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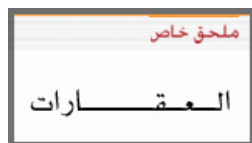
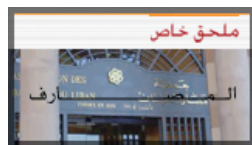
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Will Lebanon Ever Control Its Oil and Gas Resources?

Isam Khalifah

Any researcher knows of the important role that energy, especially oil and gas, plays in drafting national policies. In the past, the division of the spheres of influence — particularly in the Arab Mashriq (the region of Arabian countries to the east of Egypt and north of the Arabian Peninsula) — was largely linked to the presence of oil. This is still the case and will always remain so.

Lebanon is facing a new conflict as scientific studies have confirmed the presence of gas and oil in the eastern waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Israel and Cyprus have both started to exploit this resource.

The general principles of maritime delimitation

It is difficult to demarcate maritime boundaries because it is hard to determine precise lines and their coordinates amid the constant movement of the sea. Demarcation is done with either straight lines or circles within imaginary points and hypothetical geographical coordinates, correlating with land borders.

In the past, it was recognized that territorial waters extend to a distance of three nautical miles out from the shore, but now territorial waters can cover up to 12 nautical miles. In 1982, the Law of the Sea Convention was created to replace the 1958 Geneva Convention treaties, but this did not solve all of the problems due to each region's unique geographical characteristics.

It is the right of the states to impose their own exclusive economic zones that extend to a distance of 200 nautical miles out from a state's coastal baseline, which they do depending on the strength and capabilities of the states. However, if the maritime zone of one state overlaps with that of the other, it is very hard to demarcate the exclusive economic zones.

Drilling for oil in Lebanon

Since 1947, the Lebanon Oil Company has carried out geological studies in 3300 square kilometers of various Lebanese territories. As a result, the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) drilled an oil well in the Tirbil area. The field surveys were resumed in 1950 and a well was drilled in Yuhmor between 1953 and 1954, reaching a depth of 2672 meters. An additional well was drilled in the Nahr Ibrahim area at a depth of 650 meters. Between 1959 and 1960, the company did seismic scans in the south region and north of the Bekaa Valley, where a well was drilled in Al-Qa' at a depth of 2557 meters, in Adloun area at a depth of 2150 meters, and another in Yuhmor. Another well was drilled in Tall Dhnoub in the western Bekaa region in 1963 at a depth of 1421 meters.

After the outbreak of the war in 1975, gas and oil exploration ceased.

Oil and gas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea

In the late nineties, the US Noble Energy Company explored an oil field called Mari-B in the waters adjacent to the territorial waters of the Gaza Strip. In 2004, gas production started, with 138 million cubic feet being extracted per day.

In January 2009, the Noble Energy Company and other Israeli companies discovered the Tamar oilfield, which lies 90km off the coast of Haifa with an estimated reserve of 8.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and a production capacity range of 200 to 250 million cubic feet per day. This field is 35km south of Lebanon's territorial waters and it is expected to start production for Noble Energy and Israeli partners in the first quarter of 2013. The depth of the wells reaches 16,880 feet in water and land, and studies have proven that this field extends to Lebanese waters.

In late December 2010, the Noble Energy Company and the Israeli Delek Drilling Company discovered the Leviathan field, which lies 80 miles away from the coast of Haifa toward Cypriot waters and close to Lebanese waters. The reserves of this field are 16 trillion cubic feet with the possibility of 1.2 billion barrels of oil at a depth of 7,200 meters, all within an area of 325 square kilometers.

The greatest dilemma is that those discovered fields fall within the maritime borders of Lebanon and Cyprus. In 2007, Cyprus launched an oil and gas exploration bid, legislated related laws and signed an agreement with Israel and Egypt. Negotiations with Lebanon were inconclusive due to Turkey's objections, as they insist that the fields extend to Turkish Cypriot.

The Lebanese government is trailing Israel and Cyprus in developing the hydrocarbon resources in Lebanese territories and waters. Studies by the Norwegian PGS Company between 2007 and 2008 that extended 21,500km out from Lebanon's exclusive economic zone have proven the existence of gas and oil. These resources are mainly found in the northern, central and southern areas. There is also another dispute between Lebanon and Israel regarding a region of 850 square kilometers.

Essential questions

If the dispute between Lebanon and Israel is over an area of 850 square kilometers, do we know the gross area of the oil and gas field? Can we rely on Israeli sources to know the amount of discovered oil? How do we solve the dispute over the specific region between Israel, Cyprus and Lebanon — in case Israel insists on its position, should we resort to diplomatic or other means? What would be the position of the United Nations, and particularly the United States? It is true that Lebanon unilaterally demarcated the southern maritime border of Lebanon's exclusive economic zone and had sent the map to the Secretary General of the United Nations on July 14, 2010. But can't Israel use technical means to extract the gas and oil from the Lebanese region undetected? Why doesn't Lebanon speed up the training process of specialized human resources through opening a petrochemicals department at the Lebanese University's School of Engineering, a department that so far only exists on paper? Why doesn't Lebanon immediately ask the help of competent technical specialists and administrators from the

Ministry of Energy? Where are the necessary laws and legislation, and why aren't bids being presented to move toward investment? Why aren't the Al-Zahrani and Tripoli refineries being developed and prepared, as there are many attractive offers from European countries to do so? Are there objections to this matter from Iran, for example, who wants to maintain control of the Strait of Hormuz and the third of the world's oil that passes through it? What is the role of Israel, which is developing the Eilat-Ashkelon-Haifa line, in the process of obstruction? This line currently pumps three million barrels per day toward the Mediterranean Sea. Won't tempting Cyprus to transport 750 million cubic meters of water from the river, which flows into the gulf of Chikka, lead to rapprochement between Lebanon and this island? Shouldn't the Lebanese decision be firm in the negotiations with Turkey, Syria and Cyprus to secure our oil interests? To face Israel — which has proven greedy not only when it comes to gas and oil but also to land and water — is it not better for us to focus on our national unity? Are we not better off strengthening our state and army? Shouldn't we focus on alleviating the impact of regional powers on us, especially since the Syrian crisis will end soon and will inevitably affect the Lebanese and regional situation in general? The conflict over Syria and in Syria cannot be understood independently from the conflict over oil and gas. As Lebanese, the best thing that we can do is to learn from all our previous suffering, maintain our interests and defend the independence of our nation and its sovereignty in the face of all risks.

Through this national wealth, we can pay the nearly sixty billion-dollar debts that have long been burdening our people. But the fundamental question is: Will the politicians who pushed us to the abyss of debt protect this wealth and use it for the benefit of the people and the state to achieve sustainable development and social justice, or will they use it to secure their personal interests and those of their local and foreign masters?

Isam al Khafaji is a special adviser on the Middle East socio-economic affairs. He has taught at the University of Amsterdam, New York University and Yale University. Isam was the assistant coordinator of Iraq's Reconstruction and Development Council after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and resigned in protest at the US policies. He was the sole Iraqi adviser to the UN special envoy on the transition from US occupation to Iraqi sovereignty.

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