

**Full scope of Beirut disaster 'still not understood,' states former Israeli military intelligence chief**

By Yaakov Lappin

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**Identity of those who own ammonium-nitrate warehouse being investigated • Substance since 2014 means not used for agriculture • Lebanese state already under economic and social pressure.**

A day after two blasts—one of them an enormous—ripped through Beirut, causing untold destruction, it's still not possible to grasp the true scope of the calamity, a former Israeli Military Intelligence chief has said.

Speaking by video conference to journalists, Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin, who served as former deputy commander of the Israeli Air Force and is now executive director of the Institute for National Security Studies, noted that Israel has offered medical assistance to Lebanon. "This is a terrible, terrible disaster. The big question is how many people are missing. The numbers are between 1,000 to 4,000."

Analyzing the incidents that led to the explosion, Yadlin said it "started from a small explosion at what looks like a fireworks storage [facility]. And then the big explosion came," he said, citing the 2,700 tons of reported ammonium nitrate stored at a warehouse at the port's dock.

Ammonium nitrate "is material used to develop explosives," he said. "It is also good for agriculture, but the fact that it was there since 2014 is saying that it was not taken for agriculture. The purpose of this storage was for explosives."

Regarding the question of who owned the warehouse and why the material was there, Yadlin said "this is something I guess that the Lebanese authorities are investigating."

"Very much like his Iranian masters, [Nasrallah] failed operationally."

He added that it cannot be proven at this stage that it was a Hezbollah warehouse. If, however, signs emerge that this is indeed the case, it would form a "very serious allegation against Hezbollah," which could turn into significant political pressure on it to end its role as a military power in Lebanon and delegate that role to the official Lebanese military, he assessed.

Ammonium nitrate has been used before by Hezbollah operatives abroad in planning out a terror attack. In 2015, a Lebanese-Canadian man tied to Hezbollah was convicted in Cyprus after he was found in possession of 8.5 tons of ammonium nitrate in his

basement. That same year, the Mossad told authorities in the U.K. of four properties in North West London that contained three tons of ammonium nitrate belonging to Hezbollah. Earlier this year, the Mossad again tipped off Germany on Hezbollah's activities on its soil, including warehouses in the south of the country where Hezbollah stashed hundreds of kilograms of ammonium nitrate.

"This is another blow to the Lebanese state that was already [suffering] a huge crisis," said Yadlin. The factors that created this crisis included severe economic, financial, political and social problems.

Even prior to the blast, tensions were rising in the country. In that context, he explained, "what is important is that Hezbollah is using civilian neighborhoods to store weapons. They use civilian neighborhoods as shields for their activity. There are elements in Lebanon and the international community calling on Hezbollah to stop hiding behind the excuse that it needs these weapons against Israel."

Nuclear capability and hegemony in the Middle East

Yadlin pointed out that Israel hasn't attacked Lebanon in 14 years, and that the two countries have "no real dispute" over borders. Even a disagreement over offshore gas-drilling rights in the Mediterranean Sea "was already brokered by the Americans."

Hezbollah, he said, is looking for excuses to keep the conflict going with Israel. "This is a very good time for Lebanese to tell Hezbollah: 'We have so many other problems, give us a break from your excuses for Iranian interests that running behind you.' The issue starts with Iran sending advanced weapons to Hezbollah via Syria."

"This is another blow to the Lebanese state that was already [suffering] a huge crisis."

More broadly, the Iranian terror axis of which Hezbollah is part of is under great pressure, said Yadlin. Factors like America's "maximum pressure" campaign on Tehran—added to economic dysfunction, collapsing oil prices, Israel's campaign to roll back Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, the coronavirus pandemic, the recent assassination of Quds Force Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani—have all contributed to growing discontent among the general populace.

"The Iranians are continuing, despite all of the difficulties, with two strategic efforts: come as close as



Drone footage of the aftermath of the explosions in Beirut, Aug. 5, 2020. Source: Screenshot.

possible to nuclear capability and to have hegemony in the Middle East,” stated Yadlin.

So far, Iran has failed operationally to deter Israel, and Syria is focused on what remains of its civil war in Idlib, so Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah decided to step up and attempt to “revenge any Israeli activities in Syria if Hezbollah terrorists will be killed as well. This is what happened last week, and Nasrallah decided to act,” he summed up.

Nasrallah attempted to calibrate his actions so that they would on the one hand kill a few Israeli soldiers, but on the other avoid all-out war. “Very much like his Iranian masters, he failed operationally,” said Yadlin.

Now, in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion, Nasrallah has found his excuse to “remove this issue from the agenda, especially if this warehouse was a Hezbollah warehouse,” he said. “And there are already a lot of voices in Lebanon that blame Hezbollah for the financial difficulties. There are new sanctions on Lebanon because

of Hezbollah. The banking system is collapsing because of Hezbollah. Every Lebanese knows that Hezbollah is the strongest military power in Lebanon with a lot of political influence.”

With all of these multiple crises in Lebanon, joined by the latest disaster in Beirut, some Lebanese civilians will likely be thinking “why do they need another dimension of destruction that will come from Nasrallah attacking Israel? So I think he will find a ladder to come down from the tree,” said Yadlin.

Asked whether the Beirut disaster will set the stage for the International Monetary Fund to provide major assistance to Lebanon, Yadlin said that remains unclear. “It could on the one hand say, ‘Let’s put aside everything and help Lebanon.’ On the other hand ... [the blast] may help those who say Hezbollah is the problem, and that this was a Hezbollah warehouse. The IMF could say ‘until you move Hezbollah away from its positions that they took in Lebanon, we are not helping you despite the disaster.’”

## Lebanon Lurches toward Disaster, While Posing a Threat to Israel

By Benny Avni

nysun.com

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### Explosions, trials, and Iranian hegemony.

The Pyongyang-Seoul gap is often depicted in night-time pictures: the darkened, Communistic North versus the well-lit, free South. Something similar can now be said of the light gap, illustrated at right, between Tel Aviv (above) and Beirut (below).

Beyond endless electric outages, Lebanon is suffering a perfect storm of bad news. The last thing on the minds of its rulers, therefore, should be a war with powerful (and well-lit) Israel. Except, as seen in a series of recent incidents, it isn’t.

Beirut’s mid-20th century reputation as “Paris of the Mideast” is long forgotten. Corruption, war, internal strife, and too much reliance on the kindness of strangers have taken their toll. Far from a liberal Arab city of lights, the country is on a long, dark march downward.

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his cronies get rich while inflation is rampant, social services are non-existent, and few can afford basic necessities. Coronavirus casualties are on the rise. A mysterious, deadly mega-explosion Tuesday at the Beirut port added to the feeling that no one is in charge. Worse: Lebanon has long been occupied by the Iranian puppet organization Hezbollah, the country’s true power and the only decider on national security matters.

Hezbollah gradually took over after its last all-out war with Israel, in 2006. Hassan Nasrallah, the terror organization’s long-time chief, tacitly admitted afterwards he wouldn’t have started that losing battle. Yet, he managed to convince the entire Arab world he’d won it. That rhetorical victory, and some ruthless maneuvering,

including deadly attacks on top political rivals, made him Lebanon’s most powerful political player.

Since 2006, even as Hezbollah claims it needs to arm to defend the country from Israel, Mr. Nasrallah has carefully avoided major border flare-ups. He fears the wrath of the Israeli Defense Forces. Now, however, tensions are rising.

“The last thing Hezbollah needs now is war with Israel, but I’m not sure that’s also Hezbollah’s logic,” says a former IDF officer, Sarit Zehavi, who resides near the Lebanese border. “Remember 2006,” Ms. Zehavi, founder of Alma Center, a think tank specializing in security issues at Israel’s northern border. Like now, she notes, Lebanon then was under much internal and external pressure.

Hezbollah spent the following uneasy 14-year ceasefire solidifying its political control over Lebanon’s politics and, most importantly, modernizing its arsenal. A wholly-owned subsidiary of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps, it also became involved in the Syrian civil war, helping to secure Bashar Al-Assad’s hold on power.

The IDF, meanwhile, targeted transfers of precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah from Iran and hit munition plants in Syria and Lebanon. It also worked to prevent attempts, by Hezbollah and Tehran’s IRGC, to establish a permanent presence on Israel’s doorstep on the Syrian side of the Golan.

Two weeks ago tensions rose after IDF jets hit a Syrian missile factory, killing a high-ranking Hezbollah operative. Mr. Nasrallah long ago claimed such attacks were a red line. Last week a Hezbollah unit was chased



away after attempting to infiltrate a mountainous IDF border base. No casualties were reported on either side.

Then “IDF troops on the southern Golan Heights just thwarted an IED attack by four former terrorists,” army spokesman Jonathan Conricus tweeted on Sunday. “Former,” he later clarified, means the terrorists were killed. Mr. Conricus noted that Israel considers the Syrian government responsible, rather than Hezbollah. Either way, the IDF retaliated Monday night, when it bombed the Syrian position.

For now, then, Hezbollah’s attempts at retaliation for the recent killing of its officer proved unsuccessful. Still, on Wednesday Mr. Nasrallah intends to deliver a speech about the organization’s next moves. He may eye August 7, when a United Nation-mandated tribunal is expected to

issue a final verdict on the 2004 assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister. The tribunal has named only four suspects, all Hezbollah members.

Nasrallah may be tempted to direct the attention elsewhere — in speech, and perhaps in deed, in the form of raising border tensions, as well.

If Hezbollah launches a rocket attack, “my husband, children and I have nine seconds to run to shelter,” Ms. Zehavi says. She adds that by now the entire country is in Hezbollah’s rocket range, including the many precision missiles it possesses despite the IDF’s attempts at eliminating them. Yet, if past is prologue, the worst pain will surely be inflicted on the Lebanese people. They, let it be remembered, are already the ones in the dark.

## Chevron Now Owns a Stake in Israeli Natural-Gas Reserves. Here’s Why It Matters

By Oded Eran

inss.org.il

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### Big energy comes to the Jewish state.

Much strategic, political, and economic significance has been assigned to the announcement of the American gas and oil corporation Chevron that it reached an agreement to acquire Noble Energy, the American partner (holding 39.7 percent) in the consortium controlling the Leviathan natural gas field. Noble Energy also retains holdings in the Tamar gas field. The importance of the announcement stems from the size of the American company and the timing of the announcement. Chevron is considered to be one of the seven largest companies in the sector in the world in terms of the scope of its assets (\$237 billion at the end of 2019), the scope of its sales (\$140 billion in 2019), and its production capacity. Without a doubt, the move brings the American presence in the energy sector of the Eastern Mediterranean to a new level, which until recently was limited to the relatively minor involvement of energy giant Exxon in Cyprus and Noble Energy, which is a small American company in Israel. American companies discovered the potential in the region only after European companies carried out successful drilling in Egypt’s economic waters.

Chevron’s entry into Israel bears a number of political aspects. Chevron has extensive operations in Arab and Muslim countries, and has indirect significance regarding the efforts of countries and bodies around the world to boycott Israel. The involvement of an American company on the scale of Chevron will endow Israel with reinforced political status in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, which also includes Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy. The government of Jordan continues to withstand internal pressures exerted

by wide circles within the kingdom who oppose normalization with Israel and Noble Energy’s deal with the Jordanian electric company, whereby Jordan will be provided with three billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from the Israeli gas fields in the Mediterranean

Sea over a period of 15 years. The likelihood that Jordan will cede to the pressures exerted on it to cancel the agreement with Noble Energy will decrease in light of the disparity in size and power between the two American companies.

The entry of large American corporations into the eastern zone of the Mediterranean Sea may also have a restraining impact on the intentions of other actors, international and regional alike, regarding its political and

economic future. Russia has a long-time presence in the Middle East, which it might consider expanding in light of the tendency of US administrations since the Obama presidency to reduce the American presence in the region. Russia’s desire to expand its activity in the exploration for natural gas is well known, beyond its partnership in the consortium that acquired a concession in one of the regions explored in Lebanon’s economic waters. Turkey too, which in recent years has pursued an aggressive policy in the region, will need to take into consideration the presence and interests of two huge American corporations, Chevron and Exxon, which can be expected to exert pressure on Washington to “calm” Erdogan. Like other large American corporations, Chevron and Exxon also invest millions of dollars in lobbying Congress and the US administration.

On the surface, the change in ownership between the two American companies at the Israeli gas fields will not



The Leviathan natural-gas field in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Israel. Large finds in the Eastern Mediterranean have turned the region into a global energy source. PHOTO: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM/PRESS POOL

necessarily accelerate resolution of the controversy between Israel and Lebanon regarding the demarcation of the economic waters between them. Nonetheless, if Chevron finds it necessary and has an interest in doing so, it will certainly be able to use its economic and political clout to pressure the US administration to speed up its efforts to find a solution.

The entry into the region of an economic giant such as Chevron also conveys an important economic message, beyond the safety net with which it provides the natural gas sector in Israel. Indirectly, it constitutes additional recognition of the economic stability of the Israeli economy and its prevailing legal and administrative norms. On the one hand, the parties and the movements that have thus far opposed Israeli government policy regarding energy related matters, including the ratio of export of the natural gas and the location of the facilities designated for transporting the gas to Israel, will now face an adversary that has extensive economic and presumably political power. On the other hand, the Israeli government will need to prove that its decisions pertaining to energy matters are not dictated by the considerations of an economic giant such as the Chevron Corporation. Even the involvement of a relatively small American corporation such as Noble Energy led to accusations that Israeli government decisions were influenced by American lobbying of the government and company.

Since early 2020, the energy market has been trading water. From late 2019, the price of natural gas on the world market has dropped by 30 percent, and it is not expected to change as long as the pandemic continues to squeeze economic activity. The price drop makes it difficult for Israeli companies to mobilize the financial resources necessary to fund the continuation of exploratory drilling. Low natural gas prices raise the question of the profitability of production, even in the event of discovery of additional natural gas. A strong economic entity such as Chevron, with its proven abilities in the chain of operations that begin with locating oil and natural gas resources and conclude with the provision of electricity or gasoline to its customers, gives its Israeli partners a safety net.

An important question from a political and an economic standpoint concerns the impact that Chevron's involvement in the realm of natural gas production will have on the transport to external markets, and particularly the possibility of a Mediterranean gas pipeline from the Eastern Mediterranean to a port of entry in Europe. The pipeline, which is preferred from an economic and technical perspective, is what would connect up to the network of pipelines that exists in Turkey and is linked to Europe. Turkey's policy on the Cyprus conflict, its hostility toward Israel, and its rivalry with Egypt – as well as, but not solely because of the military and political intervention in the conflict in Libya – reduces the political feasibility of laying such a pipeline.

An alternative that is already employed is the conveyance of natural gas from Israel to Egypt, both for local consumption and, alternatively, for its liquefaction and transport in tankers to markets outside the region. In this context, Chevron's acquisition of Noble Energy at this stage is of no practical significance. A change in global natural gas consumption patterns, accompanied by a rise in prices, will require investments and the increased capacity of the natural gas facilities in Egypt, with the involvement of American corporations such as Chevron and Exxon.

Although the Israeli government is promoting the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas pipeline project, considerable doubt still exists regarding its technical, economic, and political feasibility. At a length of 1,900 kilometers, 1,300 of which are at sea, the pipeline, if and when it is completed, will transport approximately 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Israel and Cyprus to Europe each year. The cost of the pipeline has been estimated at 6 billion euros. In early January 2020, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel signed the framework agreement for the construction of the pipeline, and in July of this year the Israeli cabinet ratified the agreement. Turkey has already expressed its firm opposition to the project, and its dispatch of a drilling ship to Cypriot waters and its agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord regarding the demarcation of economic waters (November 2019) should be seen as part of Ankara's response to the alliance between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus in the natural gas sector.

On the one hand, Chevron's joining the activity in the Eastern Mediterranean increases the security of potential investors in the gas pipeline. On the other hand, this in itself cannot increase the quantities that will be transported through the pipeline or decrease the political risks involved with laying it. In addition, although the European Union is participating in the feasibility survey for the pipeline and has included it in the category of projects with shared interest for companies, this does not constitute a long-term EU commitment regarding the laying of the pipeline. It is doubtful whether the involvement of an American giant such as Chevron will change the manner in which the European Union views the issue.

None of these issues detract from the strategic, political, and economic importance of the Chevron Corporation's entry into the Israeli and Mediterranean natural gas sector. Moreover, this development comes at a critical time – against the background of a growing global doubt in the stability of the energy sector, and the Israeli dimension of this phenomenon: the weakening of the investors' faith in the economic stability of some Israeli energy companies.

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## Gas Finds Trigger a Standoff in the Mediterranean Between an Isolated Turkey and Rivals

By Yaroslav Trofimov

**Ankara's bold maritime claims spur a new alliance of Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt and cause American dismay.**

The contest over newfound gas riches in the Eastern Mediterranean has triggered a slew of rival maritime claims, pushing the region's main powers—all of them America's partners or allies—toward open confrontation.

On one side is a budding alliance of Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Egypt that benefits from the recent finds. On another is the Eastern Mediterranean's biggest economy, Turkey, which is increasingly flexing its military muscles as it seeks to break its regional isolation.

Turkish and Greek navy flotillas shadowed each other in contested waters after Turkey announced on July 21 that one of its two new seismic exploration ships will probe for oil and gas off the Greek island of Rhodes. Intense diplomatic efforts by Germany persuaded Turkey to temporarily halt the plan, which could have sparked an armed clash.

But, so far, it is just a pause—and the battle for supremacy over the Eastern Mediterranean and its lucrative seabed resources is almost certain to keep escalating, posing a significant new challenge in an already volatile part of the world.

"We see a tendency by Turkey to follow gunboat diplomacy and a militarization of its foreign policy," Cyprus Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulides said in an interview. "It is an attempt by Turkey to control the region. We want all the parties in the region to be involved in regional cooperation. But it's Turkey through its behavior that is excluding itself."

Turkish officials retort that it is Greece's and Cyprus's "maximalist" claims on Mediterranean waters that provoked the standoff. "If you look at the map, you see that we have the longest coast in the Eastern Mediterranean, and we have a huge continental shelf area," a senior Turkish official said. "Real cooperation can only be made with the involvement of Turkey."

During the past decade, large offshore natural-gas finds in Israeli, Cypriot and Egyptian exclusive economic zones have turned the region into a global energy source. Just last month, Chevron Corp. said it would pay \$5 billion for Noble Energy, a U.S. company whose major assets include stakes in Israel's Leviathan and Tamar gas fields

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and in the Aphrodite field off Cyprus. Altogether, East Mediterranean fields discovered since 2009 hold 70 trillion cubic feet of gas, equivalent to nearly 50 years of consumption by France, with a similar amount likely to be found in the near future, according to Wood Mackenzie consulting firm.

The EastMed pipeline planned by Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy would carry this gas to European consumers—except that Turkey's recent maritime claims cross its route. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has already said that EastMed won't go ahead without his assent.

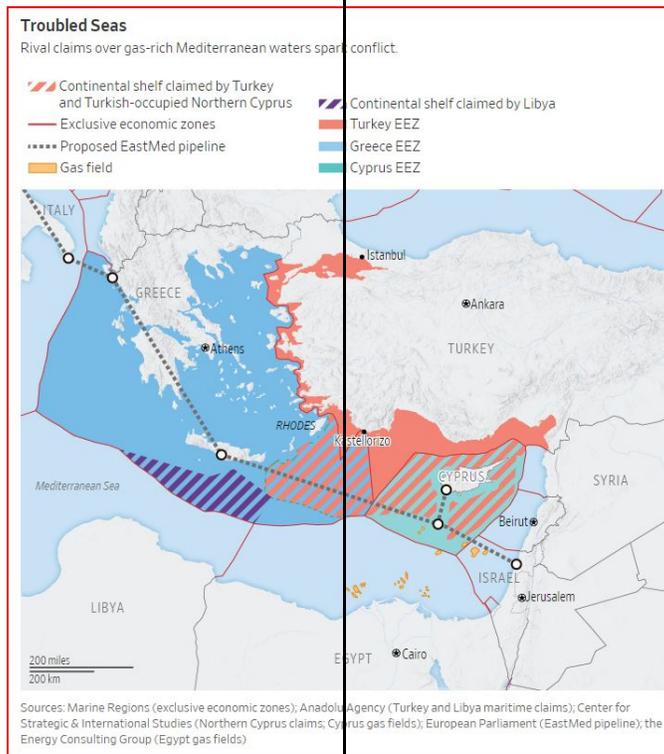
Turkey's expansionist stance in the Eastern Mediterranean can be traced to the so-called Mavi Vatan, or Blue Homeland, program drafted by nationalist Rear Adm. Cem Gurdeniz in 2006. Mr. Erdogan, whose government once espoused the policy of "zero problems with neighbors," hewed closer to this worldview after allying with hard-line nationalists in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt.

Sources: Marine Regions (exclusive economic zones); Anadolu Agency (Turkey and Libya maritime claims); Center for Strategic & International Studies (Northern Cyprus claims; Cyprus gas fields); European Parliament (EastMed pipeline); the Energy Consulting Group (Egypt gas fields)

In 2018, authorities of Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus claimed the right to drill in much of the Cyprus EEZ, including off the southern part of the island, and the Turkish Navy chased away an Italian drill ship authorized by the Cypriot government. Then, last November, Turkey stunned its neighbors by signing a maritime delimitation deal with Libya. The agreement, endorsed by the Turkish-occupied government in Tripoli that is fighting a bloody civil war, hacked away much of Greece's claimed maritime areas.

In drafting their maps, Turkish officials argue that Greek islands shouldn't be entitled to a large EEZ and refuse to take into account the Greek island of Kastellorizo, population 500 (and the setting of the movie "Mediterraneo") that is located a bit over a mile off the Turkish coast.

"Who might expect Turkey to give up 50,000 square kilometers because of this tiny island? It's our future



generations' share, it's impossible. This is a zero-sum game," said Adm. Gurdeniz, who now runs a maritime think tank at Koc University in Istanbul. "It's worth it to face the whole world, not just one, two or three countries, because we are talking about the blue homeland, the extension of our homeland."

The U.S. and the European Union haven't recognized Turkey's claims, with the State Department calling the Libya delimitation agreement "unhelpful and provocative." In a sign of growing frustration with Turkey, the U.S. also said in July that it would start joint military training with Cyprus for the first time to promote stability in the region. Congress in December ended the arms embargo on Cyprus that was imposed in deference to Turkey in 1987.

While Cyprus, divided since 1974 into a mostly ethnic-Greek area administered by the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus and a Turkish-occupied north, isn't a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Turkey and Greece both belong to the Western alliance even as they edge close to a military confrontation.

"Turkey's definition of its own maritime zone defies the international convention on the law of the sea, as well as geography and common sense, violates Greek sovereign rights and challenges Greek interests in a manner no Greek government can accept," said Thanos Dokos, Greece's deputy national-security adviser. "Therefore, the possibility of military conflict is real, and Greece is fully prepared."

A key driver of Turkey's behavior is that, with the exception of the Tripoli government that controls half of war-torn Libya, Ankara—also involved in military action in Syria and Iraq—has virtually no allies in the region. The first regional organization to cooperate on energy development, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum that was established last year, unites Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Italy. France, a vocal opponent of Turkey's aims in the region and whose Navy frigate had a standoff with three Turkish vessels off Libya in June, has also applied for membership.

"While there are initiatives attempting to exclude Turkey from the energy equation in the Eastern Mediterranean, nobody can expect Turkey to be doing nothing. That's why Turkey launched the offshore program and we are determined to continue," said a senior Turkish official.

Turkey is right to challenge the Cypriot government's gas-exploration concessions because the island's ethnic Turkish community is entitled to an equal share of resources, he added. Though Oruc Reis, the Turkish seismic ship that was supposed to probe off Rhodes, remains in port, its sister vessel has already begun a new round of exploration in disputed waters southeast of Cyprus.

Turkey has touted a competing plan to the EastMed pipeline. "Turkey proposes that if there is a pipeline to bring Israeli gas to Europe, as an alternative perhaps to Russian gas, the easiest and most economic transit way goes through Turkey," said Nursin Atesoglu Guney, president of the Center of Mediterranean Security think tank and an adviser to Mr. Erdogan.

In a pushback, Greece and Egypt (which is backing an anti-Turkish faction in the Libyan civil war) are completing a maritime delimitation agreement of their own that would overlap with Turkish and Libyan claims. Israel, whose once friendly relations with Turkey have deteriorated under Mr. Erdogan, has long insisted it doesn't need Ankara's accord to lay the EastMed pipeline.

"Once this project moves ahead, I consider that nobody will try to sabotage it. This is international law," Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said in an interview. "Regardless of the boundaries of exclusive economic waters, any ship can sail them, any airplane can fly above them, and any pipeline can be constructed through the economic waters of any country."

While Israel is interested in deepening its existing alliance with Greece and Cyprus, that doesn't mean it would get dragged into a military clash with Turkey, of course. "I don't think Israel ever got involved directly in an armed conflict between two other countries," Mr. Steinitz added.

In any case, the global economic slowdown—and the decline in energy prices—have made the EastMed pipeline project, already technically challenging, even more complicated. "The pipeline is totally theoretical for the time being," said Angelos Syrigos, a lawmaker from Greece's ruling party. "What Turkey is afraid of is not the pipeline, what it is afraid of is the cooperation between Greece, Cyprus and Israel."

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## China Values Its Ties with Iran More Than Its Ties with Israel

By Jacob Nagel and Mark Dubowitz

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Another reason for Jerusalem to distance itself from Beijing.

A recent emerging agreement between China and Iran promises the embattled Islamic Republic a potentially regime-saving economic and security partnership. The Chinese reportedly will invest \$400 billion over 25 years in the Iranian economy in exchange for heavily discounted Iranian oil, thereby undercutting U.S. efforts to sanction and isolate Tehran. For Israel, this deal between an

economic partner and a mortal enemy should be an alarming wake-up call: Beijing is not a friend, and is certainly no substitute for American support.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani initiated the Sino-Iranian agreement in 2016 in the wake of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which lifted American economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Approved by the Iranian cabinet last June, the agreement promises an expansion of the Chinese

presence in banking and telecommunications as well as in railways, ports and other infrastructure projects in Iran. The agreement includes deeper Sino-Iranian military, cyber, intelligence and technology cooperation.

The reaction inside Iran has been caustic. Rouhani's critics, from former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to regime opponents, have denounced the agreement. They understand that a weakened and isolated Iran will end up on the losing end of any deal with the Chinese Communist Party. They have seen how China traps countries with massive debt, which ultimately gives China leverage to assume control of their critical infrastructure and resources. This is all part of the strategy behind Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative—a trillion-dollar global land, sea and communications program spanning more than 100 countries. The Iranian regime, however, seeks to lean on China for its high-tech, authoritarian surveillance state model. Chinese tools can enable greater regime repression and increase the likelihood that the mullahs will remain in power.

The Sino-Iranian agreement is still not sealed. Both sides may wait until America's November elections, hoping that Joe Biden will abandon President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against the mullahs. Should Biden repeal the powerful secondary sanctions that have deterred Chinese banks and energy companies from significant business in Iran, Beijing and Tehran will have great opportunities.

For Israel, this is a clear sign that it is time to pivot from Beijing. Iran is Israel's most dangerous enemy; its leaders repeatedly vow to destroy the Jewish state and are developing nuclear and missiles programs to that end. Tehran funds and arms Hezbollah, which has amassed 150,000 missiles on Israel's northern border and is acquiring Iranian precision-guided munition capabilities that could devastate Israeli critical military installations, key infrastructure and civilian centers.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is also the most dangerous adversary of the United States—Israel's most valuable ally. The Chinese Communists are serial proliferators of nuclear and missile technology to rogue regimes like Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. They threaten Hong Kong and Taiwan. They are militarizing the South China Sea, weaponizing data, stealing intellectual property on a massive scale and committing shocking human rights abuses, including forcing more than one million Uyghur Muslims into concentration camps. The CCP also lied about the COVID-19 virus, suppressing vital information that could have contained a devastating global human and economic disaster.

But for Israel, decoupling won't be simple. China is one of Israel's largest trading partners and sources of foreign investment, alongside the United States and Europe. Sino-Israeli trade stood at \$15.3 billion in 2018, an almost 4,400 percent increase in real dollar terms since 1995. Beijing sees Israeli critical infrastructure as part of its

Belt and Road Initiative. This includes the Haifa port (where the U.S. Sixth Fleet docks), the port of Ashdod, underground tunnels and control systems in the northern Carmel mountains, and Tel Aviv's subway system. The strategic importance of this infrastructure is clear, given that some of it runs alongside key military installations, major businesses, food suppliers and other essential Israeli military and civilian services.

In Israeli high-tech, China has recognized the "Startup Nation" as an essential source of technology to build next-generation weapons. Israeli startups raised \$325 million from Chinese investors in the first three quarters of 2018, up from \$76 million in 2013. The numbers are increasing, though China remains far behind the U.S. in venture capital investments. Still, Beijing's smaller investments are strategic and designed to leverage Israel's prominence in artificial intelligence, edge computing, autonomous vehicles, robotics and big data. These are all technologies recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense as essential to its own military modernization efforts, even if they are officially civilian in their current application. Israel must therefore reassess these ties, as it is a core strategic interest for Israel to ensure that American military leadership does not erode.

Israeli strategic planners may be tempted by the idea that China-Israel economic ties could offset Beijing's growing partnership with Tehran. That is a delusion. The CCP will acquire everything it can from both Israel and Iran without fear or favor. And, if forced to choose, it will choose the Islamic Republic. Iran provides critical energy supplies to China that Israel cannot match. Its population is eight times larger. Its land mass is 75 times greater. It occupies a much more strategic territory for Belt and Road. And the Islamic Republic is an American enemy, which Beijing can leverage in its global contest with the U.S.

That puts the United States and Israel on one side in the emerging cold war between Washington and Beijing, with China and Iran on the other. Israelis have no choice but to side with America, and this must be reflected in official policy. Israeli decision-makers do not need to pass laws or regulations that will suffocate the private sector. They simply must ensure that strategic investments cannot be decided upon by bureaucrats with a narrow domestic agenda. This is a security issue. The Israeli government must help the country's high-tech entrepreneurs by leveraging strategic partnerships with India, Japan, Australia, Canada and other Indo-Pacific allies, as well as emerging ties with Gulf countries, to identify alternative capital to displace Chinese investment. These decisions must be handled directly by those who are responsible for the national defense and security aspects of Israel, and who can therefore see the bigger picture.

The U.S. can help, too. Congress should earmark investment funds similar to those that jumpstarted U.S.-Israel high-tech cooperation. The U.S. government also

can facilitate the visa process for Israeli entrepreneurs looking to set up their corporate headquarters in America while also maintaining R&D in Israel. That's been a successful business model that should be encouraged, but is currently encumbered by American immigration practices.

In the meantime, continued U.S.-Israel military and intelligence cooperation is needed. Iran's deal with China will indubitably challenge Israeli and American efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear, and broader military, ambitions. A deal with China, especially if Washington fails to respond with secondary sanctions against Chinese banks and companies, would certainly erode the U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign that has constrained those ambitions to date. It also will send a signal of weakness to those

observing U.S. restrictions.

As Israel demonstrates to Washington that it is committed to decoupling from China, there will be even greater opportunities for the two countries to cooperate. Technology, military, intelligence and political cooperation will only deepen. American and Israeli free market ingenuity will outpace anything that China's state-run authoritarian model can produce. With the Chinese joining hands with Israel's most dangerous enemies in Iran, Israel has no choice other than to draw closer to its best friend and to keep a distance from its best friend's biggest rival.

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## Stop calling anti-Zionism anti-Semitic. It's morally repugnant in its own way.

By Shany Mor

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**Defining anti-Zionism should be easy.** It is, as the name would suggest, opposition to Zionism. And since we all know what Zionism is, anti-Zionism should in theory be considerably simpler to define than, say, anti-Semitism, since there is no such thing as "semitism" which the anti-Semite opposes.

Zionism, on the other hand, has an easily accessible definition: It is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people which culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. It is the idea that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their historic homeland just like any other people.

And yet, it's not that simple to define anti-Zionism. What does it mean in 21st-century political life to be an opponent of Zionism? And what relation if any does anti-Zionism have to anti-Semitism, or criticism of Israel?

In fact, these three concepts — anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and "criticism of Israel" — are best conceived of as three completely different phenomena with occasional affinities, overlaps, and shared origins, just as we might conceive of irony, sarcasm, and cynicism as three related but ultimately different concepts; it is always possible for something to be ironic and sarcastic, or sarcastic and cynical, or all three, or none. But these are still three fundamentally different phenomena.

So is it with anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, and for that matter, "criticism of Israel," three separate concepts which sometimes overlap in making use of the anti-Semite's triangle of blood, conspiracy, and money. It's common to hear anti-Zionist rhetoric about Israel the murderous, child-killing enterprise (blood), or to hear anti-Zionists talk about how Jewish concerns over anti-Semitism aren't genuine but rather a fake ploy to silence critics (conspiracy), and that these efforts are buttressed by wealthy lobbyists whose benjamins hold the media and the establishment financially hostage (money).

And yet, not all anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel takes this form. After all, statehood for the Jewish people

has not been an uncomplicated affair, raising as it does questions about the status of Jewish minorities outside of Israel and the status of non-Jewish minorities inside, as well as conflicts over religion, borders, language, migration, and more.

Zionism emerged at the same time as other movements of national liberation in Europe and the Mediterranean. As multinational empires in central and eastern Europe, as well as north Africa and western Asia, were disintegrating into majority-based nation-states, the need of the Jewish people for the safety of territorial self-determination was as acute as any other people's. In fact, it was much more acute, as Jews were particularly threatened by centuries-old Christian and Muslim anti-Semitism.

In the early days of the modern Zionist idea, however, there were many Jews who opposed Zionism. Some disagreed with the idea on religious grounds and others on practical grounds. While Zionists saw statehood as the solution to the problem of Jewish life as a persecuted minority, others believed that the solution was migration to America, or transnational socialism, or revolutionary communism, or religious orthodoxy, or even folding Jewish life into French or German (or other) nationalisms.

These forms of anti-Zionism were neither criticisms of Israel (obviously, the state did not yet exist) nor were they in any way anti-Semitic. On the contrary, this kind of anti-Zionism was promoted mostly by Jews who were just as concerned with the fate of the Jewish people in a hostile world as the Zionists were; they only disagreed as to the proper course of action.

This mostly Jewish tradition of anti-Zionism has largely ceased to be relevant. The argument has been settled, and the State of Israel has existed for seventy-two years now.

But another intellectual tradition exists in parallel which seeks to appropriate the term anti-Zionism when its goals and methods could not be more different. This is the belief that Israel, and uniquely Israel, should not exist at

all, that its birth was a crime, and that its continued existence is somehow an affront to all decent human values.

This version of anti-Zionism is not so much an ideology as an organizing worldview that places Israel at the center of all that is evil. And as such, it is pernicious in its own way, even when it doesn't explicitly resort to the anti-Semitic triumvirate of blood, money, and power.

In its obsession with Israel, anti-Zionism is a pathological worldview; even absent the obvious anti-Semitic motifs, it's hard to see how contemporary anti-Zionism can claim the mantle of a progressive ideology. The belief that only one people's national liberation is a crime while everyone else's should be celebrated simply isn't coherent, and it's particularly jarring when it comes from people who claim to identify so passionately with the cause of Palestinian national liberation.

To claim roots in an earlier Jewish tradition of anti-Zionism is patently fraudulent. There is a difference between someone sitting in a cafe in Vienna in 1920 arguing that the re-establishment of a Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel might not be the most effective safeguard for the precarious existence of Jewish minorities in Europe and the Middle East, and someone sitting in an Upper West Side Starbucks in 2020 and arguing for the elimination of an existing state which is home to an existing political community with its own language, flag, and government.

It is a difference of both intent and effect. The intent of our first imagined cafe anti-Zionist is to find a better solution for the Jewish predicament while none has yet been found. The intent of our second imagined cafe anti-Zionist is to destroy someone else's home and community.

And the effect is even worse than the intent. Were anti-Zionists able to succeed in dismantling the world's only Jewish state, they would be casting Israel's six million Jews into the grim fate of a hated minority in the

overwhelmingly Arab and Muslim Middle East. They would be creating an unimaginable humanitarian catastrophe where one has just been solved in living memory.

It's not entirely clear why we even need the term anti-Zionism. If it were genuinely just a term to describe criticism of a state, why should it be necessary? We are able to criticize Russia and Venezuela and Hungary without needing a special word for it.

If, in contrast, it is a word for advocating the destruction of an existing state, then it must be asked again, why hide behind such an obfuscating term? And why are there no comparable movements advocating the destruction of any other state in the world save Israel? Is Israel the worst state out there? Or does the belief that it might reveal more about the mindset of the anti-Zionist than about Israel itself?

It is at the end of the day anti-Zionism, not Zionism, that needs to be able to make a case for itself. It is anti-Zionism, with its attribution of cosmic evil to one people and its yearning for the cleansing process of eliminating one political community, that should be treated as the pathological bigotry it is.

Focusing only on the question of whether anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic or not is a barren exercise. Anti-Zionism may share many intellectual roots with anti-Semitism; it may constantly express itself with the anti-Semites' triangle of blood, conspiracy, and money. But understanding the roots of an intellectual phenomenon and making a normative assessment of it are not the same thing.

Anti-Zionism should be assessed and judged on its own terms. And those terms are plenty pernicious, even if they could actually manage to steer clear of anti-Semitism. *Mr. Mor is an Associate Fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College and a Research Fellow at the Chaikin Center for Geostrategy at the University of Haifa.*

## Israelis Love to Call Each Other Cossacks Who've Been Robbed

By Philologos

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**A versatile fellow, this Cossack, identified simultaneously with Israel's prime minister and his bitterest opponents! Who is he and who robbed him?**

*"You are fueling these violent demonstrations. You're hypocrites, crying like the Cossack who was robbed."—Dudi Amsalem, Likud cabinet minister, addressing the anti-Netanyahu Israeli left in a July 27 Knesset speech.*

*"All over Israel, the protests are growing and spreading, and with them the violent [right-wing] gangs with their criminal excesses in the name of the Cossack of Balfour Street [the site of the Jerusalem home of Prime Minister Netanyahu] who was robbed."—Political commentator Yossi Verter, in a July 31 article in Haaretz, defending the demonstrators against the verbal and physical attacks on them.*

**A versatile fellow, this Cossack, identified simultaneously with Israel's prime minister and his bitterest opponents! Who is he and who robbed him?**

The common Israeli expression *ha-kozak ha-nigzal*, "the robbed Cossack" or "the Cossack who was robbed," denotes a serial wrongdoer who accuses others of the wrongs he habitually commits. The expression comes from the Yiddish *kozak hanigzol*, which means the same thing. Its source might possibly be a Jewish joke about the Cossack who fell through the roof of a Sukkah on which he was crawling in the hope of spying something beneath it to steal. Asked what he had been doing there, he answered, "I was looking for my stolen horse."

There's no need for such a joke, however, to explain the Jewish association of Cossacks with robbery. These warlike, hard-riding, seminomadic inhabitants of the Ukrainian steppes had a reputation for rapacity and plunder, seared into Jewish memory by their mass pogroms in the 1648 Cossack uprising led by Bogdan Chmielnicki. Later organized in their own regiments in

tsarist armies, they commonly regarded looting as their military prerogative. For a Cossack to complain of being robbed was, to a Jew, like a cardsharp complaining that he had been cheated in a game of pinochle or a counterfeiter that he had been passed bad money.

In this sense, the Yiddish expression *kozák hanígzol* is unremarkable. Yet it is unusual in another sense. *Hanígzol*, we have seen, is the Hebrew *ha-nigzál*, “who was robbed,” with the forward shift of syllabic stress that is typical of Yiddishized Hebrew. But though Yiddish routinely made use of Hebrew words, it did not generally make use of them in this way. When borrowing Hebrew verbs, it added Germanic prefixes or endings to them—and this is what it did with the Hebrew verb *gazal*, “to rob,” which became Yiddish *bagazlen*. In ordinary Yiddish, “the robbed Cossack” or “the Cossack who was robbed” would be *der bagazelter kozák*, not *kozák hanígzol*.

As a rule, Yiddish only resorts to “whole Hebrew,” as borrowed Hebrew not subject to the rules of Yiddification is known, when an expression has been taken directly from Jewish sources such as the Bible, the rabbinic corpus, or the prayer book. But from what source could *kozák hanígzol* have been taken? Robbed Cossacks not only don’t figure in the Bible or the Talmud; they don’t appear in later rabbinic literature, either. Why *kozák hanígzol* rather than *bagazelter kozák*?

The answer, I would propose, is to be found in the rabbinic corpus—specifically, in the Mishnah and in the Midrash. It starts with the Mishnaic tractate of Sukkah, which deals with the laws and rituals of the holiday of Sukkot. The tractate’s third chapter treats of the regulations regarding the *lulav*, the palm shoot that is one of the holiday’s “four varieties,” and begins: “A stolen palm shoot [*lulav ha-gazúl*], or one that is dried out, is unacceptable for use.”

What, you ask, apart from the presence of the verb *gazal* (here in its present-tense, passive form of *gazúl*) does this passage have to do with robbed Cossacks? This is where our midrash comes in. The following story commenting on the proviso in Sukkot occurs in the midrashic compilation of Leviticus Rabbah:

Rabbi Levi says: To whom can the user of a stolen *lulav* be compared? To a highwayman who lurked at a crossroads to waylay travelers. One day a royal tax collector passed by and he fell on him and took all he had. Eventually, he was caught and jailed. Hearing of this, the tax collector went to him and said, “Give me back what you took from me and I’ll testify on your

behalf.” “The only thing left me from what I took,” the highwayman replied, “is a carpet of yours.” The tax collector said, “Give it to me and I’ll testify.” And so he gave it to him. . . .

The next day the man was put on trial before the king. “Is there anyone,” the king asked him, “who can testify on your behalf?” “There is a tax collector who can,” answered the man. The tax collector was brought before the king, who asked him, “What do you know about this man’s innocence?” “I only know,” said the tax collector, “that after I was sent to collect taxes and he waylaid me and took all I had, he gave me back this carpet.” And all the spectators in the courtroom exclaimed, “Woe to the man whose own witness testifies against him!”

Thus it is with the man and the *lulav* with which he hopes to gain merit. If it is stolen, it cries out to God and says, “I’m plundered property.” Then all the angels exclaim, “Woe to the man whose own witness testifies against him!”

Of course, the stolen palm shoot, the *lúlov ha-gázul* in whole-Hebrew Yiddish, is not the equivalent of the *kozák hanígzol*, the robbed Cossack. Yet both cases are proverbial. The Mishnah’s *luláv ha-gazúl* is referred to by rabbinic commentators, including Maimonides, as a test case, an illustration of how *mitsvah ha-ba’ah b’averah eynah mitsvah*, “The commandment performed with the help of an unlawful act is not considered performed.”

The case of “the Cossack who was robbed” states a general principle too, namely, that one charging others with unlawful acts that one is guilty of oneself has no credibility. Indeed, the Hebrew expression *ha-kozák hanigzál* has become a quasi-judicial one, used often in Israeli courts. Thus, for instance, in a concurring opinion handed down in the Israeli Supreme Court’s upholding of a 2011 law of the Knesset aimed at the BDS movement, Justice Elyakim Rubenstein wrote that, while the movement claims to support the rights of oppressed Palestinians, “calling for a boycott [of Israeli businesses] in order to influence the policies of the state of Israel is an inherently coercive measure on the order of the Cossack who was robbed.” One could cite numerous other examples.

In short, if the Hebrew *ha-kozák ha-nigzál* clearly comes from the Yiddish *kozák hanígzol*, the Yiddish very likely originated as a play on the Hebrew’s *luláv ha-gazúl*. The palm shoot’s complaint of robbery is genuine. The Cossack’s is tainted. Framing it in the language of the Mishnah was a humorous way of mocking it.