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UN spurns Beirut on fixing sea border after Israel strikes gas

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Three Mediterranean gas fields opposite northern Israel

The UN has turned down Lebanon's demand to intervene in delineating its sea border following Israel's discovery in the Mediterranean of the Leviathan gas well - billed as the world's biggest find in a decade. UN Spokesman Martin Nesirsky explained that UNIFIL's mandate applied to coastal waters, not to delineating maritime lines.

Cyprus responded to the exchange by announcing it had licensed the Texas-based US firm Noble Energy - partners with Israel's Delek Energy group in the Leviathan project - to explore a 1,250 square-mile block bordering on Israeli waters. Leviathan, 80 miles off the Israeli port of Haifa, is claimed to contain an estimated 16 trillion cubic feet of gas. Turkey, Syria and Lebanon have challenged the maritime mapping accord, which Jerusalem and the Nicosia government recently signed with Greek backing, calling it a conspiracy to rob them of maritime energy resources belonging to them but which they never explored. Egypt, the Palestinian Authority and Turkish Cyprus may also get involved in the ballooning controversy that could bring half a dozen eastern Mediterranean nations into conflict, **DEBKAFfile's** Middle East sources report.

According to the experts, they are all sitting around the edges of one of the world's biggest unexploited lakes of gas totaling an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet under the Mediterranean sea bed. It may also contain unknown quantities of oil.

Tuesday, Jan. 4, Lebanese foreign minister Ali Shami asked UN Secretary Ban ki-moon to order the UN force stationed in South Lebanon to stop Israel drilling further in "joint regional waters between Lebanon and northern Palestine." The UN secretary lost no time in tossing the ball back to Beirut. Within hours, the UN spokesman stated: UNIFIL's mandate - among others to monitor the coastal waters in conformity with Security Council resolution 1701 - "does not include delineating maritime lines. We are talking about two different things: coastal waters and a disputed boundary."

That same day, Cyprus' Energy Service Director Solon Kassinis announced that Nicosia would issue a second license for offshore oil and gas exploration in the second half of 2011. The island's southern coast has been divided into 13 blocks for energy exploration. He said Noble Energy "is obliged to proceed" with the first exploratory well inside its Cypriot block between Oct. 2011-Oct.2013.

DEBKAFfile: The collaboration between Jerusalem and Nicosia in the exploration of Mediterranean energy resources, backed strongly from Athens, is growing stronger. It is spreading into additional strategic spheres, complementing the burgeoning ties between Israel and Greece.

Last month Turkey slammed the maritime mapping accord between Cyprus and Israel, saying it was "null and void" because it disregards the rights and jurisdiction of Turkish Cypriots on the ethnically split island. **DEBKAFfile:** Turkey maintains 25,000 troops as well as air and naval units in the Turkish region.

Ankara's objections, with queries this month from Cairo, will certainly have given Israel and Cyprus extra impetus for moving fast to establish fixed facts to support their claims as first comers to the massive gas fields opposite their Mediterranean shores before the dispute is

Amazing that Greece and Israel would become partners. The Greeks have not been cozy with Israel for years. Oh what a little gas can do!

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