

# **GAS IN GAZA**

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4 January 2024

The existence of gas off the coast of the Gaza Strip is not a recent discovery, as gas fields named Marine 1 and Marine 2 were identified in 1999, with reserves estimated at 35 billion cubic metres, ensuring twelve years of production at a rate of 1.5 billion cubic metres per year. This field, located 36 kilometres west of Gaza, was first developed by British Gas in 2000 at the request of the Palestinian Authority, but the company quickly withdrew from the contract. Royal Dutch Shell took over the project in 2016 but also withdrew in 2018. Since then, the Palestinians have been looking for investors. The uncertain nature of relations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli authorities, for whom the project must be subject to “coordination between the security services” and the need to “maintain the security and interests of the State of Israel in the matter”<sup>1</sup> (read: Israeli control over production), is unlikely to encourage investors to rush in.

In fact, Israel intends to position itself as the key player in a potential gas corridor project linking India and the European Union via the Gulf monarchies: at least that is what Netanyahu declared at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, where he clearly placed the project within the framework of the “Abraham Accords” that are intended to normalise relations between Israel and the Arab states<sup>2</sup>. He declared that these agreements “heralded the dawn of a new era of peace, but I believe we are on the cusp of an even more spectacular breakthrough, a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia”. While he did mention “the prospect of peace with the Palestinians”, he did not say a word about the essential issue of territory.

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1 <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke-gas180623>, website of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Atag74u01AM>

Palestine is conspicuously absent from the map of the “New Middle East” that Netanyahu brandished in New York, which includes Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan.



Netanyahu’s plan is eerily similar to the one Shimon Peres outlined in the newspaper *L’Expansion* in 1991: he declared himself ready, as a first step, to “freeze the creation and development of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.” In exchange, he said he was convinced that “the Arab countries would agree to end the economic boycott against our country”. Then, common problems would have to be addressed: water, pollution and the development of land transport. “Why not then lay the foundations for a shared economic life?” This shared life “requires the creation of a common market. We must follow the example of the EEC: gradually create a common market between countries, reduce customs barriers, dispel the clouds of war and, above all, create a general sense of security for local and foreign investors.”

A division of roles in this new Middle East according to Peres was proposed: “With Saudi oil, Egyptian labour, Turkish water and Israeli brains, the Middle East should take off.” It is unclear what role Peres assigned to the Palestinians, as he did not mention them.

Peres in 1991 and Netanyahu today believe they can sideline the eminently *political* Palestinian question in vast *economic* projects by

obscuring the *territorial* issue. The problem is that the Palestinians do not see it that way.

It should be remembered that the “New Middle East” project, which marginalises Hamas, was presented by Netanyahu to the United Nations on 22 September 2023, about two weeks before the attack on 7 October. However, while the Israeli plan aimed to “calm the political situation in Gaza between the warring factions (Hamas versus Islamic Jihad in Gaza)”<sup>3</sup>, it specified that “only the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank will receive gas revenues”.

Hamas would receive a few crumbs from this windfall, “with Israel’s approval” as “reward for helping to oppose Islamic Jihad militants during the latest wave of violence in Gaza in May 2023”<sup>4</sup>.

The newspaper *Alarab* of 24 June 2023 tells us that “Hamas sees gas as an invaluable opportunity to support its power in the Gaza Strip, even if it means a long-term truce with Israel.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that, seen from this angle, this cannot suit the Israeli authorities, as it would strengthen Hamas, but the question remains whether the prospect of a long-term truce between the two sides could be an acceptable *quid pro quo*. This prospect cannot suit the Israeli authorities, as permanent conflict is one of the foundations of the system; In the 1970s, Israeli author Marc Hillel wrote that Israel was in “*danger of peace*”, meaning that peace with the Arabs was more dangerous for the cohesion of the Jewish state than the indefinite continuation of the state of war and the maintenance of a siege mentality among the population.

Alain Dieckhoff said the same thing in 1996: “Since the 1947 partition plan and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Israeli society has found its cohesion in the face of external threats.” But the same could be said of the Arab states. One can imagine the perverse effects that fifty years of uninterrupted external threat can have on a population. Thanks to the Israeli “new historians”, we now know that Israel, in the early years of the state’s foundation, repeatedly rejected overtures from Arab countries: the priority was the annexation of territories purged of their Arab inhabitants. Shamir once said that of Yasser Arafat and Faisal Hussein, the latter was the more dangerous. In the eyes of Israeli public opinion, Arafat was the uncompromising terrorist working from abroad to destroy Israel, while Hussein was the moderate Palestinian bourgeois from Jerusalem who was willing to negotiate – an unacceptable prospect.

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3 31 October-13 November 1991.

4 *Ibid.*

5 [https://alarab.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/01\\_21.pdf](https://alarab.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/01_21.pdf)

One can imagine how much the internal contradictions of Israeli society must have been contained and repressed by the feeling of permanent external threat. The prospect of peace with Arab neighbours can create a sense of emptiness and panic, despite a sincere desire for peace. Above all, however, the dominant strata of Israeli society may fear a sudden release of contradictions that have been contained until now: “A process leading to peace would reveal the internal contradictions of this society,” says Alain Dieckhoff<sup>6</sup> — contradictions that are contained by the need to unite around the government in the face of external danger.

The same phenomenon was occurring in Arab countries, where the elites feared the irruption of the masses into political and economic life, which would have led, depending on the case, to agrarian reform or a questioning of the distribution of oil revenues. Israel did these elites a great service by presenting itself as a common enemy of all Arabs. To hide their powerlessness, these Arab elites even engaged in delirious nationalist one-upmanship against Israel, with the aim of masking the real problems, social demands and class struggle in the Arab countries themselves. The struggle against Israel strengthened military dictatorships whose only military effectiveness was in fighting their own people. It should be added that the permanent state of war also effectively concealed social antagonisms within Israel itself. Some commentators have described as paradoxical the deadly intensity of the terrorist attack on 7 October and the fact that Hamas had previously seemed to want to present itself as a more moderate organisation. This overlooks the fact that if Hamas wanted to show that it was distancing itself from Islamic Jihad, it was to present itself to Israel as an alternative to the corruption-ridden Palestinian Authority.

The political wing of Hamas therefore attempted to reach an agreement with Israel, without taking into account that Netanyahu prefers to deal with a corrupt Palestinian Authority rather than a structured Islamist organisation.

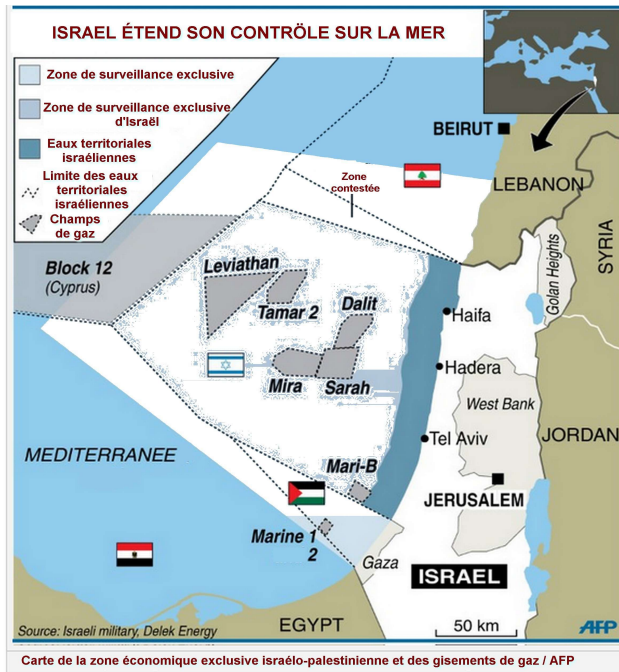
In *The New Arab* on 20 June 2023, Sally Ibrahim writes that Hamas “would in principle allow the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority to develop the natural gas field off the coastal enclave after the conclusion of agreements negotiated by the United States and involving Israel, Egypt and partner companies that would oversee gas exploration and extraction, suggesting a breakthrough in complex and sometimes secret negotiations. In exchange,

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6 *Israéliens et Palestiniens, l'épreuve de la paix*, Aubier.

Hamas would receive a share of the revenues, but it is unclear what guarantees Israel is demanding, which could complicate an agreement”.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is known that one of Israel’s demands since 2014 has been the return of the bodies of soldiers Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin and the return of hostages suffering from mental illness, Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed. Hamas responds that Israel is holding more than 4,000 prisoners, including 1,800 minors. Israel is also said to be demanding that the gas money not be used to finance armed operations.



This hypothesis put forward by *The New Arab* is rather optimistic, as the trend within Hamas seems to be, according to analyst Ibrahim Al-Madhou, that “Israel intends to steal Palestinian gas”: Hamas is preparing to “fight the gas battle and has launched it with a regional diplomatic move that does not rule out a military confrontation to prevent the theft of gas.”<sup>8</sup>

7 “Exclusive, Hamas “to allow” development of Gaza Marine natural gas, amid US-brokered negotiations between PA, Egypt and Israel,” 20 June 2023.

When we look at the map of offshore gas fields, we see that the exploration area corresponding to the Gaza Strip — Marine 1 and Marine 2 — represents a tiny portion of the areas off the coast of Israel itself.

In other words, the Israeli authorities have shown incredible activity to prevent the Gaza Strip, and by extension Hamas, from benefiting from an infinitesimal share of the gas wealth compared to that claimed by Israel. But this infinitesimal share would have been enough to provide the people of Gaza with energy for about 15 years.

A statement issued on 9 October by the Cercle d'études libertaires–Gaston-Leval (Libertarian Study Circle) denouncing the “appalling carnage” of 7 October suggested that, once the initial shock caused by this event had passed, “the necessary analysis of the chain of events that led to this massacre must not be avoided when the time comes”.<sup>9</sup> The statement added, in a (barely) prescient manner, that “tomorrow, it is the Palestinian people who will suffer the reprisals of the State of Israel”. It is not unreasonable to think that the way in which Israel’s “New Middle East” project and the Netanyahu government and Hamas have approached the issue are part of this “chain of events”.

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8 <https://www.yenisafak.com/ar/world/4034720>. *Yeni Şafak* is a conservative and Islamist Turkish daily newspaper.

9 Press release from the Cercle d'Études libertaires – Gaston-Leval, 8 October 2023, <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article955>