Does Natural Gas Hold the Key to Peace in the Middle East?

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Two weeks after the devastating explosion that damaged or destroyed large sections of Beirut, former Lebanese President Michel Aoun was asked by French television about the possibility of making peace with Israel. Startlingly, Aoun, a Christian whose political party has been aligned with the Shiite paramilitary/political/terror group Hezbollah, which is bent on Israel's destruction, did not rule peace out.

"That depends," he stated. "We have problems with Israel and we have to resolve them first."

That Aoun even hinted at making peace with Israel could mean a lot of things (or nothing, to be honest). But just the fact that he said it shows the hit that Hezbollah has taken following the explosions. Knowing how Hezbollah has inserted itself into every aspect of life in Lebanon, few Lebanese believe the terror group was not at least aware that about 2750 metric tons of potentially explosive ammonium nitrate was being stored at the port with virtually no safeguards against the kind of explosion that did, in fact, happen.

With the Lebanese economy in free fall even before the explosion, and then with Lebanese society devastated by the coronavirus, the port disaster may have been the straw that broke the camel's back for the old Lebanese political and social order. So massive was the blast that large amounts of basic infrastructure like water and power lines were devastated. Immense stocks of food and medicine vaporized. Buildings simply vanished.

As Lebanese politicians try to cobble together seemingly unworkable plans to import basic necessities, Israel's massive Haifa port lies only 130 kilometers away from Beirut. As basic necessities run out, life becomes a struggle just to exist, and rebuilding infrastructure will become a massively expensive and difficult project, fewer Lebanese may be willing to toe Hezbollah's rejectionist line and stand on principle to refuse Israel's potential help.

What then, could Israel do to help induce Lebanese society break with Hezbollah and make peace with Israel? One thing would be to actively seek a solution to the two countries' maritime dispute. Lebanon has never recognized Israel, and the two nations have never demarcated a maritime border. This became truly important when natural gas was discovered offshore in the Mediterranean Sea in 2009. Now, development of that resource could either spark new hostilities between the two countries or create new sources of wealth and prosperity for both of them, depending on their willingness to be cooperative.

The Leviathan natural gas field straddles the territorial waters of Israel, Cyprus, and Lebanon (with Turkey trying to make its own claims as well). Already Israel, Cyprus, and Greece have reached an agreement to develop the gas and lay a pipeline to transport it to Europe.

However, Israel's Block 72 of the gas field lies very close to Lebanon's Block 9. On June 23, Israel announced plans to develop Block 72, seeking bids with a delivery date of September 23. Lebanon protested immediately, ratcheting up tension. President Aoun himself declared on July 2 that the Israeli decision to develop Block 72 was "extremely dangerous."

Then Beirut exploded. Suddenly, exploring for natural gas became far less significant to the average Lebanese than getting it delivered to their homes. But in the long term, a mutual understanding between Israel and Lebanon that would allow them both to benefit from natural gas exploration may be just the catalyst that moves the two historical enemies toward peace.

For Israel, natural gas provides another huge opportunity. Having just made peace with the United Arab Emirates, in which Israel agreed (at least temporarily) not to annex parts of the West Bank and the UAE agreed to formally recognize Israel as a sovereign country, Israel now has a carrot to offer Lebanon in return for real peace and a dismantling of Hezbollah's military machine. Joint development of the natural gas fields – or at the very least, recognizing each other's right to do so – can help both countries and bring tangible benefit to the average Lebanese civilian.

Hezbollah certainly will not go quietly, but with so many Lebanese feeling that the society they have now literally is killing them, it will be harder for Hezbollah to convince the Lebanese that they should continue to suffer for a conflict few

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