

THE ISRAELI-LEBANESE MARITIME BORDER DEAL FOR ENERGY SECURITY: A LIBERAL INTERNATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, the relationship between the State of Israel and the Republic of Lebanon has been far from peaceful, with occasional disputes, and even wars, between the two nations. Most recently, the disagreement about the location of their common maritime border in the Eastern Mediterranean has been the centre of conflict between the neighbouring countries. The disputed territory of 860 km² contains natural hydrocarbon resources in the form of gas and oil, which both countries hope to make use of to improve their respective economic situations. In the present paper, the international relations theory of liberal internationalism is applied to further examine Lebanon's and Israel's motives in the matter. The signing of their maritime border deal on October 27th, 2022, is an example of conflict resolution in the spirit of liberalism: conflict resolution through negotiation, cooperation and interdependence, without the use of military force. Furthermore, the paper explains that a critical additional factor surfaced, making the agreement possible. In a quickly changing geo-strategic environment for both countries, achieving increased energy security and exporting natural gas suddenly became not only possible, but progressively probable. The results are, among other benefits, mutual economic advantage, a better basis for long-lasting peace and prosperity, as well as stability in the region. The agreement, brokered by third-party negotiators, represents a significant breakthrough in the shared history between the two countries, which might pave the way towards a stronger relationship in the years to come.

Keywords: *liberal internationalism, energy security, conflict resolution, Israel, Lebanon*

INTRODUCTION

Since the deteriorating relations with Russia, the Eastern Mediterranean region has become vital for the European Union's (EU) energy security, which certainly affects its political and strategic decisions (Tutar et al., 2021: 126). In 2007, the EU saw a disruption in its energy access caused by Russia, which showed the dangers of energy dependence (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 122) on only one supplier. The EU thus hopes to prevent such an energy crisis by encouraging the establishment of the so-called Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) pipeline, running through Cyprus, Greece and Italy, and connecting Israel's hydrocarbon exports directly with the EU (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 126). However, Israel's neighbour state, the Republic of Lebanon, has never formally recognised the State of Israel since its founding in 1948 (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022), and their relationship can be considered unstable and unpredictable (Abadi, 2020: 90). The liberal internationalist perspective on international relations holds that peace and cooperation between neighbouring states are not only achievable but desirable (McGlinchey & Gold, 2022), as they provide stability. However, over the past eight decades, there have been no long-lasting periods of peace between these two countries (Omar, 2022), which complicates the issue of energy security in the region.

The signing of the maritime border agreement by the Prime Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid, and the then-President of Lebanon, Michael Aoun, is an important step toward improving the relations between Israel and Lebanon (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022). The act was presented to the United States of America (US) and the United Nations (UN) mediators on October 27,

2022, at the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) headquarters in the Lebanese town of Naqoura (Guterres, 2022). Some have claimed the deal can be interpreted as Lebanon's de-facto recognition of Israel. However, President Aoun dismissed this, stating the agreement does not equal a peace agreement, as Lebanon still sees itself at war with Israel (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022).

Even though the details of the agreement have not been released (Gritten, 2022), it was announced that the disputed area of 860 square kilometres in the Eastern Mediterranean, containing the Karish and Qana gas fields (Sabaghi, 2022), is now divided by the so-called Line 23 (Mizrahi, 2022), allowing both countries to take advantage of the oil and gas resources in the region (Hussain, 2022). This compromise sets an example for peaceful conflict resolution in the form of cooperation, which, according to liberal internationalism, can be achieved when the interests of two or more countries overlap (Tuschhoff, 2015: 40).

Hence, liberal ideals, such as mutual interest in energy, proved to be a valuable source for peaceful negotiation between the Republic of Lebanon and the State of Israel. In other words, the increasing urgency to secure oil and gas from the Eastern Mediterranean is a significant contributor to the success of the maritime border deal. This paper will examine the shift from conflict to cooperation between Israel and Lebanon by analysing how mutual interest in preserving energy security led to the maritime border agreement. To do so, it will discuss the role of cooperation and interdependence in conflict resolution, as well as the importance of the UN and EU involvement in effectively negotiating the maritime deal after years of tensions between the two states on the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean.

US AND UN NAVIGATING THE ENERGY SECURITY ISSUE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

With a long history of conflict, and the dire need for the hydrocarbon resources in the disputed area on both sides, the disagreement over Israel's and Lebanon's common maritime border in the Eastern Mediterranean had the potential to escalate quickly. In order to reach long-lasting peace and resolve the issue of the maritime border, interdependence, cooperation and third-party negotiators are of utmost importance. In this case, increased interdependence and cooperation through mutual dependence on natural hydrogen resources in the Eastern Mediterranean are hoped to bring stability to the region, as well as economic stability and prospects of exporting said resources to the EU. However, third-party negotiators like the UN and US had to step in: After the submission of the coordinates of their respective maritime exclusive economic zones (EEZ), in which a country possesses sovereign rights to make use of the resources found there (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 126), to the UN in 2009, Israel and Lebanon were not able to find a consensus on the issue. As a result, the UN stepped in to help mediate the disagreement (LOGI Energy, 2021). In 2010, the Leviathan gas field was discovered (Aboultaif, 2016: 289), complicating the political and security landscape in the region (Aoudé, 2019: 95). The exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean now increasingly grew into a crucial geopolitical issue (Salameh & Chedid, 2020: 1). In the same year, Israel signed an EEZ agreement with Cyprus; in this proposal, Israel's northern maritime border overlapped with Lebanon's southern one – an act which Lebanon considered an attack on its sovereign rights over the affected territory, and the conflict was in danger of escalating once again. The EU and US, in a rapidly changing security environment, wanted to avoid military escalation in the already fragile region of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The first two separate proposals of Israel and Lebanon concerning their maritime borders were submitted in 2011, with Line 1 and Line 23 (for a geographic overview of the area, see Nakhle, 2023), being declared by Israel and Lebanon, respectively. While Line 1 was situated further to the north, guaranteeing more territory to Israel, Line 23, located more southwards, provided territorial advantages to Lebanon (Sabaghi, 2022). Both lines were rejected by the parties, which now prompted US diplomats to offer to step in to mediate the dispute and avoid conflict cooperation with the UN (LOGI Energy, 2021). In 2012, Lebanon changed its proposed maritime border from Line 23 to 29, claiming more territory than before, with the new suggested Lebanese EEZ including large parts of the Qana and Karish gas fields.

In the liberal internationalist view of international relations, international organisations and third-party negotiators are of utmost importance in world politics, as they can help to build confidence and trust and provide security among nations (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013:112). In 1949, the UN had also intervened, to settle a conflict between Israel and Lebanon (MEMO, 2022). After receiving the respective border proposals from both states in the second half of 2010, the UN stepped in early in the maritime border dispute, as there were hopes that a possible agreement would serve as a security-building measure that could promote stability in the region (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022). Being the first international actor entering the negotiations, the UN had a crucial role in the further development of the issue. On the basis of the UN involvement, US negotiators also played an important role in resolving the conflict: Amos Hochstein, US diplomat, was involved in negotiations that resulted in Lebanon withdrawing its claim to Line 29 and returning to its original demand, Line 23 (Sabaghi, 2022). The return to the claim of Line 23 was the cornerstone of the maritime border deal, made possible by third-party negotiators: the US and the UN held key roles in the negotiation process

(Mizrahi, 2022), and the final deal was also encouraged by the EU. However, in this case, diplomacy was based on the UN's involvement, which enabled EU and US foreign policies concerning the issue in the first place, making the deal possible.

Lebanon recognized that the US delegation played a major role in finding a solution allowing both sides to benefit from the natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean (Abadi, 2020: 107). Lowering tensions by means of diplomacy was seen as a primary objective in the region (Ellinas, 2022: 12). New issues, like Covid-19 and Lebanon's crippling energy crisis, created an urgent need to proceed with negotiations, which were launched into a new round when Amos Hochstein, a US diplomat, was appointed to the maritime border dispute. Hochstein came to Lebanon in February 2022, around the same time as Russia invaded Ukraine. This war emphasised once again the global need for natural gas resources from the Eastern Mediterranean (Sobelman, 2023: 5), with the EU now desperately looking for gas suppliers other than Russia. Brussels failed to take immediate and credible action against Moscow's transgressions of international law following its Ukrainian invasion due to the EU Member states's energy dependence on Russia (Toraman, 2022:17), which now used its energy resources as leverage against the EU (Tutar et al., 2022: 388). The EU and US now had an urgent interest in finalising the maritime border deal between Israel and Lebanon in order to start exporting gas resources to Europe from the Eastern Mediterranean and decrease European dependence on Russian gas, which, however backed by different motives, was supported by the UN.

Furthermore, with Israel starting to send drilling vessels to its section of the gas fields and pressing forward on gas exports (El Chami, 2022: 1) in June of 2022, Hezbollah, a Lebanese militia supported by Iran (Humud, 2023: 1), saw these actions as a threat to resources that rightfully belonged to Lebanon.

Contrary to the precepts of liberal internationalism, Hezbollah now threatened to escalate the Israeli-Lebanese conflict with military means. In recognising that the current geopolitical situation had made the US, EU and Israel vulnerable to pressure, the militant group, through the threat of violence, pushed diplomacy forward (Sobelman, 2023: 16), as to avoid conflict by the use of diplomatic means.

With all parties being aware of the immediate urgency of reaching a deal, Lebanon abandoned its claim to Line 29. Negotiations concluded in October 2022 with the signing of the maritime border deal, in which the two neighbours agreed on Line 23 as their official demarcation line. However, in the years to come, US and UN involvement may still be crucial in maintaining peace in the region and normalising the relations between Israel and Lebanon, which, from Lebanon's perspective, are technically still at war with each other (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022).

INTERDEPENDENCE AND COOPERATION FOR STABILITY?

The desire to make use of hydrocarbon resources in the disputed area was certainly present in both countries (Abadi, 2020: 107), and also of crucial interest for the EU. However, with no normalised diplomatic relations between Israel and Lebanon, an increasingly dangerous geopolitical situation (Silverman, 2023: 1) and Lebanon refusing to officially recognise Israel by means of an agreement (Aoudé, 2019: 104), the negotiations came to a halt, resulting in a stalemate. With no ongoing diplomatic talks about the maritime demarcation line, the issue threatened to attract third parties trying to exploit the situation (Aboultaif, 2016, : 300).

As the pressure to resolve the situation increased with each passing year, Israel finally decided to take action in January 2020 by signing an agreement with Cyprus and Greece, concerning the construction of the EastMed pipeline (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 129), trying to use cooperation, as seen in liberal

internationalism, with partners other than Lebanon. The goal of this agreement was to increase Israel's energy security and enable gas exports to the EU without the need to cooperate with Lebanon. The pipeline was seen as a way for Israel to directly export hydrocarbon resources to the EU (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 126); however, it could also easily be politicised and become the target of military confrontations in the troubled region around the Eastern Mediterranean (Badarin & Schumacher, 2022: 122). Meanwhile, when the Covid-19 pandemic began spreading across the globe in early 2020, Lebanon's energy sector saw a rapid deterioration which, due to the unresolved demarcation line, could not be remedied by new oil drilling ventures (Ellinas, 2022: 10). In June of the same year, Israel approved the decision to drill for oil next to Block 9 (Ellinas, 2022: 15), part of an oil field in the disputed area, which was already one of the main points of contention in previous years (Al-Kassim, 2019).

According to liberal internationalism, state power should be, amongst other factors, measured by the strength of its economy, which was threatened in both countries due to Covid-19, with Lebanon being hit especially hard by an energy crisis. Furthermore, countries can and do cooperate to achieve mutual benefits (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 106). In the case of the Israeli-Lebanese maritime deal, both countries stood to gain important economic opportunities through the new possibility of exploiting the Karish and Qana gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022), which is part of Israel's plan to increase its hydrocarbon exports (Zaken, 2022). Lebanon, currently facing a severe economic and energy crisis (Gebeily & Lubell, 2022) and political instability, hoped to improve its overall situation through the agreement (Hussain, 2022). Cooperating and agreeing on Line 23 enabled both countries to make use of the natural resources in the region and to rally their respective economies, thus confirming the theorem of international cooperation in liberal internationalism, according to which one of the key goals of countries engaging in diplomatic relations is

to benefit economically from such cooperation (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 117).

Furthermore, the deal also strengthens the interdependence between Lebanon and Israel, tying the two countries closer together, and providing stability through mutual dependence on natural gas resources. In international relations, interdependence, for instance, through economic ties, is essential to avoid conflict and maintain peace (Tanious, 2018: 43). By dividing the Qana gas field through Line 23, Israel and Lebanon now share the privilege of exploiting the natural hydrocarbon resources in the territory (Hussain, 2022). The agreement allows both countries to jointly develop and profit from the gas and oil deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean rather than turning them into a source of conflict. Besides the gas fields no longer being a source of dispute between the two countries, an increased economic interdependence between these neighbours also reduces the chances of future conflicts taking place (Tanious, 2018: 52).

THE CRITICAL FACTOR: INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF ENERGY SECURITY FOR BOTH PARTIES

After the Leviathan gas field was discovered in 2010, it was certain that the resulting financial and energy security benefits for both Israel and Lebanon could be extensive (Waelisch, 2011: 2). However, the urgent need for gas in both states made negotiations and finding a compromise challenging (Aboultaif, 2016: 300). States generally seek to increase their energy security and achieve uninterrupted energy access (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 121) by reducing their dependency on one single supplier and increasing the number of their sources. Energy is a vital tool in foreign policy (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 122). This became apparent when the global events from 2020 to 2022, such as Covid-19, Lebanon's energy crisis and most recently Russia's unprecedented attack on Ukraine, were reflected in

the increasingly tense situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. With the new geopolitical situation in place, the EU urgently needed to move forward on natural gas suppliers other than Russia - such as the countries on the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Lebanon, still an importer of gas and currently possessing very limited economic resources, hoped to follow Israel's example and export energy to the EU in the near future (Salameh & Chadid, 2020: 2-3). Furthermore, Lebanon's main strategic goal was to find a way out of its severe economic crisis by increasing its energy security and exploiting hydrocarbon resources (El Chami, 2022: 2). For Israel, on the other hand, natural gas exploitation was important for its domestic as well as export market, with export currently being difficult due to the ongoing tensions with its neighbouring states (Dietl, 2020: 377). Nevertheless, in light of the EU's desire to diversify its energy suppliers, the prospects of supplying EU markets with its hydrocarbon resources encouraged Israel to pursue its role as an international energy exporter (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 124). Connecting the pursuit of increased energy security in Israel and Lebanon is the EU's dependence on other countries, as its energy resources are very limited given the size of its demand (Tutar et al., 2021: 339).

The EU member states, who saw a threat to their own energy security in early 2022 when Russia, the EU's most significant energy supplier (Toraman, 2022:16), attacked Ukraine, now urgently had to find other energy sources to avoid an imminent energy crisis. This led to an unprecedented interest in the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean on the part of the EU, which was now hoping to import natural gas from this region, and was eager to see a quick resolution of the conflict over the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon, so exports could start as soon as possible.

Those two factors, firstly the urgency to achieve energy security and an improved economic situation in Lebanon and Israel, and secondly, the EU's pressing requirement to secure energy suppliers other than Russia, coming together for the first time from 2020 to 2022, unblocked the prevailing stalemate and enabled all parties to move forward with the maritime border deal. The factors demonstrated the need to effectively coordinate oil and gas supply for Lebanon, Israel and the EU, and to overcome the conflictual relationship between Beirut and Tel Aviv, which ultimately resulted in the resolution of the maritime border dispute between the two neighbours. The countries on the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean now aimed to collaborate with the EU to develop joint energy strategies from which they could all benefit financially and achieve increased energy security (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 122-123).

CONCLUSION

From a liberal internationalist perspective, the Israeli-Lebanese maritime border deal can be rationalised by the overall goal of promoting peace and stability between these two states and resolving the conflict opposing them by means other than physical confrontation via military force. Interdependence, cooperation and third-party negotiators in times of conflict are necessary to reach those goals – which Israel and Lebanon came one step closer to by signing their maritime border deal in October 2022. The energy resources discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean could thus represent a turning point in the global energy supply chain (Tutar et al., 2021: 334), with energy security now becoming a critical issue in countries' strategic security considerations (Koktsidis et al., 2021: 121). The EU hopes to diversify its energy portfolio by importing gas from Israel via the EastMed pipeline.

This paper has demonstrated that the crucial factor for overcoming the reservations and concluding a deal between these two states, regarding their

maritime border, was their shared desire for increased energy security. The discovery of offshore gas fields gave both Israel and Lebanon the possibility not only to achieve energy self-sufficiency but to become exporters of gas to major international partners like the European Union. The critical importance of achieving energy security persuaded the two countries to overcome their long standing objections and go ahead with the signature of an agreement acceptable to both.

Overall, the Israeli-Lebanese maritime deal constitutes a pivotal factor in the relationship between these two neighbouring states, which has been difficult, to say the least, over the past decades. The negotiations concerning the maritime demarcation line may lead to an overall improved understanding between the two states (Abadi, 2020: 108), and mutual dependence on the natural resources found in the region might be able to provide stability. From the perspective of liberal internationalism, contrary to critics in both nations, peace is desirable. It can be achieved through various means – perhaps also through the deal now in effect. However, it remains to be seen whether the advent of energy security as a strategic aim for both parties will effectively contribute to actual peace between Israel and Lebanon. The need for multilateral energy trade, interdependence and cooperation persists (Tutar et al., 2021: 339), contributing to increasing global peace and reducing conflict in line with liberal internationalism. Further research may well seek to highlight how this emerging bilateral strategic relationship aims to achieve energy security for both through cooperation, by investigating whether the emergence of relative peace between these old adversaries is simply circumstantial, or actually causal, and also exploring in more depth the critical influence of third parties intervening as mediators in the conclusion of this agreement.

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