

The Historic Lebanon-Israel Maritime Border Agreement

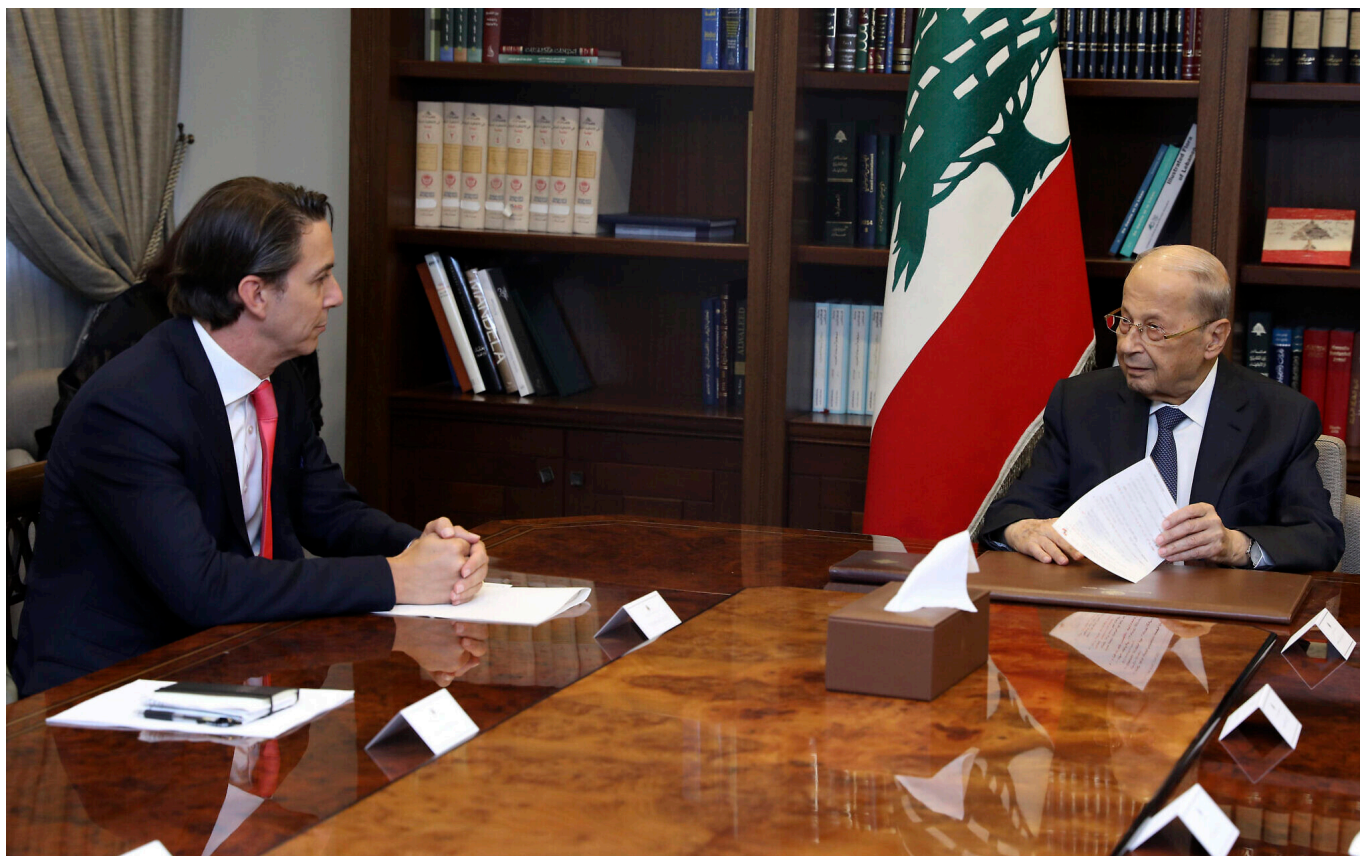
written by Ezba Walayat | October 24, 2022



Introduction

The long-disputed issue between Lebanon and Israel over the maritime border and gas fields has finally reached a landmark decision. It has been decided by both Governments to make a permanent maritime border as well as uplift the production of natural gas in the Mediterranean.

After years of stalled negotiations, the deal has been brokered by the United States Department of State's energy envoy. This is being considered as a diplomatic achievement, the Prime Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid called it a "historic agreement" as the two nations was in a state of disagreement since 1948. The Israeli Prime Minister emphasized the importance of the new accord which will not only aid the economy but will also help strengthen Israel's security and bring stability for the northern border. On the other hand, the office of Lebanese President, Michel Aoun issued a statement that the newest agreement "satisfies Lebanon, meets its demands, and preserves its rights to its natural resources." It means that it will become a key source of income for the country's crippled economy.



Flashback

The territorial dispute among Lebanon and Israel have seen many highs and lows, the conflict flared up badly in 2010, when massive deposits of gas found near the Israel's northern border. The two sides claimed the 330 square miles region covering the Qana and Karish gas fields and submitted the proposals of border claims to the United Nations in 2011. The United Nations started the round of negotiations for the division maritime border in 2020, later on it turned into a stalemate. But when the gas extraction process started in Karish field by Israel in 2017, the situation worsened as the treat of military escalation emerged significantly and gas field talks reached a knife-edge in July 2022. The recent talks of October 2022 and the finalized deal, sponsored by the United Nations and mediated by the U.S., represent a rare compromise between the rival neighbors. Lebanon and Israel has reiterated the groundbreaking agreement is made not for the normalization of ties but only for paving the way for offshore oil production that could help the economy of each country which means that Lebanon and Israel is still technically at war.



Reaction to the Maritime Border Agreement

The newly clinched deal between Lebanon and Israel has been applauded by the UN Security Council and the member states. In a press statement issued in a response to the agreement between Lebanon and Israel the members appreciated each side for ending the long running dispute of maritime boundary. The UN Security Council said “the deal is a major step, which would contribute to the stability, security, and prosperity of the region. The agreement will benefit both the countries and their people and will allow them to benefit equitably from energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean.” Meanwhile, the President of the United States, Joe Biden hailed the agreement and congratulated heads of Lebanon and Israel separately.



Analysis

The role of the United States remained prominent in an agreement between Lebanon-Israel for demarcating a disputed border in the Mediterranean that has massive deposits of oil and natural gas. Recently, the west is struggling due to limited gas flows and sky-rocketing gas prices because of crunched global supply as a result Russia-Ukraine war. This has forced Europe to look for alternatives to Russian oil and gas as it has remained heavily dependent on the Russian energy sector. Europe is facing the worst "Energy Crisis" ever, as Russia has cut the gas supply because of the sanctions imposed by EU and the United States. Later on, the crisis was exacerbated as a consequence of Europe's main source of Russian gas i.e. Nord Stream leaks which completely halted the gas supply.

Following previous failed attempts, US mediation efforts are being considered to help Israel and Lebanon reach a maritime agreement. Israel is an important ally of Washington, the maritime border agreement is mutually beneficial for both stakeholders. It is because the greatest supply cut since the COVID-19 pandemic was announced by the oil cartel OPEC+, which is led by Saudi Arabia and Russia. The reduction in oil production increased the pressure on Biden administration. According to Israel, it would start extracting gas and oil from its Karish field at earliest possible and export it to Europe within a few weeks. Therefore, the United States and Israel's western allies appreciated the development, even though the reservoirs of Karish field are relatively minor in terms of global oil production but it will support EU energy needs. Parallel to the agreement, it is reported that Israeli President Lapid was successful in attaining number of economic and security guarantees from the United States. The prospects of the agreement in terms of regional stability have to be seen yet as security threats are not eliminated completely.