doubt vulnerable to missile attacks. Therefore, Israel began benefitting from natural gas revenues to invest heavily in improving its naval capabilities. The Israeli navy has long been the smallest branch in the Israeli Defense Forces and played minor roles in the previous Arab-Israeli wars. Such military improvements will lead to having more secure offshore infrastructure, in addition to increasing Israel’s regional hegemony.

Lacking strategic depth, Israel, through augmenting its military capabilities, seeks to expand its regional presence. By undermining international law, and in order to prove its territorial domination in the region, Israel is building a border wall along the Lebanese border. This border wall does not account for the thirteen disputed points along the land border. As a result, Israel is seeking to finalize and impose a land border that extends to a maritime delineation situation allowing Israel to encroach on Lebanon’s EEZ.

However, it is highly probable that any military tension between Lebanon and Israel would not escalate into open armed conflict in the region. This low conflict probability is a result of having the Eastern Mediterranean as an intersection of interests for great powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and the EU. Regarding Israel, the United States is its closest ally and supporter. Russia, on the other hand, is Israel’s most significant oil supplier. Recently, China is working with Israeli authorities to establish a 350 km Red-Med rail project to connect the port

of Eilat to the Haifa and Ashdod ports. Therefore, great powers are expected to intervene in order to secure their strategic interests in the region.

Israel is not operating in a vacuum in the Levant Basin and should be aware that any aggressive act or further undermining of international law might lead to undesirable consequences. Therefore, energy discoveries, accompanied by the ongoing political turmoil in the Eastern Mediterranean, leading to international relationships that are in continuous fluctuation. Within all the complexities among regional and great power players, Israel walks a fine line to ensure that its energy resources are secure. Israel is augmenting its naval capabilities while trying to maintain a stable political environment that enables economic benefits and advances its diplomatic presence. Therefore, Israel's vital interests in the Levant Basin reflects the critical role these offshore energy discoveries play in achieving economic benefits, improving diplomatic presence, and attaining regional hegemony. These strategic objectives can best be accomplished through leveraging and orchestrating the instruments of national power represented by DIME.

The Levant Basin, viewed as a gas-exporting region, will undoubtedly serve diverse interests. Still, settling offshore gas ownership disputes is a prerequisite for the enhanced development of the natural gas industry. Without having a legal agreement in the Eastern Mediterranean based on respecting international law, such as UNCLOS, energy companies will be confronted with multiple dilemmas in their attempt to exploit, build infrastructure, and secure funds to export natural gas to various markets. Therefore, the following question should be taken into consideration for further research: In a politically unstable region, would future energy discoveries in the Levant Basin provide incentives to advance peace and cooperation, or would it mean more disputes and further escalation of tension?

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