

Great oil and gas potential in Lebanon, but little inclination to capitalise on it

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The Lebanese are very self-aware. We freely admit, for example, that when flying Middle East Airlines, we are atrocious passengers. We treat the cabin crew with barely-concealed contempt; we let our children run amok in the cabin, and, in what has almost become a national pastime, we cheerfully ignore instructions to remain seated until the plane has come to a halt, often deciding that we need to visit the bathroom seconds before landing.

Put us on a posh airline and we become models of obedience. And this is why we Lebanese tend to only punch above our weight when we emigrate, a condition recognised by the Lebanese telecoms minister Boutros Harb. “I wonder why Lebanese excel in other countries, while [at home] their talents are not exploited?” lamented the erstwhile presidential candidate at an IT conference in Beirut last week.

The upshot of the event was the creation of a “task force” to propose recommendations to improve Lebanon’s telecoms and IT sectors. Task force is just a more butch name for a committee and we all know what happens in Lebanon when issues are referred to a committee: nothing. They are graveyards.

And somewhere therein lies part of the answer to Mr. Harb’s frustration. Because while we are happy to follow the path of least resistance, as we do when we fly on MEA or cheerfully ignore traffic lights, we Lebanese by and large crave a well-run system defined by organisation, transparency and the rule of law. Hence why we are often model citizens and pillars of society when we live abroad? The US – inclusive, structured, collegiate, hearty and, above all, earnest – particularly agrees with the Lebanese disposition.

Indeed, any member of Lebanon's vast and productive diaspora reading about Mr. Harb's consternation would be happy to put him straight on the matter, perhaps by referring him to the progress of another task force, this time created to handle the implementation of the nation's oil and gas file, not only to explain why they are not in a hurry to come home, but also why arguably the most exciting opportunity in the country's 94-year history is rapidly running away from us.

In 2011, we Lebanese were told there were an estimated 1.9 billion barrels of oil and 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas waiting to be pumped to the surface on sea and land. Drilling contracts would be awarded by the end of 2012 and the first issuance of our new-found wealth would spurt forth as early as 2017.

Oh the breathless excitement.

The energy minister at the time, Gebran Bassil, was so upbeat, he even commissioned *A Nation's Dream*, an illustrated booklet that depicted how we would spend the revenues, by creating a new, more affluent, happier and greener Lebanon. We would have a modern public transport system, water taxis, hydroelectric dams and solar power. We would be the new Norway. Only it doesn't look like we will any time soon, despite there being credible data from onshore surveys that suggests we really might have plentiful reserves of oil and gas.

Last week, *The Daily Star* quoted "insiders" admitting that all the serious international companies that were initially eager to bid for drilling rights were no longer "optimistic about the prospects of launching a licensing round", blaming the delays on politicking rather than logistical shortcomings or financial woes.

The rumblings come three months after the current energy minister, Arthur Nazarian, officially postponed the deadline to submit bids for a maximum period of six months in August. The order came despite the creation of the apparently well run but ultimately toothless Petroleum Administration to oversee the whole process from delineation to bidding and drilling.

In May 2013, I warned on these pages that "the permanent layer of filth and corruption that coats Lebanese politics" would kill off anything destined for the national good. It saddens me to see that I might have been spot on, but

I sense that many Lebanese across the world are not in the least bit surprised.

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