

Hizballah Takes Aim At Israel's Natural Gas Discovery

Written by Gal Luft
Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

The discovery of a gigantic natural gas reservoir less than 100 miles off Israel's coast seems like great news for the diplomatically and militarily embattled country. The gas finding will strengthen Israel's energy security, enable it to become an important gas exporter and contribute wealth to its economy.

It could also be the pretext for the next Middle East war.

Ten years after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hizballah is struggling to find a cause that would enable it to continue its "liberation war" against Israel. Yes, there are those Shebaa Farms on Israel's northern border that according to international law belong to Syria, not Lebanon. But neither the Lebanese population nor Syria seem to be eager to inflame the region over a territory one fifth the size of Disney World. Something of greater strategic importance must be found in order to revive the "resistance."

This is why only days after Israel announced its gas discovery, Hizballah claimed that the deposit extends into Lebanese waters and that it would not allow Israel to "loot" Lebanese gas resources.

The discovery blows fresh wind into Hizballah's sails, giving it a new cause to fight for and a new opportunity to hurt the Israeli economy. Furthermore, by opening a new front in the Mediterranean, Hizballah is gaining legitimacy for holding on to its arms. Even non-Shiite sects in Lebanon accept Hizballah's role in protecting Lebanon's waters. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt recently said that Hizballah's "weapons are important to defend the oil in the Sea of Lebanon and national resources in the country."

Speaking last month on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah focused for the first time on the maritime rather than the ground capabilities of his group, boasting that Hizballah is ready to "wipe out Israel's navy." Hizballah's growing interest in developing maritime capabilities should not be taken lightly. The group already has an Iranian-trained navy commando and submarine units. During the 2006 Second Lebanon War Hizballah attacked and severely damaged an Israeli corvette, using a C-802 anti-ship missile.

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It would not be surprising if in the coming months Hizballah improves its tactical sophistication at sea through acquisition of new weapons and occasional encounters with Israel's navy. Upcoming flotillas under the Free Gaza banner would enable Hizballah fighters to closely observe the Israeli Navy at work and identify its weak spots. Later, as the eastern Mediterranean becomes home to drilling rigs, pipelines and other infrastructure related to Israel's gas operation, Hizballah could find multiple soft targets to attack. Such attacks could easily escalate into a regional war involving neighboring countries like Syria, Turkey and Iran.

While the Obama administration is consumed with the catastrophe off the US coast, it should also pay attention to the developments off Israel's coast, and not only because an American gas drilling company, Noble Energy, owns nearly 40 percent of the gas venture, which means American citizens operating the rigs could be in harm's way.

Disputes over access to offshore gas have been widespread throughout the world, including in the Caspian Sea, the East China Sea, and the North Sea. In some cases they even involved military skirmishes. But an all out resource war was always avoided. In the eastern Mediterranean the outcome could be very different. The reason is that in all of the above cases the parties involved were interested in the gas as a source of revenue, not as a pretext for war. As a militarized non-state actor, Hizballah has already demonstrated its capability to push an independent agenda which serves its patrons Iran and Syria, not the people of Lebanon. Israel, for its part, has already announced its willingness to use force to protect its natural gas finds.

To minimize the risk of future resource war in the Mediterranean, the US should help Israel to establish the legal basis for its activities within its economic waters while highlighting the frivolousness of Lebanon's claims. A broad international consensus on Israel's right to drill for oil and gas in its waters would deny Hizballah any legitimate ground to provoke conflict at sea.

The US and its allies should also monitor Hizballah's efforts to develop maritime capabilities and try to prevent this terror organization from acquiring offensive weapons and capabilities, particularly anti-ship missiles.

Finally, the US Sixth Fleet which operates in the Mediterranean should increase its presence in the disputed area and strengthen its cooperation with the Israeli Navy in order to deter Hizballah and its patrons from operating in the region.

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Before Israel struck gas, Lebanon showed no interest in the treasures under the Mediterranean seabed. Now, when Israeli and American investors have established its richness, those who wish to destabilize the region will find natural gas to be an ideal fuel to keep the Arab-Israeli conflict burning for many years to come.

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