
Will Natural Gas Isolate Turkey and Integrate Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean?

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For generations, the area around the eastern Mediterranean Sea has been filled with turmoil. From the Arab-Israeli conflict to the divided island of Cyprus and the general animus between Greece and Turkey, the region's problems have seemed intractable.

Over the last decade however, the discovery of massive natural gas deposits underneath the eastern Mediterranean Sea is reorienting the entire region. The rush to obtain energy independence and security by discovering and laying claim to gas and oil reserves is immensely important to the countries in the area. It is forcing them to reconsider historical relationships and presenting them with new possibilities that previously seemed unthinkable. At the same time however, countries like Turkey, which refuse to think anew, may find themselves left behind. Events are moving at tremendous speed, with much of the region having changed in just the last three months.

Natural gas was first discovered in the eastern Mediterranean Sea in the early 1970's. However, it was the discovery by Israel of its offshore Tamar field in 2009 that alerted the region to the extent of the natural gas all around them. Now the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that as much as 122 trillion cubic feet of gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil lie in the eastern Mediterranean basin. That amount of gas is equivalent to about 76 years of gas consumption in the European Union.

In just the last two months, this potential gas and oil bounty has pushed Lebanon into reconciliation talks with Israel and nudged Jordan and Egypt into a multilateral trade association with Israel, all the while leaving Turkey out in the cold. It is far too early to make broad generalizations about the future of that notoriously volatile region, but clearly times are changing.

Despite technically remaining in a state of war with Israel, last week, at the headquarters of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Brigadier General Bassam Yassin, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Lebanese Army, met with Udi Adiri, Director General of the Israel Energy Ministry. The talks, which were mediated by the United States, lasted only an hour. However, they produced positive responses on both sides and a commitment to meet again on October 28. This is "the first step on a thousand-mile journey for demarcating the southern borders," said Yassin, but we "look forward... to achieving this file within a reasonable timeframe."

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For much of the last 40 years, Lebanon has been dominated by the Shia militia known as Hezbollah. Since 2000, Lebanon has fought two full-scale skirmishes with Israel and Hezbollah has become a leader among the Arab Rejectionists opposing any peace or reconciliation with Israel. This group includes the nations of Iran, Syria and Iraq. Based on these antecedents, it is truly startling that an official Lebanese representative would negotiate publicly with Israel.

The breathing space, if not the necessity, for Lebanon to talk with Israel directly and publicly likely results from the explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4. That blast, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded on land, killed at least 200 people and devastated large portions of the Lebanese capital. Many Lebanese suspect that the thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate which ignited were being stored for Hezbollah's use against Israel. Instead, the explosion caused such massive devastation and societal and economic turmoil that Lebanon may have little choice but to seek to demarcate its southern maritime border with Israel so Lebanon can begin to develop its own natural gas resources.

The Lebanese front is not the only area where traditional Middle Eastern animosities are being reordered in the face of the natural gas bounty. On September 22, Greece, Italy, Israel, Cyprus, Jordan, and Egypt all signed onto a joint organization to promote regional cooperation in the development of natural gas. "Today is an historic moment," said Egyptian Oil Minister Tarek el-Molla. "Once the organization is up and running, we will soon see important projects that add value to all our countries."

While Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979, until now it would have been almost unthinkable for an Egyptian official to issue publicly such a statement about an economic organization in which Israel is a member. As with Jordan, which signed a peace deal with Israel in 1993, Egypt has maintained a very cold peace with the Jewish state. Though no longer officially at war, until now there has been little real bilateral trade, development or tourism between Israel and either Egypt or Jordan. What little national cooperation did occur generally was not well publicized, if at all.

This week a third natural gas opening appeared in the relationship between Israel and the Arab world. Specifically, MED-RED Land Bridge, an Emirati/Israeli owned company, and EAPC, the Israeli-owned pipeline company, signed a memorandum of understanding to store and transport oil from the UAE to Europe. The pipeline, which will run across Israel from the Red Sea port of Eilat to the Mediterranean port of Ashkelon, will significantly cut the time and expense needed to transport fuels from the UAE to Europe.

Thus in the space of two weeks, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan have fundamentally changed their stance toward Israel, and the UAE has expanded its already existing ties.

Noticeably absent from these significant developments is Turkey. The Turks evidently have chosen not to be part of the six-nations development agreement, despite having the largest economy in the region. Arguably then, Turkey would stand to benefit substantially by including itself.

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Ruled since 2003 by an Islamist President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey however has taken an uncooperative approach to potentially collective Mediterranean resource development. As his presidency has continued, Erdogan has increased his confrontational tone and policies against both Israel and the west generally. Turkey also was not included in the agreement to build the EastMed pipeline signed by Greece, Cyprus, and Israel at the beginning of 2020. Instead, Turkey has focused its energies more on disrupting other nations' development of these resources than attempting to develop its own.

The early read is that Turkey will be unsuccessful in its efforts to stifle pan-national cooperation among the various states mentioned above. Literally then, Turkey risks being left out in the cold by continuing down its current path.

Fueled by the prospect of economic expansion that can best be achieved by cooperation instead of confrontation, the world is changing all around Turkey, rapidly. Instead of coalescing around a joint rejection of Israel, as President Erdogan may have hoped, the other nations in the eastern Mediterranean are pursuing joint development of natural gas and oil resources. This cooperation acts not only as a form of economic development but also as a counterweight to the political extremism within Turkey and Iran. Unless Erdogan realizes this and readjusts, it may be Turkey and not Israel that ultimately feels the sting of isolation in the future Middle East.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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