

The Conflict over the Karish Gas Field - Between Celebration and Drone Attacks

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Renewed disputes over a gas field on the border between Lebanon and Israel threaten to reopen a wound that has still not completely healed and plunge the region into a renewed conflict that will also affect Europe. Malte Lauterbach reports directly from Israel.

The warm, dry morning air carries the breathtaking voice of the young woman up to the room on the second floor. After a few bars, her voice is joined by an acoustic guitar and together they sing the first verse of the Israeli national anthem Hatikvah, which describes the 2,000-year-old hope of Jews to return to Israel and establish an independent nation.

Abruptly, the duet is interrupted by a volley of gunfire from a short distance away. Short, precise bursts of fire, unmistakable signs of Israeli forces fall in response to the imprecise, mostly untargeted continuous fire from Lebanon. One of the many firefights on the border has begun. The firefight is now joined once again by the singing of the young woman. A new day in Israel has begun.

I am in Kibbutz Bar'am in the north of Israel, a very special place in the country. Not only does Bar'am offer a breathtaking view of the region with its high mountains and deep green forests, and on good days a view as far as the Golan Heights, but Bar'am is also one of the last kibbutzim that still adheres to the original proto-socialist way of life of the first kibbutzim. But another difference is the proximity to the border of Lebanon. This special proximity also requires special security measures.

So man-high fences, decorated with barbed wire crowns, line the outer borders of the kibbutz. Along the way, one encounters old trenches, a remnant of one of the many wars of the last 60 years that have swept across this region. A few steps later, you come across a rocket that serves its last resting place as a flower bed, its formerly white shell now glistening with holes in the sun. "A sad necessity" is how a member of the kibbutz describes the situation. Just under 150 kilometers to the west, another working day also begins for the Greek-British company Energean. Meanwhile, on board the Energean Power, a floating gas processing ship, preparations for gas production from the disputed Karish gas field are underway under the watchful eye of the Israeli navy.

The gas field - barely 50 kilometers from shore, has been the starting point of disputes between Israel and Lebanon for several years. The State of Israel and the Republic of Lebanon both claim the sea area as a so-called Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

In Lebanon, there has been an extreme energy shortage for several years as a result of the poor economic situation caused by scarcity management; there is a shortage of oil and gas, the power grid regularly breaks down and large parts of the country are in darkness. In Israel, the situation is only conditionally better - the highly developed country still generates large parts of its electricity with oil and gas power plants, and much electricity, oil and gas must be imported from abroad. The Karish gas field and its bigger brother the Tanish gas field are expected to supply Israel with gas, at least in the near future, in addition to also supplying 10% of gas consumption in Europe, a market traditionally dominated by Russia before the Ukraine war.

Since the decision in 2019 to produce from the gas field and the subsequent sale of the production right to the company Energean mentioned at the beginning, the de facto terrorist group Hezbollah has threatened that as soon as the gas production would take place, they would be determined to attack it. This summer, this has already happened several times, F-16 fighter jets

of the Israeli Air Force and the corvette ILS Eilat shot down several drones of the type Gods Mohajer, supplied by Iran to Lebanon.

The Mohajer 4 can direct up to 25 kilograms of explosives to the target as a suicide drone.

A diplomatic solution to the conflict over the border seems extremely unlikely at present; diplomatic clarification talks fail time and again, with no solution in sight. Instead, saber rattling is the only option. Just the other day, the Israeli army warned Hezbollah that "the IDF would react harshly if it (Hezbollah) tried to attack the Karish gas field again." Attacks on oil and gas infrastructure using Iranian drones are nothing new in the region, with devastating attacks on infrastructure occurring time and again, as in September 2019 when several dozen drones attacked the Buqaiq and Khurais oil refineries in Saudi Arabia, causing several million euros in damage. The low-flying drones overwhelmed U.S. MIM-104 Patriot air defenses by the sheer number of targets, a concept called Saturation Attack. Such a Saturation Attack would not be unlikely in the event of a Hezbollah attack on targets in Israel.

The concept of Saturation Attack is not exactly new and the Israeli Ministry of Defense has long been aware of the threat. That's why the new Israeli Sa'ar 6 corvettes (BSN reported here) are equipped with powerful 76 mm OTO Melara guns that can make course corrections in flight with their DART projectiles and therefore also take out moving targets with high precision. Towards the end of the year, production is scheduled to begin, but there is still a lot to be done before then.

Back on land, there is less concern at the moment. In the view of many people, the war with Lebanon and Hezbollah has virtually never stopped since 2006. Nevertheless, many remember the moments when hundreds of rockets from Lebanon fell on Israel in 2006, causing severe damage in many places. 44 people died and more than a thousand were injured, some seriously, in the hail of rockets.

Today, however, there is celebration - young people who work as volunteers on the kibbutz flock to the pub on the Sabbath, mingling with Israelis to celebrate the end of the work week. Every now and then, one or the other tries a short flirt, while the basses from the small "dance floor" make the earth shake.

Not much further away stands a small troop of soldiers of a similar age, casting a watchful eye over the border fence between Israel and Lebanon. Among them, too, the attitude toward war is rather lax. "Worried about a war? We've been at war here since 2006, so to speak," one of them says with a laugh. After instructing me not to linger too long on a particular hill because Hezbollah might see me there and shoot at me, the armored vehicle passes me by. That, too, is life in Israel. Exactly what the harsh IDF response described above would be is unknown. It has been just under 16 years since heavy Israeli artillery fired more than 170,000 artillery shells for weeks not far from Kibbutz Bar'am.