

Lebanon and Israel Reach Gas Deal, But Will It Hold?

Interview with Abbas Zalzali

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Lebanon and Israel have [reached a deal](#) concerning their maritime border dispute in the gas-rich Mediterranean Sea.

Israel's current leader, Yarir Lapid, wants to get the Knesset's approval before Israel's elections on November 1, but there's no guarantee that it will happen before then. The long-term life of this deal depends on the outcome of the Israeli election.

Lebanon's deputy speaker Elias Bou Saab said yesterday that an agreement had been reached that satisfies both sides, and the US-brokered final draft has gone to President Michel Aoun. US mediator Amos Hochstein worked to close the gap between Israel and Lebanon on the issues surrounding the gas deal. The text of the deal was leaked to the press, and appears to give the Karish field to Israeli control, while the Qana field would remain with Lebanon. Aoun stressed previously that this deal does not create a partnership with Israel, as the two countries remain in a state of war.

Lebanon's Energy Minister Walid Fayad has previously said they will take over Russian gas company Novatek's 20 percent share in a consortium licensed to explore two offshore blocs after the Russian gas giant pulled out in August. The consortium is led by France's TotalEnergies and includes Italy's Eni. Yesterday, a delegation from Total was in Beirut meeting the caretaker Prime Minister Mikati, who told them to start immediately exploring and drilling the area once the maritime border deal comes into force.

The deal could solve the financial, social, and political problems that Lebanon has been facing which almost brought the small nation on the Mediterranean Sea to 'failed-state' status.

The two nations sense the urgency to come to an agreement amid [Hezbollah's threat to](#)

[defend Lebanon's offshore energy resources](#) by force if necessary. The Lebanese army is incapable of militarily defending Lebanon, and Hezbollah is the only resistance force capable of deterring the encroachment of borders or territorial waters. Hezbollah officials have said they would endorse a deal reached between Lebanon's government and Israel. Offshore oil and gas production for Lebanon could spell the end of the worst economic crisis in the world in modern history, according to the World Bank.

Previously, Lapid said Israel would begin production in the Karish gas field in the Mediterranean "as soon as possible." That decision threatened to raise tensions with Hezbollah, as the Karish gas field was contested. Israel set up a gas rig at Karish in June, saying the field was part of its UN-recognized exclusive economic zone; however, Lebanon insisted Karish was in disputed waters. Tensions between Lebanon and Israel increased since the arrival of a floating production and storage vessel to the Karish field in June, and in July the Israeli military shot down three unarmed Hezbollah drones flying over the Karish field.

Steven Sahiounie of MidEastDiscourse interviewed Abbas Zalzali, news anchor, media instructor, talk show host and writer. Mr. Zalzali explained how the deal might be effected by the Israeli election outcome, and also commented on the upcoming Presidential election in Lebanon.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): Previously, we heard that Israel and Lebanon were very close to signing a deal over the gas in the Mediterranean Sea, but that the negotiations had collapsed. As of now, the deal appears to have been made. In your opinion, who caused the previous negotiations to collapse?

Abbas Zalzali (AZ): The previous Israeli statements regarding the border demarcation agreement with Lebanon, which has now been made, fall into the category of Israeli election rhetoric. That is why we saw Benjamin Netanyahu trying to use the border demarcation file against Yair Lapid as a pressure card by making clear that it is a concession to Lebanon and Hezbollah, but all indications indicate that the agreement has been accomplished, especially after US President Joe Biden called Lebanese President Michel Aoun and congratulated him on completing the agreement, as did the US Ambassador to Beirut Dorothy Shea and more than one Arab and international official.

SS: The Israeli officials are threatening to attack Lebanon and asked their settlers in northern occupied Palestine to get prepared for escalation with Lebanon. Netanyahu is against this new agreement between Lebanon and Israel, and in the coming election he might win. Do you think that the situation will go to a full scale war if he comes back to power?

AZ: If Netanyahu wins, things will get complicated. I do not think that Israel is ready to launch a war against Lebanon, not because of the demarcation of the maritime borders, or for any other reason, because the regional and international conditions are not ready, and because Europe needs Mediterranean gas as a result of the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the conflict over energy sources. Let us not forget that in the war with Lebanon in July 2006 Israel gained nothing. Hezbollah has gained a great deal of fighting power through its participation in the wars in more than one country, in addition to doubling its missile force.

SS: The Lebanese Parliament should vote for a new president for Lebanon. In your opinion,

are the Lebanese political parties ready to choose a president, or we will see Lebanon without a government and a president?

AZ: The elections of a new President in Lebanon has always been an internal connection with external and internal reasons, but there are some countries meddling in Baabda Palace, and some neighboring countries that changed the political map in the country.

So we may face a stage of a presidential vacancy under a resigned government. But if the positives continue in the file of demarcating the maritime borders with Israel, and the agreement is signed, this may reflect regional and international consensus, which will be reflected inside Lebanon as an agreement to elect a new president.

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