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Israel-Lebanon agreement on the delineation of the maritime border

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On 27 October at the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) headquarters in Naqoura, representatives of Israel and Lebanon handed over concurring statements to the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon on the coordinates of the Israeli-Lebanese maritime border the Mediterranean Sea. The finalisation of the procedure was made possible by Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid signing declarations earlier in the day which accepted the US proposal for an agreement presented on 12 October. These declarations were handed over in Naqoura to the US negotiator, State Department Senior Energy Security Advisor Amos Hochstein.

Commentary

- Israel and Lebanon formally remain at war and the agreement, coming after a decade of US mediation over some 860 square kilometres of sea, is not strictly an Israeli-Lebanese agreement and does not mark the establishment of diplomatic relations. The delegations did not have direct contact during the Naqoura ceremony. The 1949 armistice line still serves as the land border. However, by concluding the agreement, Lebanon has de facto recognised Israel's existence, which is a break in the previous policy of boycotts.
- The agreement stabilises the security situation on Israel's northern border and at least temporarily deflects the threat that the Lebanese terrorist organisation Hezbollah would shell a production platform at the Karish offshore gas field, which is located close to the border. This threat has been repeated regularly since a floating installation was anchored at the field in June. Beirut's acceptance of the so-called 'maritime buoy line' is also crucial. The buoys were deployed along the initial 5km off the shore by the Israeli navy during the withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. The line is located slightly north of the rest of the maritime border (which in turn is in line with Beirut's demands) and its location prevents the Lebanese side from observing Israeli territory. The need to finalise the agreement quickly, despite the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1 November, was stressed by the Israeli military and special services, pointing to tensions in relations with Hezbollah and instability in Lebanon.
- The signing of the agreement unlocks the possibility of exploration and exploitation of new gas fields. Although Jerusalem did not officially make the start of gas production from the Karish field (which has been in preparation since June) dependent on the success of the negotiations, the compromise allowed Energean PLC to safely start

production (26 October). The increase in production will give Israel a surplus of gas, which it can export to the European Union via Egyptian liquefaction stations (with an initial export potential of 2–5 bcm per year). In connection with the agreement, Israel also reached a memorandum of understanding with the French company TotalEnergies. TotalEnergies holds a concession from the Lebanese government to produce from the Qana field, located on both sides of the border and the memorandum regards Israeli participation in profits from production at the field. The border agreement simultaneously gives Lebanon the exclusive right to explore and extract from Qana. TotalEnergies has been holding up work due to the border dispute and is now under pressure from the Lebanese authorities to determine as soon as possible whether the field contains a viable amount of gas to be exploited. Tenders are also open until 15 December for exploration licences for eight as yet untested blocks in Lebanese waters, two of which are located near the border with Israel.

- The agreement strengthens the regional position of the USA (and President Joe Biden personally) and its European allies, especially France, whose diplomacy supported the negotiations. In turn, it weakens the influence of Iran (Hezbollah's patron and supplier of energy resources to Lebanon) and Russia (the Novatek company announced in August that it would withdraw from its stake in Lebanese deposits, which took place on 22 October). Hezbollah, whose raison d'être is to fight Israel, is increasingly being blamed for Lebanon's situation and has come to terms with the need for a deal. Lebanon's own gas resources would be crucial to a Lebanese economy in deep decline (electricity, for example, is supplied to residents for two hours a day). The implementation of the agreement could mean an influx of aid and investment from the West into Lebanon, although these will still be conditional on reforms, which are blocked by the Lebanese political crisis. It will also favour cooperation between Beirut and the pro-Western Arab states. It could result, for example, in the launch of gas exports from Egypt to Lebanon via the so-called Arab Gas Pipeline or in Lebanon joining the work of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. The members of this Forum are: Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan, Palestine; the US, the EU and the World Bank are observers.
- The exploitation of Lebanese deposits (and thus the establishment of gas platforms on both sides of the border), the stabilisation of the political situation and the weakening of Iranian influence in Lebanon, and also the consolidation of regional energy cooperation under Western auspices would create a new equilibrium to enhance security and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. This would be of fundamental importance for Israel, especially given the hostility of Hezbollah, its arsenal of precision missiles and also growing Iranian aggression. However, the implementation of the agreement and the resulting opportunities could be jeopardised: militarily by the unpredictability of Hezbollah, politically by a protracted political crisis in both countries, and economically by the possibility that commercial gas deposits are not found in the Qana field.