



Negotiations to Resolve the Lebanon-Israel Maritime Border Dispute over Drilling Rights and Gas Fields Continue While Israel Vows to Begin Production in Contested Areas

Earlier this week, Israeli officials vowed to begin gas production in contested areas, despite the fact that negotiations to resolve the Lebanon-Israel maritime border dispute over drilling rights and gas fields are still ongoing. While progress is being made, and some have highlighted that talks are entering the final stages, Israel has stated that production from the Karish gas field is “not connected to these negotiations and will commence without delay as soon as it is possible.” Observers have lamented this disregard and insensitivity for the ongoing negotiations, and worry that it could play a destructive role in serving to fuel tensions. U.S. officials are engaged in mediation attempts aimed at reaching an agreement to resolve the maritime border dispute, and have suggested that a deal could be finalized soon. In recent days, Lebanese officials involved in the negotiations were slated to meet with U.S. mediators in New York, as efforts towards the aim of striking an agreement continue.

Karish’s location in the Eastern-Mediterranean Sea and its untapped gas field makes it a potential location for conflict, if provocative actions are not held in check. Thus, Israel’s remarks earlier this week threaten to raise tensions and come at a very sensitive time while efforts are being made to address the dispute. Hezbollah officials in Lebanon have expressed that “as long as extraction has not started, there is a chance for solutions” regarding the issue. As a result, Israel’s comments risk derailing the negotiation process and are not diplomatically appropriate for a matter that is still ongoing. Israel set up a gas rig at Karish back in June, but Lebanon insists that this is in disputed waters. Over the preceding months, Hezbollah has issued multiple warnings to Israel to not start production without a deal in place, while Israel has responded by stating that Lebanon would “pay the price” for any Hezbollah attacks.

Negotiations to resolve the longstanding Lebanon-Israel maritime border dispute have been taking place on and off since 2011. Lebanon has been steadfast that Karish is in disputed waters and thus Israel cannot set up their gas rig there, while Israel claims that the area is within its “economic waters.” Both see the issue as a defense of their rights to drilling and economic benefits. After Israel brought a production vessel into the Karish gas field several months ago despite the unresolved negotiations, Hezbollah responded by launching unarmed drones towards the area. Karish is minimal in terms of global supply but represents a significant economic boon for Israel and Lebanon, the latter of which in particular is currently suffering from an economic crisis which could be slightly alleviated by the gain that oil production could potentially supply. For Israel, gas production has been up by over 20% so far this year as a result of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The disputed Karish field is estimated to hold as much as 2-3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 44 million barrels of liquid.

Any provocative actions by either side could spark an outbreak of conflict, and as such, now more than ever, observers have pointed out the importance of addressing the maritime border dispute and expressed a sense of urgency to get a deal finalized as soon as possible. Some have speculated that a potential compromise could call for a border running in the north of Israel’s portion of Karish which would permit Lebanon to carry out offshore drilling at a site it is developing. Elias Bou Saab, Lebanon’s deputy parliament speaker and lead negotiator on the maritime border dispute with Israel, arrived in New York earlier this week for continued talks with mediators as officials suggest that talks have entered the final stages. Ultimately, if it is reached, an agreement would represent a notable diplomatic breakthrough.