

Syria expects oil and gas production by 2023



Syrian Oil Minister Ali Ghanem announced that the country expects commercial production of offshore gas to begin by 2023, in a development that once again raises the issue of demarcating Lebanon's northern maritime border with Syria.

Ghanem said that a Russian company already drilling onshore in Syria would go about the maritime exploration. The size of a single one of the five blocs Syria has delineated would hold reserves equivalent to its entire onshore reserves, he said, adding he expected some light oil to be found.

The announcement comes soon after Lebanon launched a second offshore licensing round which includes Blocs 1 and 2 – both of which lie in the north and border Syria's maritime area. A

zone of roughly 830 square kilometers is under dispute, according to Roudi Baroudi, an independent energy consultant with more than 40 years experience in the sector.

But while Lebanon is currently involved in serious UN-sponsored mediation efforts to resolve its southern maritime border dispute with Israel, there has been no public announcement of preparations to negotiate with Syria. The issue is politically sensitive, given divisions among factions in the Lebanese government over the nature of the country's ties to Syria, effectively frozen since the Syrian crisis began.

The demarcation issue centers around the fact that Syria has never unilaterally published its maritime boundaries, while Lebanon did in 2011. When Lebanon's line is compared to the blocs that Syria published in March 2019, there is an overlap of about 832 square kilometers, Baroudi said.

Because maritime boundaries are based on terrestrial borders, Baroudi said that demarcating the maritime border could be as simple as pinpointing the final land point between Syria and Lebanon, which would be in the middle of the northern Nahr al-Kabir. "It has never been fixed because it's never been relevant, but it's no more than a technical issue" he said.

Baroudi noted that the northern demarcation issue would be aided by a resolution to the southern maritime border dispute with Israel, currently the subject of intensive U.S.-mediated negotiations. A resolution to that dispute would set a border point between Israel, Cyprus and Lebanon, known as a tri-junction point, which would aid in the drawing of the Syrian-Lebanese Cypriot tri-junction point.

Potentially complicating matters is the fact that Israel and Syria have not signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which in its article 74 sets out rules for delineating maritime borders between states with opposite or adjacent

coasts.