

LEBANON WARNS ISRAEL ABOUT "PLAYING WITH FIRE"

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Date: July 2011

Lebanon has warned Israel it is "playing with fire" by staking out energy claims in the Mediterranean Sea, where Beirut says Israel's discoveries are in its territory.

The Israeli Cabinet, heading off another dispute similar to the Sheba Farms land dispute at the northern border, approved a "marine economic zone proposal" Sunday after Lebanon presented maps to the United Nations, marking maritime borders that would include part of the giant Leviathan and [Tamar](#) fields. The United Nations previously [has refused](#) to take responsibility for marking the maritime borders.

The Lebanese daily As-Safir, in an article under the headline "War of Oil: Another Phase of Israeli Offense," reported that Lebanese Minister of Energy and Water Joubran Bassil said Israel "is playing with fire "by violating Lebanon's maritime border and oil rights."

He added, "Obviously we will prevent any violation. However, in case of violation, Israel will not be the only damaged part, but also large companies that cooperate with it. We, in Lebanon, respect the rights of others, and we don't want to violate the rights of others, but at the same time, we do not want someone to attack us. Lebanon will not give up its rights or its borders"

Israeli firms [discovered the gas fields](#), which also are believed to hold large commercially viable [oil deposits](#), two years ago. Afterwards, Lebanon said the discoveries are in its territory, and it recently has announced that a Norwegian company will start a seismic research offshore.

Hizbullah, with its eyes on the [rich reserves](#), previously has threatened that Israel is risking war by planning to "steal" its offshore energy reserves.

Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon Sunday morning denied a report in the Haaretz newspaper that the United States already has backed the Lebanese position.

"The dispute over the border with Lebanon was created by the Lebanese," he said on Army Radio. "It is incorrect that the Americans sided with Lebanon in this dispute. There are very objective and organized rules, and I think that Israel will have no problem proving its ownership of the maritime areas that are ostensibly in dispute."

He also said that Israel has unsuccessfully tried to talk with Lebanese officials about maritime borders, despite the countries' officially being enemy states. "We've been in contact with Lebanon for a very long time," he explained. "We have an interest in demarcating and setting all the borders, but they refuse."

"Even the current land border, which is recognized by the United Nations, was demarcated without Lebanese involvement or recognition," Ayalon said. "After the

huge gas reserves were discovered, they [suddenly woke up](#). Now that they've suddenly sent maps, we have no choice but to set the borders ourselves."

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman charged that Lebanon is "under pressure from Hizbullah" and "is looking for friction." He added that there are "very strong arguments under international law" that back Israel's claims.