

Hezbollah: Siniora Gave Away Lebanese Oil



Siniora's premature agreement with the Cypriots allowed them to go ahead and sign agreements with Tel Aviv. (Photo: Al-Akhbar)

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A recent spat between a Hezbollah politician and former prime minister Fouad Siniora has brought attention to the alleged mishandling of Lebanon's maritime boundary demarcation, a mistake which may have ceded significant oil and gas resources to Israel.

MP Nawaf Moussawi of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc slammed Siniora for his "defeatist policy with the [Israeli] enemy" after accusing the former prime minister of illegally signing an

agreement with Cyprus which resulted in granting 850 square kilometers of territorial waters, and any oil or gas resources therein, to Israel.

Conspicuously absent from their rejoinder was any defense against the accusation of having given Israel territory and resources
Siniora and Future Bloc MP Ammar Houry responded on Twitter by criticizing Hezbollah over “the predicament it has gotten itself into in Syria, where it is fighting on the side of Bashar al-Assad’s regime,” and for “launching an Iranian drone over Israel, which may drag Lebanon into a situation desired by the enemy.”

Conspicuously absent from their rejoinder was any defense against the accusation of having given Israel territory and resources that could have been claimed by Lebanon. Legally, “territorial waters” only extend 12 nautical miles (22 km) off the coast, but countries can claim up to 200 nautical miles (370 km) offshore as an “exclusive economic zone.” This area is often referred to informally as territorial waters, in the sense that a given state exercises exclusive economic rights over it.

Israeli and Lebanese politicians have been trading threats in the press [2] for several years over the rights to huge natural gas fields [3] the Israelis are developing that appear to extend into Cypriot and Lebanese territory. The US Geological Survey estimates [4] 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil are trapped beneath the Eastern Mediterranean region known as the Levant Basin Province.

As warring states, Lebanon and Israel cannot negotiate directly to demarcate their respective exclusive economic zones, but Siniora’s premature agreement with the Cypriots allowed them to go ahead and sign agreements with Tel Aviv, thus creating a de facto border and freeing Israel to exploit the gas and oil fields while paying Cyprus a cut in return for drilling rights.

On 17 January 2007, the Siniora government signed an agreement with the government of Cyprus recognizing a coordinate known as “Point 1” as the offshore tripartite point to mark the border between Lebanon, Cyprus and Israel.

This was despite the fact that a Lebanese committee of experts had not yet finished their own report taking into account geography, potential resources and the rights granted Lebanon by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The committee released its findings on 28 December 2008, adopting “Point 23” as the tripartite point to be included in the Petroleum Sector Management Law. Siniora’s second government endorsed this report on 13 May 2009, despite having already signed an agreement with Cyprus adopting “Point 1.”

The coordinate dubbed “Point 23” is located beyond an islet called in Hebrew “Tekhelet.” If this islet is not officially designated an island, it can be overlooked and the borders can be expanded, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The difference between the two coordinates would cost Lebanon up to 850 square kilometers. Siniora later claimed that “Point 1” was intended as a “compromise point” and thus ostensibly temporary. Unfortunately, no one seems to have informed the Cypriots, who went on to sign their own agreements with the Israeli government.

Sources within the March 8 coalition told *Al-Akhbar* that under the government of Saad Hariri, the Future Movement sought to pass a bill during a session of the parliamentary Public Works

Committee to discuss the exclusive economic zone which would ratify the agreement with the Cypriot government on the basis of “Point 1” as the tripartite point.

Complicating the matter is the fact that when Siniora signed the agreement, the opposition at the time, led by Hezbollah, had already pulled out of the government and no longer recognized its legitimacy.

The March 8 sources added that Siniora had relied on antiquated maps prepared by the British Royal Navy in drafting the agreement in question. While these maps do not differ greatly from those used by the Lebanese committee, the sources emphasized “the complacency shown by Siniora in forfeiting Lebanese territories unlawfully, giving the Israeli enemy a pretext to advance and consider the area between points 1 and 23 a part of its own exclusive economic zone.”

The sources also confirmed that during a visit he made to Cyprus, Speaker Nabih Berri found that the Cypriots thought the matter concluded and were adamant that “Point 1” was indeed the agreed upon tripartite point. The Cypriots have since expressed willingness to negotiate over the matter, but it is unclear how these changes would affect existing agreements between Israel and Cyprus over oil and gas extraction.

Sources close to Siniora have defended the former PM claiming that “this is what we did with the Syrians in the North,”

Siniora’s public acknowledgement of having forfeited, intentionally or not, a large part of Lebanese territorial waters and the resources they may contain to the Israeli enemy, may be less crude than his indirect justification of this move.

Sources close to Siniora have defended the former PM claiming that “this is what we did with the Syrians in the North,” as though ceding part of Lebanon’s exclusive economic zone to the Syrian government can justify doing the same with Israel. If true, instead of seeking to correct the mistake in the North, Siniora’s government merely replicated it in the South.

The Lebanese-Cypriot agreement has caused a crisis that will not be easily resolved, as this would require the abrogation of the agreement between Nicosia and Tel Aviv, which has been ratified by the parliaments of both countries and was endorsed by the United Nations.

“The agreement between Lebanon and Cyprus is null and void because the Lebanese side that signed it had its official capacity revoked,” said a Hezbollah source, referring to the Resistance’s position that the government at the time was unconstitutional. “The sea, like land, is a one hundred percent legitimate Lebanese right, and we shall defend them with all our strength.”

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

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