

Iran-Israel Conflict Intensifies with Large-Scale Missile Attacks

written by Ezba Walayat | April 22, 2024



Introduction

In retaliation for a reported Israeli strike on its consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024, Iran launched an attack of missiles and drone strikes against Israel on April 13, 2024. The midnight escalation followed more than six months of Israel's catastrophic war on the Gaza Strip, which has killed over 33,000 Palestinians and brought the worst humanitarian crisis. The Iran-Israel conflict has heightened the regional tensions, spilling over into Lebanon and Syria and drawing long-range fire from Yemen and Iraq at Israeli targets.

Iran's Unprecedented Direct Attack

With tremendous aerial bombardment, Iran launched its first ever direct attack on Israeli territory from Iranian soil. Iran retaliated against Israel by launching an attack after seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including two generals in charge of operations in Syria and Lebanon, along with six other people killed in an airstrike on the country's consulate in Damascus earlier this month. It was a carefully planned operation intended to send a clear message against any invasion by the Zionist state. The Iranian President said, "Iran's attack brought down the glory of the Zionist regime." In a speech on Army Day, President Ebrahim Raisi stated that the operation demonstrated the readiness of Iran's armed forces. The attack has been called Operation True Promise by Iran, and it is said that the objective of operation has been achieved.



Israel April 14, 2024. Photo: REUTERS/Amir Cohen . Courtesy Reuters

The United States officials estimate that the attack, which started on April 13th, lasted approximately for five hours. Despite the fact that no serious damage was sustained, the missiles pouring down on Israeli soil has tested the region's biggest military power. Tel Aviv was among the Israeli cities that heard explosions during the strike. As Israeli forces attempted to fire down the rockets, air raid sirens sounded in over 720 places and explosions were also heard in Jerusalem. According to the Israeli military, the Iran attacked with some 300 killer drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, but with help from the United States, UK, and French forces, 99 percent of them were intercepted outside the country's border. The western nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Norway, have condemned Iran's missile and drone attacks, the US imposed sanctions on Iran. Egypt and Saudi Arabia called for restraint. At Israel's request, the UN Security Council convened an emergency meeting to review the situation. President Joe Biden conducted a meeting with his national security team at the White House and reaffirmed Washington's ironclad commitment to its ally's security during his conversation with Israeli Prime Minister.

Miscalculation Risk

Following the Iranian missile and drone attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened multiple war cabinet meetings. Herzi Halevi, the Israeli military's chief of staff, said his country will fight against Iran's aggressiveness and pledged a response but did not provide specific details. On the other side, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran has threatened to destroy Israel's nuclear sites and could even go nuclear if Israel strikes Iran's nuclear facilities. A senior commander of the Iranian

Revolutionary Guards said, Iran may reconsider its “nuclear doctrine” in response to Israeli threats of retaliation. This might heighten concerns over Tehran’s nuclear program, which it has consistently said is only for peaceful purposes.

Furthermore, Iran showed its military strength as tensions with Israel escalate. On April 17, 2024, Iran’s military paraded to demonstrate its readiness for a counterattack from Israel following an unparalleled strike on its archenemy. The parade featured a variety of military weaponry, including drones and long-range ballistic missiles. There were the Dezful medium-range ballistic missile and the S-300 air defense missile system, along with various versions of the Ababil, Arash, and Mohajer drones. Israel was warned by Raisi that any act of violence would be met with “a fierce and severe response.”

In a recent development, on April 19, 2024, the US officials reported that Israel conducted a military attack and fired missile to target an air base near Isfahan. There have also been reports of explosions in Syria and Iraq. Isfahan has sites involved with Iran’s nuclear program, and it is reported that air defenses are active around the city. However, Iran asserted that its nuclear facilities are totally secure and situation is under control in Isfahan. Iranian military authorities even stated that noise heard overnight in Isfahan was caused by air defense systems targeting a suspicious item. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN’s nuclear watchdog, stated that no nuclear sites had been damaged and has asked the two countries to avoid attacking nuclear facilities.

Plea from World Leaders

A number of Western governments have urged Israel to prevent the Middle East situation from deteriorating. Along with other international leaders, Israel’s allies have consistently asked Netanyahu to refrain from adopting any measures that would escalate tensions with Iran. Additionally, representatives from Europe visited Israel to call for de-escalation in the wake of the Iranian attack, nonetheless, the foreign secretary of the United Kingdom conceded that an Israeli counterattack appeared likely. Before meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, British Foreign Secretary David Cameron stated, “It is clear that the Israelis are making a decision to act.”

In conclusion, any direct military action by Israel or Iran on nuclear installations would have disastrous effects on the Middle East and beyond. The likelihood of a military confrontation grows as tensions between the two dominant regional countries build, and Israel demands a swift and forceful response against Iran. The current unpredictable situation has increased the risk of escalation, raising concerns of confrontations and crises. To avoid any miscalculation at regional and global level, immediate diplomatic efforts are required to open lines of communication, de-escalate tensions, and reach agreements to the underlying issues.

Anwar Ibrahim Takes The Office Of Malaysia's Prime Minister

written by Maheen Tanveer | April 22, 2024



Malaysia's tenth Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has taken the oath of office. On November 24, 2022, at the palace in Kuala Lumpur, the 75-year-old senior politician took the oath of office in front of King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah.

After Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition won the most seats in the weekend election, King Sultan Abdullah assumed leadership of the process of selecting a new government. Both PH and the rival conservative Malay-Muslim Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, which had the second-highest number of MPs and was led by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, started discussions to establish a government.



In order to get their opinions on who should head the new administration, the King met with Anwar, Muhyiddin, and recently elected members of parliament. Anwar was named as the leader following a gathering of the royal houses on November 24 because the monarch believed he had the backing of Malaysia's 222 members of the parliament.

King Sultan Abdullah urged all politicians to cooperate for the good of the nation, saying that there are "no absolute winners and no absolute losers." Anwar promised to carry out the responsibilities assigned to him with "utmost humility" following his inauguration. According to the ambitions of the people, "I will carry out this enormous obligation based on the people's aspirations," he declared.

Reforms

PH supporters continued to chant "reform" at rallies, hoping for a government that will combat corruption, uphold democratic freedoms, and guarantee the independence of crucial institutions like the legislature and the judiciary.

In response to a potential economic slowdown, Anwar promised supporters that his administration would also reduce the size of the cabinet and lower ministerial pay and benefits.

Votes

A great number of Malaysians were present in the election, according to official results. PH received 5.81 million votes, followed by PN with 4.67 million and BN with 3.43 million.

A constitutional amendment that gave 18-year-olds the right to vote and established automatic voter registration resulted in an expansion of the electoral roll, which made the conclusion even more uncertain. Beginning in 1971, when he founded the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim began his political career as a student activist. He later led demonstrations against rural poverty and other socioeconomic issues. When Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the United Malays National

Organisation (UMNO), which has been in power since then, saw his activism and convinced him to join. Anwar had a reputation as a charming, ambitious, and reform-minded politician as he advanced swiftly through the ranks to become Finance Minister and deputy Prime Minister.

Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development

written by Maheen Tanveer | April 22, 2024



Bali, Indonesia hosted the Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development (IPFD) from December 7-8, 2022. Ministers, senior officials, and ambassadors from several nations participated in the IPFD, which was hosted by Indonesia.

Under the banner of “Grow and Prosper Together,” the Participants spoke on how they perceived the Pacific as a region of collaboration and solidarity.

Additionally, they emphasised the significant regional potential and common issues, such as minimising the Covid-19 pandemic’s consequences and hastening the economic recovery following the pandemic. The forum considered how to enhance collaborations for infrastructure development. They concentrated on ways to increase connectivity between people as well as between regions and islands.



Furthermore, it was acknowledged that climate change poses an existential threat to the area right now. The attendees applauded the commitments made at COP27, particularly the decision to fund “loss and damage” for weaker countries. They reiterated the need for technological development in this direction in order to establish a low-carbon economy.

The importance of strengthening ocean preservation measures was also acknowledged by IPFD because the ocean is a significant source of food and livelihood. A coordinated effort to stop illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing was also demanded by the participants.

During an IPFD workshop on disaster management, the Participants stressed the necessity of increasing collaboration in disaster risk reduction.

Participants also considered strategies to strengthen collaborations to promote the area’s digital transformation, particularly by developing affordable, high-quality digital infrastructure and boosting digital literacy and skills.

The representatives stated a desire to increase women’s participation and roles in all areas of society. They held a session on women’s empowerment during IPFD.

The Participants were aware of the connection between education and the potential for independence in the next generation. They emphasised the need for collective action to ensure that everyone has access to education. The IPFD also talked about how to cooperate to combat the growing threats posed by global organised crime and non-traditional security challenges.

However, IPFD emphasises the tremendous opportunity for collaboration between Indonesia and the countries and territories of the Pacific area.

IPFD is a platform for developing partnerships between Indonesia and the countries of the Pacific, with the

aim of assisting them in cooperating to create a prosperous, peaceful Indo-Pacific region.

Mongolia-Japan Special Strategic Partnership

written by Maheen Tanveer | April 22, 2024



President of Mongolia U. Khurelsukh on 29 November 2022, held official talks with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as part of his state visit to Japan. Both parties agreed to adopt the “Special Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity” as the framework for advancing Mongolia-Japan relations.

The two parties discussed collaboration in both global and regional contexts as well as future goals and opportunities during the formal meetings.

The President of Mongolia reaffirmed his commitment to advancing ties and collaboration with Japan and expressed gratitude to the Japanese government for continuing to support Mongolia’s democracy, reforms, and sustainable development.

Moreover, during the formal discussions, the two sides reviewed the 50 years of cooperation between Japan and Mongolia since the two nations’ diplomatic ties were established and exchanged opinions on future objectives and prospects, as well as cooperation in both global and regional contexts.



The President of Mongolia thanked the Government of Japan for continuing to support Mongolia's democracy, reforms, and sustainable development and reaffirmed his commitment to deepening ties and cooperation with Japan, which Mongolia shares similar values with in terms of democracy, human rights, and the market economy.

Furthermore, the parties also concurred to intensify collective efforts to solve issues affecting the global community while fostering human-centred interactions based on the shared values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and a market economy.

The "Special Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" between Japan and Mongolia was founded, and its 10-year Action Program's objectives include enhancing bilateral cooperation in commerce, investment, human-centred development, and citizen exchange. The Mongolia-Japan Strategic Partnership's Medium-Term Program, which has acted as a road map for the two countries' relations and collaboration, was also reaffirmed.

In this regard, to diversify Mongolia's economy, increase domestic production, ensure food security, and improve business and legal conditions, the two parties decided to collaborate. The parties decided to continue collaborating to foster youth exchanges and human resource development.

Within the framework of the UN and other international organisations, both parties reaffirmed their dedication to continuing to work together in coordination.

In order to support the "One Billion Trees" national movement, led by the Mongolian President, and advance cooperation in environmental protection and climate change mitigation, the Japanese side

pledged to plant 50,000 trees in Mongolia and arrange training for 20,000 Mongolian children and youth in the areas of environment, desertification, and disaster prevention.

Sanctions on North Korea by the US and its Asian Allies

written by Maheen Tanveer | April 22, 2024



On 1 December 2022, the United States and its Asian allies Japan and South Korea imposed fresh sanctions on North Korean officials involved in the country's nuclear programs after Pyongyang's most recent and greatest intercontinental ballistic missile test on 18 November 2022. The North Korean government conducted an intercontinental ballistic missile test on November 18 as part of a record-breaking string of over 60 missile launches this year, raising fears that Pyongyang may soon resume nuclear weapons testing, which has been halted since 2017.

The representative of Washington, Antony Blinken, believes that the recent missile tests by North Korea, including the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile with the capability of striking the US mainland, "pose grave security risks to the region and entire world." Consequently, the US Treasury Department sanctioned three individuals named Jon Il Ho, Yu Jin, and Kim Su Gil.

Earlier, the US efforts to impose tougher sanctions on North Korea were blocked by North Korea's closest allies China, and Russia. Washington then needed to concentrate on trilateral diplomacy to restrain Pyongyang's belligerence with South Korea, Japan, and European allies. Japan and South Korea both reacted in support of the US and put sanctions on North Korea. Sanctions against various North Korean officials and entities were announced by the foreign ministry of South Korea.



This latest development, according to South Korea’s foreign ministry, was a part of its measures to firmly counter North Korea’s increasing nuclear and missile threats. Similarly, Japan has frozen the assets of three North Korean entities—Korea Haegumgang Trading Corp., Korea Namgang Trading Corp., and Lazarus Group as well as one individual, Kim Su Il.

The highly sophisticated missile and nuclear weapon initiatives of North Korea have not been stopped by decades of US-led sanctions. Anthony Ruggiero, who oversaw North Korea sanctions efforts under former President Donald Trump, said, “Targeting senior officials inside North Korea responsible for WMD and missile activities and working with South Korea and Japan are important, but it is an inadequate and symbolic response to 60+ missile tests, including 8 ICBM tests.

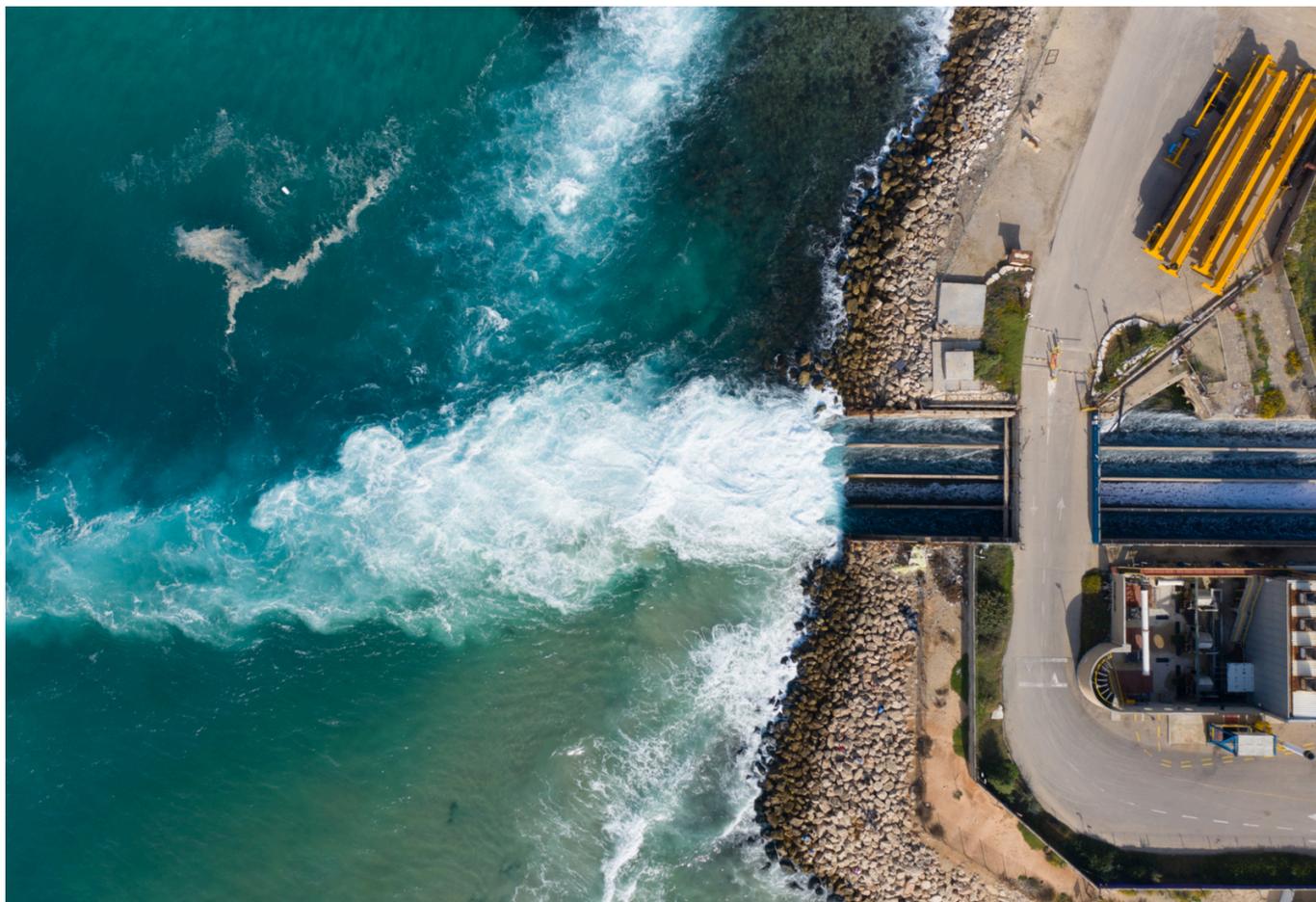
The White House National Security Council spokesperson, however, claimed that sanctions had been effective in “slowing down the development” of the weapons programmes. He further added, “The DPRK’s decision to continue ignoring our outreach is not in their best interest, or the interest of the people of the DPRK.”

Israel-Jordan make headway with “Water for Energy Deal”

written by Ezba Walayat | April 22, 2024



After an early analysis of the project revealed its viability, Israel and Jordan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to proceed with a water-for-energy deal. Jordan is supposed to develop 600 megawatts of solar power generating capacity that would be transferred to Israel, according to the plan, which was first revealed a year ago. Israel would give Jordan 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water in exchange for Jordan's water. The United Arab Emirates, which in 2020 became the first Gulf state to normalize relations with Israel and has been a partner in the project, held an event during the COP27 climate summit in Egypt where the MOU was signed. This will be the first time that the nations have worked together on such a project. The Middle East is particularly sensitive to climate change. Considered one of the largest energy projects between Jordan and Israel since the Wadi Araba Treaty was signed in 1994, the recently proposed "water-for-energy" agreement is a significant energy project between Jordan and Israel. Through this agreement, regional collaboration on environmental issues could be strengthened.



Although political institutions signed the pact, Ecopeace Middle East, an environmental NGO that operates in Palestine, Israel, and Jordan, is the organization that came up with the proposal. According to the director of Ecopeace Jordan, “in 2020, we produced the Green Blue Deal for the Middle East report which included exchanging renewable energy and desalinated sea water between Jordan, Israel and Palestine.” The parties have agreed to carry out feasibility studies related to the development of the solar power plant and the necessary infrastructure in Israel to desalinate water from the Mediterranean Sea and transport it to Jordan, as per the declaration of intent (DOI), which was finalized last year in Dubai. According to the director of Ecopeace Jordan, “Jordan has the potential to become a regional powerhouse for creating renewable energy, while Israel possesses an advanced desalination technology.” As climate change and population growth are likely to exacerbate water scarcity in the region, the likelihood of conflicts may also rise. “The main benefit of this project is that it enables the parties to meet their carbon reduction commitments and to secure extra quantities of water and renewable energy at relatively cheap prices.” The new proposed deal is supposed to capitalize on the natural resources of each country. According to UNICEF, Jordan’s agricultural output could be seriously hampered by reduced water availability, lower crop yields, and possibly crop failures. Although it only makes up about 5% of Jordan’s GDP, agriculture uses more than 50% of the country’s freshwater. The demand for water is rising as Jordan experiences rapid urbanization and an influx of immigrants and refugees. Water is a resource that spans across sectors and necessitates cooperation from different stakeholders. In this situation, the subsidy and tariff system, whose implementation should be gradual, can be proved helpful. In the meanwhile, it is crucial to encourage the adoption of water-efficient methods and technology, notably in agriculture sector.



Historically, war and unemployment drive more migration within MENA than water-related events such as drought. But in the region, political conflicts over water resources have a long history. These are more the outcome of a lack of collaboration over unequally distributed common resources than a true dearth of water in the area. Jordan, a downstream nation, depends substantially on collaboration with its upstream neighbors because it receives 40% of its water from trans-boundary basins. Effective cooperation over shared water resources remains difficult despite years of discussion. However, creative initiatives could pave the road for increased collaboration, such as the water-energy accord between Jordan and Israel. Jordan has yearly renewable water resource availability per person of fewer than 100 cubic meters, which is already far below the 500 cubic meters mark of “absolute water scarcity.” Without strong actions, the situation is likely to get worse as Jordan’s water resources are rapidly running out. If the “water for energy” deal between Israel and Jordan is successfully implemented, it may assist to alleviate some of the problems with water and energy security brought on by climate change in Middle East, as well as to promote the renewable energy sources, sustainable water supply and stability in the region.

Pakistan China’s Joint Development Ventures

written by Hamna Seyyed | April 22, 2024



Pakistan on Thursday proposed the inclusion of new areas of cooperation in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, including disaster recovery, global development initiatives and boosting digital investment in the economy. Pakistan also proposed a 1+5 arrangement for special economic zones agreements between the geological survey institutes of the two countries, an agreement between the Geological Survey Intuitions of the two countries, and cooperation in developing Pakistan's export potential. The minister highlighted three basic objectives in the 11th Joint Advisory Committee, which include the revival of CPEC, which has been revived since the government assumed office in April this year. The inclusion of new projects that will expand the CPEC portfolio and the third was business-to-business collaboration, which was previously government-to-government.



The Joint Advisory Committee also emphasized the importance of key projects for the development of energy and infrastructure; which are now operational and provide innumerable opportunities for socio-economic development in Pakistan. Similarly, another priority project, the Karachi Circular Railway, which will benefit a large section of the population of our largest city of Pakistan, Karachi, was discussed in detail. The two sides also agreed to start the ML-1 project, which was considered the backbone of CPEC and remained neglected in the past. It was agreed to include a new area of “Water Resources Management and Climate Change” which will be of great importance especially after the recent flood which badly affected Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan has also launched an initiative to include 10,000 MW of solar power in our system. The Pakistani government has asked China to create a financial window or line of credit for Chinese companies participating in the project. It was the 11th meeting of the Joint Cooperation Committee, a key decision-making forum on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Pakistan’s part of the \$50 billion Belt and Road Initiative. It is the largest CPEC project in terms of cost and has been awaiting a final decision for the last five years. Pakistan has agreed to increase the cost of ML-1 from \$6.85 billion at the request of Chinese negotiators who called the earlier cost figure unrealistic,” an official insider of CPEC planning told Nikkei Asia on condition of anonymity. He was not authorized to speak to the media. The official further added that approval of the ML-1 JCC project would be a big boost for CPEC. A press release issued by the government after the JCC meeting stated that both parties agreed to start the ML-1 project. However, the final announcement on the ML-1 and other projects approved by the JCC will be made during Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s visit to Beijing in the first week of November.



Moreover, the JCC meeting could decide the fate of the 300-megawatt power plant at Gwadar – a port that is supposed to be a key Belt and Road hub. But the Pakistani government has an incentive to stay in China’s good books, given Sharif’s plan to visit China. According to media reports, Sharif is likely to seek \$10 billion in financial assistance from China through balance of payments support and the rollover of Chinese loans, which account for 30% of Pakistan’s total foreign debt. But he said Beijing has already taken this into account while deciding on CPEC projects. “Beijing knows that the ML-1 project is also in Pakistan’s interest, and even if Khan reconstitutes a government, it cannot reverse that,” Dorsey said. It will not be wrong to say that it is a right time for this proposal. Pakistan is already facing an economic turmoil due to the floods and the recovery is all what needed. Its high time that Pakistan and China shall revive their development projects.

The Historic Lebanon-Israel Maritime Border Agreement

written by Ezba Walayat | April 22, 2024



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.

The Future of Food Security in Middle East

written by Ezba Walayat | April 22, 2024



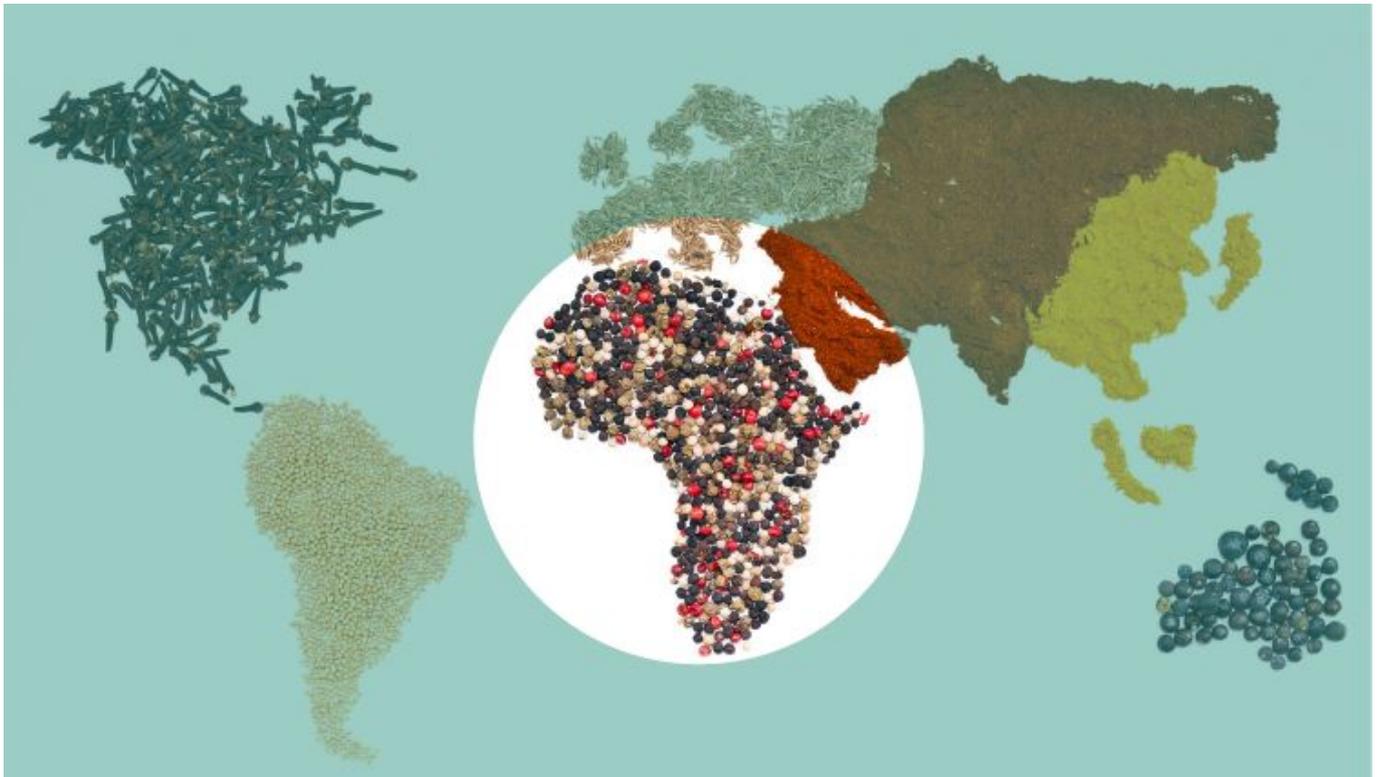
Before COVID-19, UN agencies predicted that more than 55 million of the 456.7 million people living in MENA countries were undernourished. Food insecurity is still prevalent due to the pandemic, extended conflict, and other circumstances. In contrast to its 6% share of the world's population, MENA had a 20% percentage of those who were severely food insecure in 2020. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has made the situation worse now. While approving a new food shock borrowing window for vulnerable nations, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Kristalina Georgieva, stated in Riyadh that more than 141 million people in the Arab world are at risk of food insecurity. As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, she continued, crop supplies are being choked off in 48 nations around the world, which has made them particularly vulnerable to the food crisis.



In September 2022, the secretary general of the League of Arab States, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, urged for the activation of integrated management of the Arab region's issues regarding food, water and energy security, he warned that food security in particular is "deteriorating" alarmingly which requires a holistic approach for building national capacities in particular areas. After the statement of secretary general a positive development was observed when the agriculture ministers of Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria have decided to support a regional effort to boost food security in the region amid the ongoing complex global events. The ministers also endorsed the recommendation from the World Food Program (WFP) to look into the establishment of a regional center for food security in Jordan. According to a statement, they also decided to establish partnerships in agricultural marketing and to improve interstate cooperation and integration in the food production sector. That plan will also support to forge agreements, support unconventional agriculture as well as the exchange of goods.



There are numerous threats to the Middle East's food security, it is extremely complicated because of the region's stability and development. Large-scale hunger is becoming more likely as a result of conflicts that are hurting agricultural productivity in several Middle-Eastern countries. In addition, the area's low agricultural output is caused by a lack of agricultural land, lack of water and climate-related shocks. More than half of the people in the area struggle to pay for nutritious food. Food systems are pressurized as a result of high food import levels, food quality and wastage, economic shocks, global food crises, and fluctuating oil costs. If government funding and other policies on agriculture are reviewed, the situation can be addressed by employing digital technologies in the agriculture sector which will also attract private investment. Interventions in development are required to help farmers adopt more sustainable, productive systems that are resistant to threats like drought and flooding. Apart from the mentioned factors, there is extreme food reliance on other countries for basic commodities. According to reports, the Middle East will continue to be one of the most "import-dependent regions in the world," with over 50% of its food coming from other countries. The Middle East can play a significant role in providing its population with a sustainable, affordable, nutritious, and inclusive food system by making serious efforts and working with international players to bring up the necessary changes for the current situation of food insecurity.



Currently, the wide-ranging impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on food prices and food supplies around the world are being experienced. Domestic food price inflation was significant at the beginning of October 2022, with low-income nations experiencing an increase of 88.2%, lower-middle-income countries experiencing an increase of 91.1%, and upper-middle-income countries experiencing an increase of 93%. About 82.1% of high-income nations now have high food price inflation, a sharp rise in the proportion of high-income countries with high inflation. If this situation continues and gets worse, it might have disastrous repercussions for a region like Middle-East. Countries in the Middle East will have many difficulties in responding and dealing to the escalating food insecurity, as the United Nations have asserted that the global food crisis might endure for a longer time if it is not handled. To conclude, Middle Eastern countries should reconsider their development strategies and start economic and social reforms to ensure food security in the region while considering the needs of the people and the food systems in the context of world's rapidly changing and escalating problems.

Repercussions of OPEC's Decision: Major Supply Cut to Oil Production

written by Ezba Walayat | April 22, 2024



Introduction

The OPEC+ group of countries have agreed upon largest cut to oil output, since the beginning of coronavirus outbreak in 2020, limiting oil supplies in a market that is already strained, despite of the pressure from the United States and others to produce more oil. The world's oil producing nations said in a statement that they would produce 2 million fewer barrels per day following at 33rd Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting held in Vienna on 5th October, 2022. It has raised the concerns over skyrocketing inflation which is likely to increase as the world's oil supply is expected to tighten. The action is taken before Russian energy economic sanctions by the European Union due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Following the meeting, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian energy minister, claimed that OPEC+ was acting in response to warnings of a global economic slowdown that may reduce demand for oil and drive down the prices.



US' Disappointment at the Decision

In recent months, as Russia tightened its grip on Europe's energy supply, natural gas prices skyrocketed, plunging Europe and much of the world into a severe energy crisis that resulted in unrest and compelled Governments to declare emergencies and make efforts to stabilize markets. For this reason, three months ago, when President Biden visited the Middle East he asked the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, to increase the oil production because Saudi Arabia controls nearly one-third of OPEC's oil reserves. After the decision made by OPEC, it seems like the President Joe Biden's advice for taking measures to increase oil production have been ignored. Quickly after the decision was made, the White House criticized it as "shortsighted" and charged the oil cartel as for supporting Russia. The United States' Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated after OPEC's statement that his Government was working "to ensure that energy is available on the market and the costs are kept low." This was also quoted by the US National Security Advisor and Director of the National Economic Council (NEC), they said in a statement "At a time when maintaining a global supply of energy is of paramount importance, this decision will have the most negative impact on lower and middle income countries that are already reeling from elevated energy prices." According to some analysts, in order to counteract what OPEC's recent decision, the US may try to release part of its oil reserves. In order to increase American energy output and weaken OPEC's grip over energy prices, Biden urged his administration and Congress to look into possible solutions. The White House added that Biden has requested another 10 million barrels oil release from the American Strategic Petroleum Reserve in an effort to bring down oil costs and ensure energy security. Moreover, in light of recent development, the White House accused "it was obvious that OPEC+ was aligning with Russia." Following the establishment of OPEC+ oil output agreement in 2016 and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz

historic trip to Moscow in October 2017, Moscow's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have progressively improved. It is once again in the highlights, because of the OPEC's deal, it is being said that Saudi Arabia is favoring Russia.



Response by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)

The accusations made by the United States have been rejected by saying that the decision is technical not a political one which was purely made for the global economy and the energy market. In response, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) energy ministers dismissed claims of the US that the most recent oil output cut was “endangering the global energy market” and contributing to “energy poverty in the West.” The output cut by OPEC+ was also supported by the OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais, who claims that the decision aims to give the energy market “security and stability.”



The blame game is persisted for energy weaponization, as the West accused Russia to spark a crisis in Europe that might lead to gas and power shortages this winter. In contrast, Moscow accused the West of turning the dollar and financial systems into weapons as a reaction to the Ukraine war initiated in February. The global humanitarian and economic effects of the Ukraine war are being felt at all levels, the energy sector is the most vulnerable which has put Europe in a difficult situation too. The state of global economy is already not good, high inflation is one of the biggest challenges that the world is facing. A possible recession is on the horizon as a result of the recent OPEC oil cut decision, therefore, it needs to be dealt in a responsible and responsive way to avoid any devastating situation that people and Governments cannot handle.