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LEBANON PUSHES FOR RESUMPTION OF US EFFORTS TO SOLVE LEBANON-ISRAEL MARITIME BORDER DISPUTE

Talks aimed at resolving the maritime border dispute between Lebanon and Israel are set to resume. During a visit to Lebanon, U.S. Deputy Assistant of State for Energy Diplomacy Amos Hochstein met with Speaker Nabih Berri, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and other officials including Prime Minister Tammam Salam and Energy and Water Minister Arthur Nazarian to discuss the pending maritime dispute with Israel. Lebanon and Israel both claim an area of 850 square kilometers as their own. Lebanese officials hope that US and UN mediation will help demarcate territorial waters. The disputed triangle is believed to hold substantial amounts of natural gas.

The Lebanese government has not yet launched its first licensing round, due to domestic political rivalries delaying decision-making. It fears however that Israel may be “siphoning” its natural gas, a concern that was expressed to the UN. Speaker Berri warned that any attempt by Israel to steal Lebanon’s gas could trigger a violent confrontation between the two countries in a state of war. He urged the government to issue the pending decrees that would allow for Lebanon’s first licensing round to open and companies to bid for licensing.

In a pre-qualification round launched in spring of 2013, Lebanon was able to attract major oil and gas companies that expressed their interest in exploring Lebanese waters. Out of fifty-two companies from twenty five different countries that submitted their applications, forty-six companies qualified, twelve as Right-Holders Operators including Chevron, ExxonMobil, ENI, Shell, Statoil and TOTAL, and thirty-four as Right-Holders Non Operators.

Lebanon’s late entry into the natural gas market may impede its ability to secure a share of the regional market, according to experts. Despite domestic policy debates that have delayed production from its largest offshore gas fields, Israel is ahead of the game. It is engaged in talks to export natural



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gas to its neighbours Egypt and Jordan, and is strengthening energy ties with its Cypriot neighbour discussing ways to merge export infrastructures. The discovery by Israel of a small natural gas field close to the disputed triangle, the Karish field, has triggered concerned that Israel may be violating Lebanon's Exclusive Economic Zone.

The resolution of the conflict is an essential step for the adjacent countries to fully exploit their respective maritime potentials, as no company will be willing to explore the disputed zone. The lack of relations between the two countries and Israel having not signed the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) may impede progress in the US and UN' attempts to resolve the dispute.

Karen Ayat is an analyst and Associate Partner at Natural Gas Europe focused on energy geopolitics. Karen is also a co-founder of the Lebanese Oil and Gas Initiative (LOGI). She holds an LLM in Commercial Law from City University London and a Bachelor of Laws from Université Saint Joseph in Beirut. Email Karen karen@minoils.com Follow her on Twitter: @karenayat

Natural Gas Europe welcomes all viewpoints. Should you wish to provide an alternative perspective on the above article, please contact editor@minoils.com

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