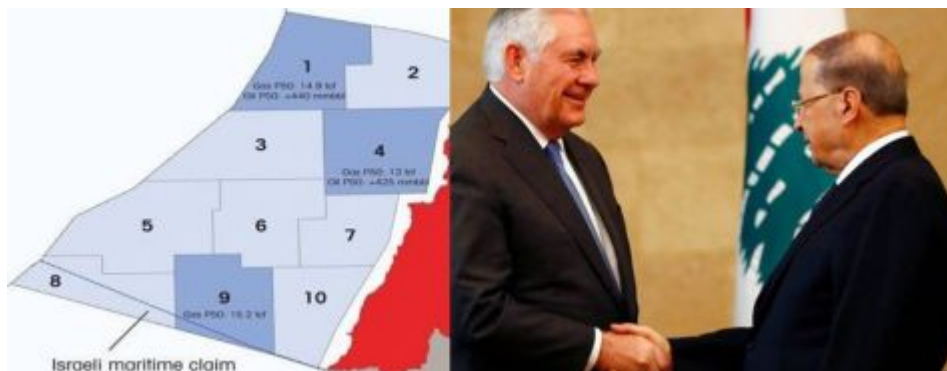


The Israel-Lebanese oil dispute – part of US-Russian Mid-East energy battle

Description



via [debkafile](#)

Instead of accepting a US-brokered deal for Block 9, Hizballah and Iran make Israel's offshore gas and oil fields a fourth war front.

When six years ago, the US tried to mediate the dispute over Block 9, which straddles the maritime waters of Lebanon and Israel (offering 60 percent to Lebanon; 40 percent to Israel), Russia, Iran and Hizballah had not yet intervened militarily in that early stage of the Syrian civil war. At the time, too, the US controlled Middle East energy markets and Israel cherished the belief that its offshore gas and oil fields were rich enough to supply Europe's annual consumption and make the Jewish state a Middle East energy power.

But Beirut flatly rejected the US compromise then – just as it does now, except that, today, Lebanon speaks with a stronger and more aggressive voice, backed since then by Hizballah's and Iran's victories in the Syrian war arena.

Israel, for its part, missed the train. Major international energy firms have since drawn away from investing in the development of Israel's Mediterranean gas and oil fields, and it has fallen back on supplying its own needs and sales to neighbors, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians. Most of all, Israel has reason to rue its rejection of Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated offer to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for Russian state firms to develop those fields, finance a pipeline network to Europe and provide security for the project. Putin maintained that neither Iran nor Hizballah would venture to attack rigs and pipelines under Russian ownership and protection. This rationale worked effectively in October 2017, when Iraqi and Shiite militia forces seized the oil city of Kirkuk from the semiautonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, while refraining thus far from laying hands on the oil fields supplying Turkey, because the Kurds had earlier handed them over to the Russian Rosneft energy giant.

Netanyahu spurned Putin's proposition at the time for the sake of Israel's close ties with Washington.

In the present geo-strategic circumstances, DEBKAF's military and intelligence sources are strongly skeptical of the chances of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Acting Undersecretary David Satterfield pulling off their bid to broker a deal between Lebanon and Israel over Block 9. Even if a compromise is negotiated, Beirut will flout it before the ink is dry, just as it did UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which prohibited Hizballah from rearming after its 2006 war with Israel or positioning armed strength in South Lebanon.

Five compelling impediments stand in the way of the US mediation bid:

1. The Block 9 issue has evolved from the latest turn in the Syrian war into part and parcel of a broader test: US controls the oil fields and gas plants of eastern Syria which the US-backed SDF seized from ISIS last year, including the Conoco natural gas facility. Against this, Iran, Hizballah and Syria are in position for holding Israel's Mediterranean oil and gas facilities hostage.
2. A resolution of this impasse is contingent on the US and Russia reaching understandings on Syria. In their absence, US forces on Feb. 7, for the first time attacked Russian "mercenaries" helping Syrian and pro-Iranian attempting to cross the Euphrates and seize control of the Tabiyeh oil fields on the eastern bank; and Moscow, for its part, will not lift a finger to stop the Iranian Al Qods commander, Qassem Soleimani, or Hizballah's chief, Hassan Nasrallah, from continuing to threaten Israel's offshore rigs. Nasrallah said explicitly on Friday, Feb. 16: The region has entered "the battle of oil and gas. No one should look at this as a separate dispute," he said. If the Lebanese Defense Council so decides, we [Hezbollah] are ready to disable Israel's offshore gas installations in a couple of hours."
3. The Israeli-Lebanese dispute is not the only energy-related quarrel in the region, which Secretary Tillerson is trying to tackle. For months he has been trying without success to settle the feud which oil-rich Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt are fighting with Qatar. Just as the former is tangled up in the Syrian crisis, the latter is caught up in the challenge the US and Saudi Arabia is presenting to Iran's bid for control of the Red Sea and determination of the outcome of the Yemen war.
4. The Trump administration's perception of Lebanon's government and military structures is unrealistic. Its officials appear to believe that they are not fully under Iranian and Hizballah control and can still be rescued from those Shiite-imperialistic claws. Washington therefore continues to remit arms and funds to Beirut, although Hizballah takes the first cut.

For Israel, the dispute over Block 9 is a major handicap for its strategic position against its foes. Until now, Israel had to contend with three belligerent Iranian-Hizballah fronts building up from Quneitra on the Syrian Golan, southern Syria and southern Lebanon. Hizballah's threat to its offshore gas and oil fields has added a fourth.