

Offshore gas field dispute ratchets up tensions between Israel and Lebanon

The Arab Weekly staff

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Israel seems to have decided to bring tensions with Lebanon down a notch by indicating it is open to foreign mediation in its dispute over the ownership of a gas field on the countries' border.

Rhetoric has been escalating for several months between the two countries, especially regarding Israel's concern over heightened assertiveness of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah on its border and increased levels of Iranian influence in its neighbour's internal politics.

"We hope for, and are prepared to move forward on, a diplomatic resolution to this matter," Yuval Steinitz, Israel's minister of national infrastructure, energy and water resources, told the Ynet news site when asked about the Block 9 field, for which Lebanon issued oil and gas exploration licences in December.

The flashpoint was provided by Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who, speaking at an international security conference at Tel Aviv University on January 31, said: "When they (Lebanese officials) issue a tender on a gas field, including Block 9, which by any standard is ours... this is very, very challenging and provocative conduct here."

"Respectable firms" bidding on the tender "are, to my mind, making a grave error because this is contrary to all of the rules and all protocol in cases like this," he was quoted by Reuters as saying.

The Lebanese cabinet originally

approved licences for three international companies to carry out exploratory drilling off the country's coast. Under the terms of that agreement, Italy's Eni, France's Total and Russia's Novatek, which bid for two of Lebanon's ten offshore blocks, would be granted the rights to determine whether oil and gas exist within the disputed area.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri called Lieberman's comments a "blatant provocation that Lebanon rejects," saying his claims were "invalid in form and substance." Hariri also indicated Beirut's readiness to follow up "with the competent international parties to assert its legitimate right to act in its territorial waters."

Lebanon is on the Levant Basin in the eastern Mediterranean where several major gas discoveries, including Israel's Leviathan and Tamar fields, have been made since 2009. For Lebanon, beset by chronic infrastructure challenges and host to more than 1 million refugees, a major find of oil or gas off its coast would hold great significance for the country's embattled economy. However, it raises the possibility of fuelling tension with Israel during a period of increased hostility.

Beirut officials said no legal ambiguity existed over the location of its maritime frontier. Lebanese Energy Minister Cesar Abi Khalil told the Associated Press that the United Nations had been informed of the location of its border after it was originally demarcated. Irrespective of any Israeli claims, he said exploration would begin as planned in 2019 and, depending upon what is discovered, more blocks would be put forward for tender.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujar-



Defending a right. Lebanon's Energy Minister Cesar Abi Khalil points to a map as he speaks about the offshore Block 9 during an interview in Beirut, on February 1. (AP)

ric said: "We're encouraging everybody to use diplomatic means to address these issues... We support the right of both Lebanon and Israel to exploit their maritime resources in accordance with the international law of the sea."

He added: "We encourage both countries to continue efforts to address the delimitation of their respective maritime exclusion zones and the exploration of their natural resources in a manner that does not give rise to tensions" but in-

stead "builds confidence through dividends of cooperation."

Exacerbating tensions between the two countries have been Israel's plans to construct a wall

along its Lebanese frontier.

"This wall, if it is built, will be considered an assault on Lebanese land," the secretary-general of Lebanon's Higher Defence Council said in a statement after a meeting with the country's senior government and military officials.

"The Higher Defence Council has given its instructions to confront this aggression to prevent Israel from building (the wall) on Lebanese territory," the statement said.

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Lebanon's potential missile plants threaten renewed conflict with Israel

Nicholas Blanford

Beirut

In the late 1990s, when Hezbollah was battling Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, rumours surfaced that the militant Shia organisation was manufacturing short-range Grad-style rockets in Lebanon to offset the need to smuggle in Iran-provided rockets from Syria. No evidence emerged that Hezbollah was building its own rockets and no homemade versions were recorded having been discovered.

However, the subject of a covert Hezbollah missile production line in Lebanon resurfaced recently and brought Israel and its Lebanese nemesis potentially closer to war than at any time since the ambiguous cessation of hostilities between them in 2006.

The topic surfaced last March when the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida suggested that Iran established Hezbollah-operated underground weapons production facilities in Lebanon, manufacturing rockets with ranges of more than 500km as well as a broad assortment of guided missiles and explosive-carrying pilotless drones.

Another report claimed the existence of an underground facility near Hermel in northern Lebanon, producing the Iranian Fateh-110 family of missiles, and a munitions plant near Zaharani in southern Lebanon.

In August, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu warned that the installation of weapons production facilities in Syria and Lebanon was "something that Israel cannot accept." Shortly thereafter, Israeli jets struck a suspected missile plant at Syria's Scientific



Varying ranges. Test firing of Iran's home-built surface-to-surface Fateh-110 missile. (Iranian Defence Ministry)

Studies and Research Centre facility near Hama. Two more Syrian facilities were struck in the following three months.

Israel has been attacking targets in Syria associated with Hezbollah since 2013, mainly arms convoys en route to the Lebanese border or storage facilities holding weapons destined for the Lebanese party. The alleged decision to manufacture missiles in Lebanon was considered an Iranian attempt to evade the air strikes.

Israeli media reports said warn-

ings issued in the summer had deterred Iran from establishing missile production sites but the Israeli air strikes against Iran-affiliated locations in Syria may have prompted a rethink by Iran. Since the end of January, Israeli military and government officials have revived the allegations of missile building and significantly intensified the scale of their warnings.

Israeli military spokesman Brigadier-General Ronen Manelis wrote an article published, unusually, in several Arabic language platforms

that accused Iran of turning Lebanon into "one big missile factory."

"It's no longer about transfers of arms, money or advice," he wrote. "De facto, Iran has opened a new branch, the Lebanon branch – Iran is here... Iran and Hezbollah are currently trying to build a precision missile factory."

If the reports of weapons production facilities in Lebanon are true, it remains unclear exactly what is being built or assembled and therefore the level of technical sophistication and logistics required.

"It really depends on what weapons [the Israelis] are talking about," said Jeremy Binnie, the Middle East and Africa editor of Jane's Defence Weekly. "If this is just a case of putting warheads on standard artillery rockets, then that could be done anywhere. However, if they are manufacturing motors and warheads for large-calibre rocket artillery and missiles from scratch, then that will require a large facility."

Typically, weapons storage and manufacturing facilities in Syria follow a distinct pattern discernible to anyone who cares to search on Google Earth. However, within Lebanon, subject to daily reconnaissance flyovers by the Israeli Air Force, whatever facilities that might exist are more likely to be underground and hidden from overt surveillance.

Israeli reports suggest that the suspected facilities in Lebanon are intended to equip existing missiles with improved guidance systems. There are numerous versions of the Fateh-110 missile with varying payloads, ranges and flight trajectories. Some versions are modular, meaning the components could be more easily smuggled into Lebanon, assembled at secret plants and fitted with guidance systems.

"It might be an upgrade process for something like existing Tishreen missiles [the Syrian version of the Fateh-110], with improved Iranian guidance systems for example, or perhaps turning existing Maysaloun heavy rockets into missiles by adding guidance systems," said Binnie. "If so, that probably wouldn't involve a great deal of plant and could possibly be done at existing storage sites."

The intensity of Israeli warnings is clearly intended to unnerve the Lebanese in general, compel Iran and Hezbollah to reconsider the wisdom of building missile plants in Lebanon and galvanise the international community – the United States, Russia and Europe – to act to prevent another conflagration in the Middle East.

However, Israel has no desire to go to war knowing that the scale of fighting would dwarf the 2006 conflict. Naftali Bennett, Israel's hawkish education minister, acknowledged recently that a military clash with Hezbollah could "lead to damage to the Israeli home front the likes of which we have not seen since the War of Independence [in 1948]."

Similarly, Hezbollah is in no rush to go to war for much the same reasons as the Israelis.

However, if the existence of suspected missile facilities in Lebanon is found to be true, and Iran and Hezbollah move ahead with the project, will Israel conclude it has no choice but to attack them even at the risk of triggering a devastating war?

Nicholas Blanford is the author of "Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel" (Random House 2011).