**WHY ISRAEL NEEDS TO UTILIZE THE MARITIME BOUNDARY DISPUTE WITH LEBANON TO ITS ADVANTAGE WITH REGARDS TO REDUCING HEZBOLLAH’S CAPABILITY**

A. **Main Recommendation.** Israel should concede most territorial rights to the maritime zone currently disputed by Lebanon, in exchange for action by the Lebanese government against Hezbollah.

**Bottom Line.** Unless Israel wants to continue to pursue a policy of primarily military action as the solution to the Hezbollah problem, Israel will need to gain Lebanese government support in a meaningful way. The use of significant economic leverage should gain the support of the Lebanese government, as well as backing and action from the key European players. Currently, the disputed maritime zone, and the natural gas that may exist within it, is the most significant economic bargaining chip possessed by either nation.

B. **Background.** The security situation in the north is currently characterized by several factors: a. an unstated deterrence policy by both the Israeli government and Hezbollah leadership, b. Hezbollah continues to build material, personnel, and governance strength in the southern one-third of Lebanon, c. the Hezbollah influence and territory has now moved in southern Syria, d. as discovered during Operation NORTHERN SHIELD, UNIFILs ability to reduce Hezbollah’s military gains has been unsuccessful, e. technological and training enhancements are now being directly supported by Iran via the Quds force, and these enhancements will shift the kinetic balance of power with the consolidation of medium-range, precision-guided munitions in southern Lebanon and Syria.

 Politically the situation has evolved slightly over the last decade and specifically within the last few years. Israel maintains its deterrence policy, utilizing limited covert actions and Israeli border security enhancements, while publically stating that any significant action within southern Lebanon will be met with overwhelming force. Next, Israel is in a state of indecision with regards to holding the Government of Lebanon (GoL) accountable for the actions of militia forces along the Israeli border. Recently, Hezbollah has gained political legitimacy with its largest gains made within the Lebanese parliament. This change in Lebanese power balance has tied Hezbollah closer to the elected government, and the two often act as one.

 Economically, the situation has changed significantly in the last two decades, and is at a critical point in the last few years. The discovery of large natural gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean Sea have caused all of the nations involved to legally demarcate their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and to strike deals with one another for rights of exploration and refinement. However, Israel and Lebanon have come into conflict with regards to the line that separates the two nations’ EEZs, with each side claiming exploratory rights in the area. Israel is not a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and as such is using various diplomatic mechanisms to resolve the conflict. The first mediator, Frederic Hof (United States) presented a plan in May 2012 creating a provisional but legally binding maritime separation line and a buffer zone with no petroleum activities. According to media reports, it acknowledged that around 500 km2 of the disputed area belong to Lebanon. This was not voted upon by Lebanon, who essentially delayed hoping for a better outcome. The Trump administration had other priorities and didn’t actively involve itself on the subject until lately. The U.S. appeared to be dusting off a proposal based on the Hof plan and Beirut was not thrilled. Lebanon prefers to involve the U.N. and made a counter-proposal to demarcate the border via a trilateral committee including Lebanese, Israeli and U.N. representatives in addition to experts and American diplomats. A procedure that is similar to the one used in 2000 to demarcate the land border known as the Blue Line. The offshore extension is now being referred to as the White Line. But both the U.S. and Israel prefer to keep any U.N. role minimal.[[1]](#footnote-1)

[[2]](#footnote-2)

C. **Fundamental Considerations of Israel.** Reasons that Israel should leverage the maritime EEZ to force the GoL to confront Hezbollah:

1. Current force-based deterrence policies are allowing for the build up and territorial expansion of Hezbollah in Lebanon.
2. Hezbollah will continue to gain political clout within GoL as election cycles continue, causing a situation where the nation takes on the form of Hezbollah, and/or Hezbollah becomes the major maritime negotiator with the world.

(c) As of 2014, Israel produced over 7.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) of [natural gas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_gas) a year.Israel had 199 billion cubic meters (cu m) of proven reserves of natural gas as of the start of 2016.[[3]](#footnote-3)This total is enough to continue to domestic supply for over 20 years while still exporting a huge amount for great profit. The addition of possible discoveries within the disputed territories may be insignificant to Israel given the total volume.

(d) GoL will be made to see that the single largest chance of economic expansion and success is in the sea, and as such the addition of these resources will expand GoL legitimacy domestically and will enhance quality of life.

(e) The GoL can be made to confront Hezbollah in exchange for the rights to these resources.

(f) European power can be brought to bear to assist GoL versus Hezbollah (across the DIME spectrum), as Europe has clearly shown its desire to explore and import gas fields in the Mediterranean.

(g) The United States can be seen as chief mediator for the dispute, thereby tying it to the conflict resolution in the North and giving a win to the United States with regards to regaining some power within Middle East diplomacy.

(h) Israel will maintain the option to rescind the deal should GoL not accomplish stated milestones.

D. **Options for Action.**

(a) Israel directly negotiates with GoL, stating clear objectives and milestones, delineating maritime EEZ boundaries, mentioning Israel options should GoL not achieve the desired goals, and looking for options of linking the maritime efforts of both nations with regards to gas usage and export.

(b) Israel takes a similar course, but works through the United States as an arbitrator.

(c) Israel takes a similar course, but works through the European Union or United Nations (possibly via the United States).

(d) Israel maintains its claim on the disputed EEZ, and continues to confront Hezbollah militarily with mutually agreed deterrence.

E. **Chosen Course of Action**. In order to delay and disrupt the slow build up of Hezbollah in the north, Israel, via the United States, concedes significant portions of the disputed EEZ with GoL, in exchange for quantifiable actions by GoL against Hezbollah.

F. **Conclusion.**  With the security and political situation in the north slowly shifting in favor of Hezbollah, Israel needs to take action to alter the course of events. This should be done by tying GoL to the security situation vis-à-vis Hezbollah, and trading possible gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea to military and political action (ideally supported by Europe) by GoL against Hezbollah.

**Bibliography**

The Maritime Border Dispute Between Israel and Lebanon Explained; Middle East Strategic Perspectives; March 5, 2018.

# <https://www.mesp.me/2018/03/05/maritime-border-dispute-lebanon-israel-explained/>

# <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_gas_in_Israel>

# Oceans and the Law of the Sea; United Nations.

# <http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/oceans-and-law-sea/>

# Barrier, Felicite and Ahmad, Ali. The Geopolitics of Oil and Gas Development in Lebanon; AUB Policy Institute; Jan 2018.

# <https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/policy_memos/2017-2018/20180121_geopolitics_oil_and_gas_lebanon.pdf>

# Norris, Andrew; Tablet; Block 9: Flashpoint for the Next Lebanon War. June 6th, 2018.

# <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/263356/block-9-flashpoint-for-the-next-lebanon-war>

1. https://www.mesp.me/2018/03/05/maritime-border-dispute-lebanon-israel-explained/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.google.com/search?q=israel+lebanon+maritime+border+dispute+map&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwim577JlvzfAhWSmbQKHSjGCdYQ\_AUIDigB&biw=1171&bih=595#imgrc=QtSnGiC-F7HTwM: [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural\_gas\_in\_Israel [↑](#footnote-ref-3)