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Israel's 'turn to the sea' and its effect on Israeli regional policy

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the effect of Israel's new maritime orientation on its foreign policy. It first demonstrates that in the last two decades Israel has changed its maritime posture in three important ways: it has developed energy dependence on offshore gas, begun extensive seawater desalination and dramatically expanded its navy's platforms and missions. The paper then investigates the effects of these changes on Israel's bilateral relations with its neighbours. Finally, the paper highlights the cumulative effect of these changes as well as some of their implications for Israel's foreign policy.

KEYWORDS Israel; Middle East; Mediterranean Sea; policy; maritime strategy; energy; desalination

Introduction

This article examines the effect of Israel's new orientation towards the sea on its foreign policy. Orientation towards the sea refers to significant changes in policy, resource allocation and institutional development that focus on the maritime domain. All these, as suggested below, create both new sources of conflict and new avenues for cooperation between Israel and its neighbours. For example, the discovery of large gas fields in the sea can lead Israel to cooperate with others in its production, delivery and export, but can also lead to disputes over the newly found riches.[1] The article continues in three parts: first, it investigates Israel's 'turn to the sea', paying special attention to offshore energy, desalination and naval buildup. In the second section, it explores how these recent shifts in maritime orientation are affecting Israel's relations with other actors in the region. In the third part, it highlights the cumulative effect of these changes and analyses their implications.

Israel has 196 km of seashore on the Mediterranean, and another 14 km of seashore on the Red Sea. It shares maritime borders with Lebanon, Gaza,

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Egypt and Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea and with Jordan and Egypt in the Red Sea. Throughout most of Israel's seven-decades-long history, the sea did not play a significant role in Israeli security, energy market or development policies. Yet, beginning in the 1990s, Israeli decision makers turned their attention to the sea. This was not a result of a national grand design, as experienced in other countries,[2] but rather an incremental development in different policy areas which together accumulated into a critical mass.[3] Alongside extensive offshore energy, water desalination development and naval expansion, Israeli governmental efforts since 1999 also include comprehensive marine planning and legislation initiatives, and the extensive development of seaports, international communication and internet infrastructure (via submarine cables), as well as a significant investment in marine research. Heightened awareness of the marine environment also included the issuing of new fishing regulations and the planning of several large marine nature reserves.[4] In the following section, we review the three core areas where Israel 'turned to the sea'.

Energy

Beginning in 1999, several large offshore natural gas reservoirs were discovered in Israel's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean. The discoveries transformed Israel from an energy-dependent economy to an energy-independent one.[5] Israel's first offshore gas discoveries, 'Noa' and 'Mary-B' (estimated at a total of 45 billion cubic meters (BCM)), were announced in 1999, and owned by the Israeli Delek Energy and Texas-based Noble Energy. Two other gas fields, Tamar (283 BCM) and Dalit (7–14 BCM), were discovered in 2009 and developed by Delek and Israeli energy companies Dor and Isramco Negev. Israel's most dramatic discovery, Leviathan (535 BCM) – the largest discovery of natural gas fields for that decade worldwide – was found in 2010 and is developed by the same four partners.[6] Today, natural gas provides approximately half of the energy needs for the country's electricity, and many industrial companies have made plans to shift to natural gas as their main source of energy.[7] Israel's newly found energy resources surpass its domestic needs and have enabled it to become an energy exporter to other states.[8] Currently, both EU countries and Turkey rely on energy supply mainly from Russia and Persian Gulf countries. Both sources of supply are subject to political considerations and are perceived as unstable. Israeli gas may therefore be a good option for these countries in their quest to diversify their energy sources.

Recently, Noble has submitted a plan for production, and included an offshore rig that will treat all the gas at sea and be connected via pipeline to Israel, instead of using an FPSO (Floating Production, Storage and Offloading) vessel as was originally intended. The plan could, pending approval, lead to production from Leviathan by 2019, at first mainly to Israel and Jordan - and possibly the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Egypt. A second phase could then include one of two viable options: to sell the gas to British Gas (BG) and export it via pipeline to liquified natural gas (LNG) plants in Egypt, or to export the gas via direct pipeline to Turkey.[9] Jordan has recently signed an agreement to import Israeli gas, though the energy needs of Israel and Jordan would not fulfil all of Israel's export needs, as its potential supply of gas is far greater.[10]

Israel could also connect to Europe through Cyprus and Greece, with the added benefits of the latter two's membership in the EU and their ties to Russia. These are especially important now that US influence in the East Mediterranean is waning. The fact that Cyprus has also discovered gas in its EEZ, and already begun planning its production, having franchised the same companies developing Israeli production, is another important incentive for both states to collaborate on this issue.[11] Additionally, in August 2016, the Petroleum Council of Israel approved the acquisition of the Karish and Tanin natural gas fields by Greek Energean Oil & Gas from Israeli Delek, and in March 2017 Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy signed an agreement for the construction of a 2000 km underwater natural gas pipeline between Israel and Europe by 2025 – potentially making it the longest in the world.[12]

The Italian company ENI, which discovered the large Zohr gas reservoir offshore from Egypt, has also extended an offer (in 2015) to create a vast gas hub to Europe in Egypt, by pulling together Israeli, Egyptian and Cypriot gas, although this offer would only be relevant if Israel provides the necessary infrastructure for extracting and transporting the gas from its reservoirs.[13]

Expanding Israel's navy

The second significant manifestation of Israel's turn to the sea is the expansion of the Israeli navy's missions and capabilities. Three missions seem to stand at the heart of this development. The first is for the navy's submarine flotilla to serve as the bedrock of Israel's nuclear deterrent. Though Israel has never admitted publicly that it possesses nuclear weapons, numerous sources suggest that Israeli submarines can launch ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads, thus providing Israel with a second-strike nuclear option.[14] While Israel is the only Middle Eastern country assumed to be in possession of nuclear weapons at the moment, it is preparing for a time when another Middle Eastern country – Iran – will acquire such weapons and the capability to launch them.[15] The submarines, according to unconfirmed reports, will also allow Israel to deploy off Iran's shores.[16]

Before 2003, Israel was also concerned by Iraqi capabilities in this area.[17] Since the 1990s Israel acquired six submarines from Germany, and is negotiating the possible purchase of three more.[18] Former senior navy officers of the submarine flotilla were appointed to leadership positions in the secretive atomic agency commission, further signalling the connection between the two.[19] This massive expansion of the submarine flotilla, as opposed to decades during which the Israeli submarine capability was negligible, was made easier as the German government subsidised a sizeable portion of the project, partially due to its alleged involvement in the buildup of Iraqi military capacity during Saddam Husain's regime.[20]

The navy's second mission is to support Israel's 'campaign between the wars'. Reflecting the nature of current threats to Israel, its armed forces embarked on a strategy that is intended to constantly engage hostile actors, states and non-states alike, in low-intensity operations such as weapon interdictions, pinpoint attacks on military material and targeted assassinations of selected (hostile) military leaders. All of these take place not only near Israel's borders, but on a regional and occasionally even global scale.[21] These missions require an effective and robust navy for intelligence collection, deployment of special forces and interception at sea. Indeed, since the early 2000s the Israeli navy has interdicted weapons ships as far as 1500 km from Israeli territory.[22] One specific facet of this effort is the naval blockade on Gaza, in place since 2006. The possible effect of the navy was demonstrated in 2010 when Israeli navy seals raided a Turkish ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, which tried to break the blockade. With nine Turkish citizens killed in the raid, it led to a significant crisis between Israel and Turkey that lasted six years and only ended in the Summer of 2016.[23]

The navy's third new mission is the protection of Israel's gas assets in the Exclusive Economic Zone and the infrastructure that transports it to Israeli shores. After some deliberations, the Israeli government decided that the state of Israel will defend the privately owned offshore gas infrastructure, due to Israeli dependency on the gas, and because of the proximity of some of the infrastructure to the borders with Gaza and Lebanon. In order to carry out this mission, the navy recently purchased four corvettes from Germany.[24] At 2200 tons, these corvettes are significantly bigger than the biggest existing 1300-ton Saar 5 vessels, and are equipped for a longer stay at sea as well as more diverse missions. In addition, Israel's military industries invest significant resources in developing unmanned maritime vehicles that will take part in securing Israel's critical infrastructures, including gas rigs and pipelines, desalination plants and civil ports.[25]

Desalination

Shortage of drinking water is a significant problem in many states in the Middle East. For Israel, this was both an internal problem and a recurrent cause for tensions between the state and its neighbours.[26] Israel has operated a desalination plant in the Red Sea coastal city of Eilat since the 1970s, but the state's contemporary challenges of water shortage – an increase in population size, improper water management, groundwater salinisation and pollution, droughts and the demands of modernisation – have all caused the state to extend its desalination activities to the Mediterranean Sea in order to provide desalinated water state-wide.[27]

In 2003, Israel approved National Outline Plan (NOP) 43/B/2, which includes plans for eight new desalination plants. The government also passed decision 2789 in 2011, which pertains to the broadening, hastening and cheapening of the activity of these plants, and to the reduction of their environmental risks.[28] These desalination plants are currently owned and developed by private operators under Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) agreements with the understanding that the operators would hand over the plants to the state 25 years later. One site, Palmachim, is under a Build-Operate-Own (BOO) agreement. In both cases, Israel's Water Desalination Authority controls and monitors all desalination sites. Six sites have already been erected and activated on Israel's Mediterranean coast, using reverse osmosis desalination, and supply much of Israel's drinking water today (see Figure 1).[29] The plan includes production of all of Israel's drinking water via desalination by 2050.[30]

Ownership and control over water resources has been a major source of strain between Israel and its neighbours, mainly Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinians, in particular regarding the water resources of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret), the Jordan River's stream and sources, and the aquifers under Israeli and Palestinian territories. This can be asserted by the fact that peace negotiations between Israel and each of these parties included a section on water arrangements. Recent technological breakthroughs lowered the costs of desalination, and thus became a reasonable cost solution to Israel's water shortage problems. Consequently, the perception of fresh water in Israel has changed from a symbolic scarce resource to a market-oriented commodity.[32]

Effects on Israel's foreign policy in the region

Israel's new approach towards the seas has affected its relations with most of its immediate neighbours, as well with some regional actors. In the following section, we investigate the specific ways in which this occurred.

Jordan

The recent Israeli gas discoveries in the sea added another incentive for Israeli-Jordanian collaboration. Specifically, making Jordan dependent on energy supply from Israel increases the political leverage of the latter on the former. In September 2016 Israel and Jordan signed an agreement in which Israel is set to provide energy-starved Jordan with enough natural gas to

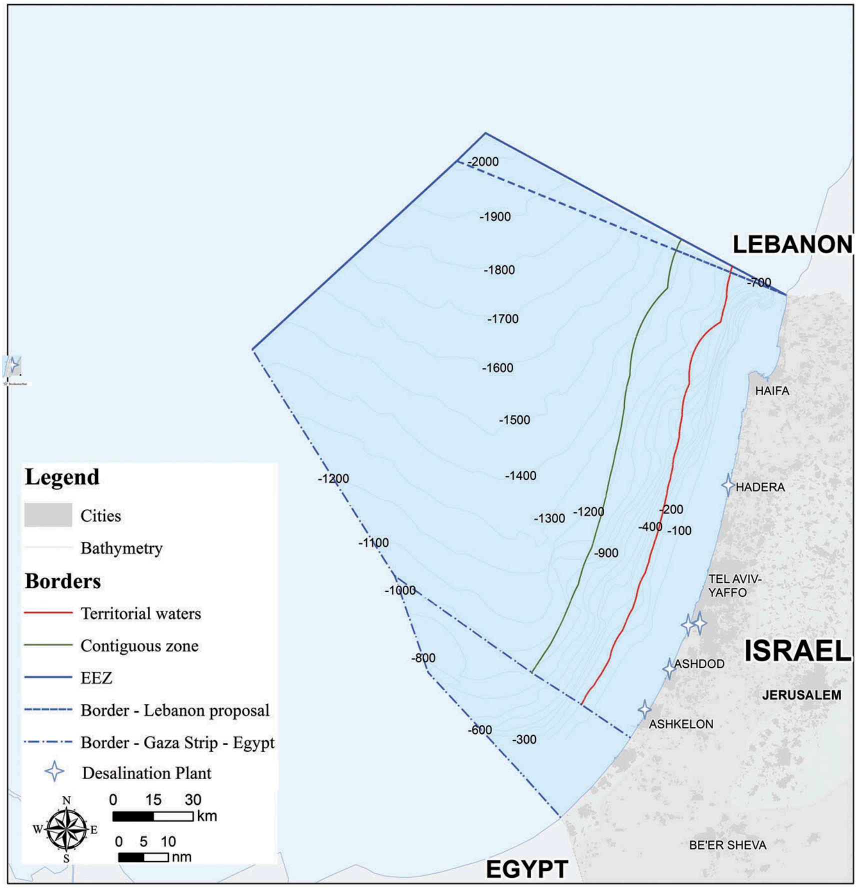

Figure 1. Israel's[31] sea water desalination plants, 2018.

Map created by authors, based on information from Israel Water Authority, *Desalination Facilities in Israel*; Korial, "Inside View"; Teschner, Garb, and Paavola, "The Role of Technology."

make up 40% of its electricity. Given the animosity towards Israel among the masses in the region, news of the agreement was received with some opposition by part of the Jordanian public.[33] This shift in Israeli-Jordanian relations is very different from the historic level of maritime collaboration between the two states, as before Israel's turn to the sea, Israel and Jordan only engaged in a few relatively small scale marine and coastal cooperation initiatives in the Gulf of Aqaba.[34]

However, one proposed marine-related project worth noting has become increasingly relevant in the past decade. The Red Sea Dead Sea Canal (RSDSC), in advanced planning stages, is intended to provide desalinated water for Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli citizens of the Jordan Valley. As part of this project, seawater is to be pumped from the Gulf and transferred via pipes all the way to the Dead Sea, where the brine will be disposed. While the initial idea of a canal going from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea is almost 120 years old, it originally had to do (only) with the idea of producing hydroelectric power. In 1977, an Israeli governmental committee approved the project, but it was abandoned in 1985 due to the UN ruling that it would contradict international law, as the canal was to pass through Jordan and Gaza without their approval.[35]

It was only in the last decade that interest in the project was reignited by billionaire Yizhak Tshuva, coincidentally owner of Delek (the same company that developed most of Israel's offshore gas), this time with the canal not only as a source of energy but rather as a source for desalinated water for Jordan, the West Bank and Israel, as well as bringing people and businesses to the (currently arid) area. Tshuva officially unveiled his plan in 2008, and expressed his willingness, as well as that of other business moguls he had reportedly recruited, to invest in the canal, which he saw as a solution that would make the Jordan valley a 'Valley of Peace', with thriving agriculture, industry and tourism for all involved parties.[36]

Although Tshuva later took back his offer to spearhead the project, the Israeli and Jordanian governments continued to develop it, asking the World Bank to perform a feasibility study, which took place between 2008 and 2013. The World Bank recommendations proposed a smaller-scale pilot project for desalinated water from the Gulf.[37] In February 2015, an agreement was signed between Israel and Jordan regarding the RSDSC.[38] It included a gradual construction of the desalination plant and the pipes (using a BOT process), limited desalination with water provided to Jordan and Israel (with quotas and water exchanges agreed between the two), and a clause granting the Palestinians the option to procure a certain amount of drinking water from Israel.[39] In June 2016, 17 groups of Israeli and international companies answered a bid issued by the Israeli government for the project, including that of Tshuva.[40] In December 2016, $400 million was pledged (both as loans and as grants) by the US, the EU and other states to finance the first stage of the project, intended to supply 100 MCM of desalinated water to Jordan, the West Bank and Israel. Development is planned to begin in 2018 and end in 2020.[41]

To conclude, Israel has exploited its recent technological and energy assets in the maritime domain to deepen its relationship with the Jordanian regime and increase the latter's dependence on Israel in the supply of two crucial natural resources – energy and fresh water. The new agreements on gas and the planned RSDSC project represent a recent and unequivocal break from the traditional low-key relationship between the states.[42] The level of collaboration and its long-term strategic implications are unique to the maritime domain, and are a clear and direct consequence of Israel's turn to the sea.

Cyprus and Greece

On 10 July 2011, the Israeli government approved an internal decision (3452) that announced the boundaries of Israel's EEZ in the Mediterranean Sea, and was later submitted to the United Nations.[43] On 17 December 2010, Israel and Cyprus signed a formal bilateral agreement, specifying the agreed maritime border between the two states.[44] In addition, both agreed to collaborate in gas exploration along their joint border, and to jointly promote Israel's connection to the European gas pipeline and electricity grid through Cyprus and Greece.[45] This set of agreements caused some friction between the Greek-Cypriot government in the southern part of Cyprus (that signed the agreements), and the Turkish government, which claims that the agreements have no standing without the consent of the Turkish-Cypriot government.[46]

These agreements with Cyprus and Greece are part of a general rapprochement between the two states and Israel in the past few decades. Up until the 1970s relations between Israel and Greece were very limited, with Greece officially recognising Israel as a state only in 1990. However, cooperation increased after the turn of the century, and marked a new peak with Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's official visit to Greece in 2010. The large offshore natural gas discoveries during those years, as well as Europe's ever growing demand for a stable supply of natural gas, contributed to furthering the emerging alignment between Israel, Cyprus and Greece.[47] One prominent realm of collaboration between Israel and Greece in recent years has been occasional joint drills between the navies and air forces of the countries. This collaboration on military and security issues indicates a clear shift in Greece's previous pro-Palestinian stance. This shift was clearly manifested in May 2011, almost a year after the first Gaza flotilla and the *Mavi Marmara* incident, when Greece forces boarded Gaza Freedom Flotilla vessels in order to prevent activists from using Greek ports as a departure point for a second flotilla.[48]

Israel's turn to the Mediterranean Sea, and the convergence of Israeli national interests with Greek and Cypriote interests, especially regarding energy, the economy and security, facilitated the formation of a new regional axis between them. This axis not only marks a change in Israel's energy security, but also elevates Israel's regional geostrategic status and modifies the strategic balance in the East Mediterranean. Israel's awareness to and development of its offshore resources and naval capacity had a pivotal role in this newly formed alliance, and it is no accident that relations between these states became closer as offshore gas development became more viable for both Israel and Cyprus. The relationship between the two latter states, in particular, was a direct result of their heightened awareness to their shared maritime border and the desire of both states to legitimise and protect their maritime areas and energy resource from other regional actors.

Turkey

In the mid-1990s, Israel and Turkey signed agreements for free trade (1997) and extensive military cooperation (1996). However, relations between the states cooled off significantly after the AKP ("Justice and Development Party") won the Turkish election in 2002, with Turkey openly criticising Israeli attacks on Hamas and Hezbollah in the 2000s, and claiming Israel is to blame for the stalemate in Israeli–Palestinian peace talks and that it has used excessive force towards Palestinian combatants and civilians.[49] Thus, despite potential cost-effectiveness, transferring Israeli gas to Europe through Turkey was perceived as a less viable option in recent years, due to tense Israeli–Turkish relations following the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident.[50] However, in June 2016 Israel and Turkey signed a reconciliation agreement that includes US$20 million compensation to the families of Turkish casualties in the incident, an eventual return of ambassadors, and initial talks on a possible natural gas pipeline between the two countries. Israel also agreed that Turkey will be allowed to provide humanitarian aid and build infrastructure facilities in the Gaza Strip, including the construction of a water desalination plant in Gaza.[51]

Two elements of Israeli maritime policy shaped its relationship with Turkey. First, Israel's determination to control Palestinian waters in the Mediterranean, through the Gaza blockade, was the catalyst for acts of violence at sea, which further severed diplomatic ties between the two states. On the other hand, Israel's intention to export its recently discovered offshore gas played a key role in bringing the relationship between the two states back on track. While other Turkish energy-related interests, such as developing additional gas resources, decreasing dependence on Russian gas and pushing Iranian influence out of the area had most likely contributed to Turkey's willingness to renormalise ties with Israel, the fact that the first item on the agenda was an Israeli–Turkish pipeline indicates that Israeli offshore resources were a significant incentive for normalisation.[52] On the Israeli side, a gas pipeline to Turkey is one of the most viable and profitable solutions for Israel's gas export needs. Indeed, while other, non-energy-related, incentives for normalisation between the two countries exist (e.g. mutual trade agreements) collaboration on such a large-scale project would necessitate a qualitative change in terms of mutual intergovernmental cooperation and long-term interdependence between them. Importantly, Israel's new maritime assets also represent new diplomatic challenges and cost–benefit calculations: since the construction of two parallel pipelines – one to Cyprus-Greece, and the other to Turkey – is most likely not a feasible plan, preferring one option over the other will determine Israel's potential allies (and adversaries) in the region in years to come.

Lebanon

Israel's 2001 announcement regarding its maritime boundaries clashed with Lebanese claims to its maritime areas. More specifically, the two countries disagree over a contested area of approximately 850 square kilometres, which is assumed to be rich in natural gas.[53] Consequently, Israel has thus far objected the exploration of oil and gas in the disputed region by international companies, under Lebanese licence.[54] Since 2011, the US has tried to mediate an agreed border demarcation scheme between Israel and Lebanon,[55] and sided, at least informally, with the Lebanese interpretation of the border dispute. However, Israel consistently refuses to accept the Lebanese standpoint and declines any indirect discussions regarding the Israel–Lebanon maritime border via the UN.[56] Israel's Karish gas discovery in 2013 has led to Lebanese claims that Israel has violated Lebanon's EEZ rights,[57] and since 2015 Lebanon has pushed for the resumption of US efforts to resolve the matter, stating that extraction of gas by Israel in the contested area would be considered an act of war.[58]

Cyprus has also tried, on numerous occasions, to mediate between Lebanon and Israel, at least in part in order to facilitate gas explorations for both Israel and Cyprus in and near the contested area.[59] The speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, approached French President Francois Hollande, requesting that France mediate in its maritime border dispute with Israel, claiming that 'If the situation remains as it is, it might ignite a new war against Israel that would unite all Lebanese citizens who would reclaim the honour of their nation, as happened in 2006'.[60]

As of yet, Israel has refrained from drilling in the contested area, and a map of new licenced areas for gas exploration, published in August 2016 by Israel's Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources (MNIEWR), excludes this particular area.[61] However, it seems that neither Israel nor Lebanon have stepped down their claims to the contested area. In early 2017, Lebanon published a tender for drilling companies to explore the area on its behalf, and the Israeli government stated its intention to approve a new Marine Areas Act in Knesset, in which the disputed area is defined as part of Israel's EEZ. The Lebanese government has already responded to this statement, claiming that the proposed bill was a new attack on Lebanon's sovereignty and is equal to a declaration of war. Israeli officials, on the other hand, claim that Lebanon is the one that has disturbed the status quo, and appealed to the UN, asking it to ensure that Lebanon respects international maritime law regarding the disputed area.[62]

The emerging maritime boundary contestation between the two states manifests a distinct dynamic in the already hostile relationship between the two states. This is especially true with regard to the different dynamics on land and at sea. While Israeli forces operate occasionally on Lebanese land territory against Palestinian and Lebanese combatant groups, Israel and Lebanon have not contested the 'Blue Line' – the internationally recognised borderline between them – since Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000. This is not to say that there have not been border violations by both sides, but nevertheless the border was not put into question by either state.[63] In contrast, Israel's (as well as Lebanon's) enhanced awareness of available maritime resources lead the two to contest each other's boundary claims in the maritime realm. Also important, the conflict dynamic on land is characterised by frequent violence and rare legal and diplomatic efforts by international actors. Conversely, the conflict at sea rarely includes violence and involves ongoing international mediation efforts.[64]

Egypt

Israel and Egypt have also dealt with maritime issues in the past few years, relating mainly to border demarcation, energy resources and naval buildup. The Israel-Egypt 1979 peace agreement determines the maritime border between the two states in the Red Sea. However, there remained some controversy regarding a small marine 'triangle' of a few dozen square kilometres. Israel claimed that the maritime border should be the continuation of the land border, as did an international arbitration committee, but Egypt disagreed, and the status of that area was left undetermined. Egyptian and Israeli navy vessels refrained from entering the area, but Israeli gambling ships began using the triangle for their cruises. In 2003, the Israeli Foreign Ministry prohibited the activity of gambling ships, and declared that to all intents and purposes the 'triangle' is considered Israeli territory.[65]

The maritime boundary situation in the Mediterranean is murkier. Recent gas findings off the coast of both countries, in their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), have led them to re-evaluate their maritime borders, especially as Egypt did not agree to delimitation proclamations made by Israel regarding the Egyptian-Israeli border following bilateral delimitation agreements between Israel-Cyprus, Egypt-Cyprus and Lebanon-Cyprus. Egypt has also signed further agreements with Cyprus and Greece to ensure that Israeli and Turkish exploration efforts would not breach the EEZ rights and interests of Egypt, Cyprus or Greece.[66]

Subsequent to these agreements, a huge natural gas field was found in 2015 in Egyptian waters – Zohr. Larger than Israel's Leviathan and estimated at 850 BCM, it is considered the 20th largest gas field found worldwide. The gas find is considered a 'game changer' for Egypt, though it is still unclear how it will affect Israeli–Egyptian relations, and whether it will contribute to or lessen tensions between the two states.[67] Egypt, which previously exported gas to Israel,[68] has now become a potential competitor of Israel for natural gas in the Middle East. Egypt's Zohr gas field discovery also provides attractive options for companies that are or were interested in Leviathan, and in exporting gas through the Mediterranean.[69] Despite predictions regarding a long development period that could give Israel the advantage, Egypt signed a US$12 billion deal with Italian ENI to develop the Zohr field by end of 2017.[70] ENI had suggested in the past (2015) that the combined capacity of Israeli, Egyptian and Cypriot gas[71] may serve as an energy hub for European consumers. Although talks between the gas companies continue, no official agreement has been announced.[72]

Egypt has also embarked on a significant 'turn to the sea', with the widening of the Suez Canal which was completed in August 2015, and the impressive buildup of its navy, with new French and Russian surface platforms, including two Mistral-type helicopter carriers and new German-made submarines. Rising tensions with Iran, Turkey and extreme Muslim groups in and near Egypt, rising challenges of governance in the Sinai Peninsula, and the ongoing civil war in Yemen have all led Egypt to enhance its naval cooperation and coordination with Israel.[73] The two states' turn to the sea has caused both friction and opened the door for naval and possibly energy cooperation, although it is still unclear whether the latter will develop into an actual bilateral (or trilateral) collaboration.

The Palestinian Authority

The 1994 Gaza and Jericho Accords stipulated that a special maritime zone – providing economic rights to the Palestinians but maintaining Israeli security authority – would be set for Gaza, extending up to 20 nautical miles off its coast (the Gaza Marine Activity Zone). However, these agreements were considered intermediate, and Israel revised its policy unilaterally regarding those territories in the years to follow, in light of the collapse of the Oslo Process.[74] During the 'al-Aqsa Intifada' (2000–2004), fishing rights were revoked and later restricted to 12 nautical miles due to security considerations, in 2006 the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) limited Palestinian maritime access to 6 nautical miles and in 2009 to only 3 nautical miles off the coast of Gaza.[75] In 2015, the Palestinian Authority became the 167th signatory of the United Nation's Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which means that according to international law it could now be allowed to claim its EEZ rights in the area.[76]

In 2000, the Israeli government allowed the Palestinians to search for fossil fuels off the coast of the Gaza Strip. British Gas carried out offshore drillings in the area. In August 2000, reserves were discovered in the Gaza Marine gas field, with an estimated 30–40 BCM. However, to date, British Gas has not developed the field, among other reasons due to Egyptian competition and the unstable political situation in the Gaza Strip.[77] Following Hamas' ascendance to power in Gaza in 2007, Israel revoked some of the Palestinian maritime privileges, including the development of the Gaza Marine gas field, which is located within the special zone.[78] British Gas (now Shell) still owns 60% of the field, alongside the privately owned Lebanese company CCC (30%) and the PA (10%), and there have been talks in recent years regarding the supply of natural gas from Gaza Marine to the PA and Jordan, as well as to Israel. However, no actual agreements have been signed to date, and in 2016 Israel raised the possibility that the Gaza Strip, and later several other PA cities, would receive gas from the Leviathan field, with the infrastructure financed by the Middle East Quartet.[79]

Desalination by Israel or with Israeli assistance was also considered a solution for the Palestinian and Jordanian water shortage. An Israeli plan was suggested for the construction of a desalination plant on the Israeli coast to provide fresh water to the Palestinian West Bank. However, the Palestinians are worried that such a plant would dramatically increase Israeli leverage over them. The Palestinians also worry that such a move would hinder their claims to the Mountain Aquifer, although Israeli water abundance – as a result of its increased desalination capacity – may facilitate more flexibility in negotiations with the Palestinians over water resources.[80]

In June 2016, Yisrael Katz, the Israeli Minister of Transportation, announced a plan to build a 3-square-mile artificial island off the Gaza coast, linked to Gaza via bridge. While Prime Minister Netanyahu has not lent his support to the project, Katz has already stated that the island is intended to include, among other things, a seaport and an airport. Katz maintained that this would alleviate the economic hardship in the currently blockaded Gaza Strip, reconnecting its residents with the outside world, while not compromising Israeli security concerns. While Israel will supervise the island to prevent threats to its security, the ports are intended to be managed by the Palestinians and representatives of other international partners to this endeavour.[81]

Israeli–Palestinian disputes regarding coastal and marine resources and activities offshore Gaza have increased in recent years and have brought about strategic challenges to Israel, including the continued maritime blockade over Gaza, preventing Hamas from enhancing its naval capabilities and fighting off Hamas attempts to infiltrate and attack Israel by sea or strike against Israeli maritime assets. Notwithstanding, the Gaza coastline and its offshore areas also offer potential opportunities for conflict management, and in particular provide solutions for Palestinian needs with (supposedly) little risk to the Israeli side. These include developing the Gaza Marine gas field for the benefit of Gazan Palestinians, constructing a port in Gaza for Palestinian civilians on the coast or on an artificial island and erecting a coastal desalination plant. These maritime-based changes, if implemented, would change the balance of power significantly, as residents of the Gaza Strip currently rely on Israel for most of their energy, fresh water, goods and international travel. On the other hand, it could further separate the Gaza Strip from the West Bank and decrease international legitimacy for Palestinian demands to establish a continued land strip between the two areas.[82]

Conclusion

The state of Israel has seen a fundamental change in relation to the maritime domain in the past two decades, amounting to a 'turn to the sea'. The current article demonstrates that this turn created new risks and opportunities for Israel's relationships with its neighbours. The delineation of maritime borders in the context of expected resources created a new conflict with Lebanon, added to the tension in Gaza, and hold the potential for tension with Egypt. Relations with Turkey also deteriorated, at least in part due to Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. Its 'turn to the sea' further created new vulnerabilities for Israel. With over 50% of its energy and water supplies coming from the sea, Israel faced new potential security threats from regional foes such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and has consequently made a greater effort to provide security at sea.

At the same time, the 'turn to the sea' created new opportunities for Israel to cooperate and improve relations with its neighbours. These include an agreement to export gas to Jordan, as well as export and collaboration with Cyprus, Greece and Italy regarding offshore energy exploration, production and security in the Mediterranean Sea. Other possibilities for cooperation include collaboration with Jordan on water desalination, possible construction of gas pipelines between Israel and Egypt or Turkey, and finally planning maritime solutions that will give Gaza independent access to energy, water and international commerce and travel. These – actual or potential – actions could not only improve relations with regional actors, but also create a different balance of power in the East Mediterranean. They would also promote Israel's goals of economic prosperity, an enhanced strategic position in the region, energy self-sufficiency and water security.

Thus, large-scale seawater desalination provides Israel with a key for solving broader regional challenges such as scarcity of drinking water in the Middle East – a cause of tension and violence in the area for many years. Moreover, potential gas or water exports to adversary states, including the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey, could serve to improve Israel's geopolitical standing in the region, and form the foundation for additional cooperation in fields of mutual interest, such as countering extreme Islamic groups that pose a threat to all five regimes.

The case presented has shown that Israel's change in maritime policy and activity provides additional resources that could potentially help peace-building efforts pertaining to protracted conflicts that are often framed as deadlocked and/or zero-sum conflicts. Moreover, the article also shows that maritime-related foreign policy can incentivise states to develop new policies to long-term land-based problems, creating potential for trade relations and other forms of collaboration, and even co-dependence.

Other considerations are and always will be a part of every state's foreign policy, regardless of its maritime policy and activities. The latter exist in a reality that is dictated by other interests and events, which are all intertwined, and it is therefore difficult at times to ascertain what is the cause and what is the result between a state's policy and its awareness and access to maritime resources. Nevertheless, in the Israeli case it is evident that these extraordinary and drastic changes in Israeli foreign policy, as well as in foreign policies of some of its neighbouring states, were made possible by – and were often the direct result of – the described change in maritime activity. Thus, even if other considerations (political, economic, strategic) exist, Israel's turn to the sea is responsible for a major shift in Israel's foreign policy and, potentially, in its foreign relations, possibly contributing to regional stability.

Notes

1. Khadduri, "East Mediterranean Gas," 111–17.
2. Jones, Lieberknecht, and Qiu, "Marine Spatial Planning," 256–64.
3. Teff-Seker and Portman, "Stakeholder Involvement," 24–32.
4. Ibid.; and Teff-Seker, Eiran, and Rubin, "Israel's 'Turn to the Sea'".
5. Fischhendler and Nathan, "In the Name of Energy Security," 155.
6. Ibid.; and Shaffer, "Israel – New Natural Gas Producer," 5379–87.
7. MNIEWR, "The Natural Gas Sector in Israel."
8. Fischhendler and Nathan, "In the Name of Energy Security," 152–62.
9. Azran, "The Plan."
10. Tsafos, "Israeli Gas"; *Financial Times*, "Israel's Leviathan."
11. Gutman, "Triple Power"; Tziarras and Gabriel, "Full of Gas."
12. Bar-Eli, "Greek Firm"; *Reuters*, "Israel Okays Energian"; *InCyprus*, "Ambitious East Med Pipeline"; Margalit, "Underwater Gas Pipe from Israel to Europe."
13. Scheer, "Insight."
14. Melman, "Report: Israel is Improving."
15. Eiran and Malin, "The Sum of All Fears," 77–89.
16. Mahanaimi, "Israel Stations Nuclear Missile Submarines."
17. Pedhazur, "A Harmful Use."
18. Rapaport, "Israel is Negotiating."
19. Kedem, Magal, and Zur, "The Expansion of the Indian Navy," 89–102; Government of Israel, *Decision 2496*.
20. Ibid.
21. Shabtai, "The Concept of the Campaign," 24–7.

22. Oren, "Between Karine A and KLOS C."
23. Migdalovitz, "Israel's Blockade on Gaza"; Ravid, "Israel and Turkey."
24. Cohen, "The Ministry of Defense."
25. Ibid.
26. Allan, "Hydro-Peace," 255–72; Sofer, *Rivers of Fire*.
27. Spier, "Status Report"; Teschner, Garb, and Paavola, "The Role of Technology."
28. Ibid.
29. Israel Water Authority, *Desalination Facilities in Israel*; Korial, "Inside View."
30. Teschner, Garb, and Paavola, "The Role of Technology," 91–103.
31. Based on information from the cited sources (see 28 and 29).
32. Israel Water Authority, *Desalination Facilities in Israel*; Ward and Becker, "Cost of Water for Peace," 5806–26.
33. *Financial Times*, "Israel's Leviathan."
34. Four of the most advanced were the joint committees of the Eilat-Aqaba Municipal Cooperation (AEMC), the Red Sea Marine Peace Park (RSMPP), the Joint Oil Spill Contingency Plan (JOSCP) and the Red-Sea-Dead-Sea Canal (RSDSC), see Portman, and Teff-Seker, "Factors of Success and Failure," 1–17.
35. Coren, "Billionaire Yitzhak Tshuva Unveils."
36. Ibid.
37. Markel, Alster, and Beyth, "The Red Sea," 65–79.
38. Al-Khalidi, "Jordan, Israel Agree."
39. Ibid.
40. Cohen, "The RSDSC Tender." Israel's Prime Minister's office is reportedly working on another contingency plan that does not (currently) include Jordanian or Palestinian involvement, and may therefore conflict with the aforementioned agreement between the states (ibid.).
41. Basuk, "Approximately $400 Million Collected."
42. Arieli and Cohen, "Policy Entrepreneurs."
43. Tzimerman, "Law and Jurisprudence."
44. United Nations, *Agreement between the Government*.
45. *Globes*, "Cyprus Seeks to Import"; Spier, "Status Report," 1–5.
46. Coats, "Eastern Mediterranean Gas"; *Naharnet*, "Cypriot Speaker Urges Reinforcement."
47. Tziampiris, "The Israeli-Greek Rapprochement"; Mekel, "Israel-Greece Relations."
48. Mekel, "Israel-Greece Relations," 16–8.
49. Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey–Israel Relations."
50. Ravid, "Israel and Turkey"; Tziarras and Gabriel, "Full of Gas."
51. Ibid.; and Lieberman and Labott, "Israel, Turkey Strike Deal."
52. Austvik and Rzayeva, "Turkey in the Geopolitics of Gas," 14.
53. Ravid, "US Backs Lebanon"; Tzimerman, "Law and Jurisprudence."
54. Ayat, "Lebanon Pushes for Resumption."
55. Ravid, "US Backs Lebanon"; Moussa, "US Tries to Mediate."
56. Ibid.
57. Ayat, "Lebanon Pushes for Resumption."
58. Ibid.
59. Coats, "Eastern Mediterranean Gas."
60. Groisman, "Lebanon Pushes for French Mediation."

61. MNIEWR, "Minister Steinitz Promotes Opening the Sea"; MNIEWR, *Recommendation of the Oil Council.*
62. Ben-David, "Moving the Border"; McKernan, "Israeli Bill."
63. Williams, "Talking to Hezbollah," 167–70.
64. Eiran, "Between Land and Sea," 1–17.
65. Egozi, "Decided."
66. Hussein, "New Gas Fields"; Rubin, Eiran, and Magal, *Dwelling at the Haven.*
67. Ibid.;*Globes*, "Egypt Works Fast."
68. In 2011 the Egypt-Israel gas pipe was sabotaged and gas has stopped arriving in Israel from Egypt. In 2016 Israel and Egypt reached a settlement in which Egypt compensated Israel for (part of) its losses. See Gutman, "Report: Israel and Egypt."
69. Scheer, "Insight."
70. *Globes*, "Egypt Works Fast."
71. Scheer, "Insight."
72. Yefet, "Egyptian Minister."
73. Rubin, Eiran, and Magal, *Dwelling at the Haven*, 71–2.
74. Stocker, "No EEZ Solution," 579–97.
75. Ibid.; Lin, "Gaza's Shrinking Borders."
76. Rubin, Eiran, and Magal, *Dwelling at the Haven*.
77. Even, "Israel's Natural Gas Resources," 11–12.
78. Stocker, "No EEZ Solution," 579–97.
79. Cohen, "Leviathan Will Supply."
80. Keinon, "Transportation Minister Plans."
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.

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