

Pipelines to Normalization in the BDS Era: The Natural Gas Deals with Egypt and Jordan as a Case Study

Ofir Winter and Eyal Razy-Yanuv

Despite the prominence achieved by the BDS movement in the West in recent years, it has often had difficulty enforcing the principles of boycott, divestment, and sanctions in its “home court” – the Arab world. There are diverse reasons for this. First, the majority of Arab countries do not have any formal relations with Israel. The connections with Israel consist primarily of limited normalization with Egypt and Jordan and dependency relationships with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and therefore implementation of the BDS policy has largely remained without any practical significance. Second, the messages and content of the BDS campaign were designed for target audiences in the West, based on a liberal discourse of civil equality and human rights that does not resonate in Arab countries. Third, and most importantly, the regional reality of recent years has created an unprecedented symmetry of economic, security, and political strategic interests between Israel and a number of Arab countries, which has created a counterbalance to the messages of the boycott and blunted their edge.

The public discourse that has developed in Egypt and Jordan surrounding the deals to import gas from Israel constitutes a case study of the ability of significant economic and strategic considerations to trump the political and cultural residue of the conflict and the calls for a boycott by the various BDS movements. It illustrates the positive changes that have occurred in the attitudes of both countries toward normalization, even during an ongoing

period of deadlock in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. The traditional asymmetric equation, whereby Israel is eager for any symbolic gesture of cooperation, peace, and recognition that Jordan and especially Egypt grudgingly provide, has become somewhat more balanced against the backdrop of the recent regional upheaval. Normalization is no longer exclusively an Israeli interest, nor is it so strictly conditional upon a political agreement. The economic and security challenges and the focus of public discourse in Egypt and Jordan on domestic issues have made relations with Israel a shared interest in its own right. While the natural gas deals have raised public objections in both countries, many voices have supported them as a necessity, and blanket delegitimization of normalization has been replaced by a more open and balanced discussion.

Background: The Natural Gas Deals with Egypt and Jordan

In view of the energy crises experienced by Egypt and Jordan in recent years, the two countries seem to be natural and ready candidates for the import of Israeli natural gas. Egypt and Jordan, each for different reasons, have had growing difficulties maintaining a steady and inexpensive supply of natural gas that meets the needs of their electricity sectors for both industrial and private customers. This difficulty is reflected in frequent power outages and soaring government expenses for the import of natural gas and subsidization of energy products. Israel, for its part, has seen the neighboring markets as attractive customers for three main reasons. First is the relatively low costs of transporting gas over short distances using infrastructure that already partially exists. This availability makes it possible to ensure immediate customers for Israeli gas, which is essential for receiving the initial funding for the enormous investments required to develop the Leviathan gas field. This is particularly important in light of the current funding challenges, which have become starker due to the significant drop in gas prices and the uncertainty about finding enough external gas customers beyond the limited Israeli market. Second is the possibility of liquefying Israeli gas¹ for export to Europe and Asia using the existing facilities in Egypt rather than building new facilities in Israel at an estimated cost of billions of dollars, which would involve a series of complex technical issues surrounding their construction at sea or near the coast. And third is the strategic, “security and geopolitical” importance, to quote Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that Israel places on establishing energy relations with Egypt and Jordan.² Beyond

the economic value of the deals, Israel sees the export of gas as a means of strengthening the peaceful relations with both countries and stabilizing their regimes. The mutual interest in the gas deals has thus created a win-win situation for Israel and its neighbors. The United States has also encouraged these deals, seeing them as key to increasing stability in the Middle East and consolidating the moderate regional axis.³

The natural gas deal developing between Israel and Egypt signifies a role reversal, with Israel turning from a customer into a potential gas supplier. During the years 2008-2012, it was Egypt that exported natural gas to Israel. However, the recurring explosions of pipelines in Sinai led to a cessation of the gas flow and later to Egypt cancelling the export contract. At the time, the sale of gas to Israel sparked major criticism in Egypt, especially in light of the associated corruption attributed to the Mubarak regime concerning this deal. However, gas production in Egypt has declined in recent years while gas consumption has increased, a trend that has led to shortages and obliged Cairo to seek external sources of gas. According to Tarek el-Molla, Egyptian minister of petroleum and mineral resources, in 2015 Egypt had to import 35-40 percent of its gas needs, mainly for generating electricity. As for the enormous Zohr gas field that Egypt reported in August 2015, the most optimistic forecasts are that it will be possible to produce gas from 2017 but will provide Egypt with energy independence only toward the next decade.⁴

The Tamar and Leviathan groups both signed contracts and long-term memorandums of understanding worth billions of dollars with the Egyptian company Dolphinus in March and November 2015, respectively, for the export of natural gas to Egypt and to destinations in Europe via the liquefaction facilities in Egypt. In December 2015, the Egyptian government announced a freeze on the gas deals with Israel in the wake of an international arbitration ruling obligating the Egyptian gas companies to compensate the Israel Electric Corporation \$1.76 billion over violation of the gas export contract in 2012. The parties began backroom talks in an attempt to settle the debt, and reports in March 2016 stated that they were close to a compromise in which the final compensation would be about half of the amount determined by the arbitration ruling.⁵ Nonetheless, the understandings Egypt reached in early 2017 with the energy companies British Gas and ENI to export gas through the liquefying facilities in its territory put a question mark on the execution of the gas deals with Israel.

Jordan too encountered a gas shortage due to the recurring bombings of the pipelines in Sinai and the cessation of gas flow from Egypt in the wake of the January 25 Revolution in 2011. Egyptian gas was responsible for 80 percent of Jordan's electricity needs, and its replacement with far more expensive fuels at the time (such as diesel, mazut, and liquefied natural gas imported via the Port of Aqaba) raised the price of generating electricity and caused Jordan weekly losses in the millions of dollars. The energy crisis has thus become part of Jordan's prevailing bleak economic reality. Other factors contributing to this crisis include the wave of refugees from Syria, the damage to tourism and foreign capital investments by regional turmoil, and the traditional weaknesses of the Jordanian economy – notably the scarcity of natural resources, lack of agricultural lands, and deep dependence on external aid.⁶

In view of these difficulties, Israel has emerged as a potential gas supplier, and at the beginning of 2013, the Jordanian Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources reported talks on the import of natural gas from Israel to the Arab Potash factories, a third of whose stocks are owned by the Jordanian government.⁷ In February 2014, a fifteen-year deal worth \$500-700 million was signed between the Tamar group and Jordan, and a year later Israel granted the permit to export the gas.⁸ Jordan's difficulty in achieving a gas import agreement at attractive prices from Arab countries, particularly Qatar, led to an acceleration in the talks on acquiring Israeli gas, which was offered at a much lower price. In September 2014, a memorandum of understanding on the import of Israeli gas was signed between the Jordanian Electric Power Company (JEPCO) and Noble Energy, which operates the Leviathan gas field.⁹ In September 2016, the two sides signed a contract for the provision of gas for fifteen years at an estimated sum of \$10 billion.¹⁰ Officials have projected that implementation of the memorandum of understanding would save the Jordanian government \$100-600 million each year and reduce JEPCO's enormous losses.¹¹ The pipeline from the Tamar field has been operating since early 2017, while the gas from Leviathan is supposed to start flowing in early 2020.¹²

Legitimate Deals or Unacceptable Normalization?

The gas deals with Israel have aroused intense public debate in Egypt and Jordan about their legitimacy, with contradictory positions expressed by ministers, parliamentarians, civil organizations, columnists, and online

commentators. On one side are politicians, intellectuals, and opposition members who oppose any expression of normalization with Israel on ideological and emotional grounds, use arguments charged with suspicion and hostility toward Israel, and succeed in swaying significant portions of public opinion. On the other side is a significant minority led by members of the establishment and intellectuals who understand the economic value of the gas deal with Israel and stand behind the government's policy.

The two camps reflect contradictory trends occurring in both Egypt and Jordan: broad delegitimization of expressions of normalization with Israel alongside growing legitimacy of the internal debate about the nature of connections with Israel, a debate that represents the undermining of the traditional taboo on normalization. Online public opinion polls conducted by leading newspapers in Egypt and Jordan in which readers were asked to state their opinion on the gas import deals with Israel exemplify this schism. While the majority situated themselves in the opposing camp, a significant minority were on the supporting side, and dozens of commenters were undeterred from expressing their positive position using their full names. Even though these are not professional polls reflecting a representative sample of citizens, they nonetheless indicate the division between those who see Israel as a sworn enemy and those who see it as a legitimate business partner. A poll conducted in December 2015 by the popular newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* found 86 percent against the gas deal with Israel and 14 percent percent in favor.¹³ A questionnaire conducted a year earlier by the Jordanian newspaper *al-Ghad* found around 70 percent against the import of Israeli gas and 30 percent in favor.¹⁴

Egypt and Jordan are two of the first five Arab countries in which BDS branches were established (alongside Morocco, Qatar, and Kuwait).¹⁵ The BDS movement in Jordan was more active than its Egyptian counterpart in the struggle against Israeli gas imports and started a petition calling for the prime minister to cancel the deal and a campaign to pressure members of the Jordanian parliament to take action to prevent it.¹⁶ The opposition was not only from BDS branches but also included broader frameworks of opposition to normalization, most prominently the Jordan National Campaign against the Gas Agreement with the Zionist Entity, an umbrella organization for unions, political parties, and members of parliament with a Facebook page that as of October 2016 received support from tens of thousands of people. This campaign invested extensive effort in placing public pressure

on the Jordanian government to cancel the gas deals with Israel and held public symposiums on the issue.¹⁷ While popular opposition in Egypt to the import of Israeli gas was relatively weak and mainly reflected in the media discourse, in Jordan a number of demonstrations were held, usually with hundreds of participants, most of whom were representatives of Islamist and nationalist movements, members of trade unions, and past and present parliamentarians.¹⁸ The Jordanian campaign called on citizens to turn out their lights for an hour on October 2, 2016 as a sign of solidarity with the struggle to cancel the gas deal. A protest song entitled “We don’t want gas,” which was broadcast on a satirical program on the private Jordanian TV channel *Roya*, received almost 150,000 views within a week.¹⁹

The main arguments against importing gas from Israel have touched on two main areas: politics and economics. Politically, the deals were perceived as an unacceptable expression of normalization and in blatant contradiction to the obligatory Arab solidarity with the Palestinians. Importing gas from Israel, it was claimed, was tantamount to rewarding the country that was committing crimes against the Palestinian people. Even worse, it was purchasing “stolen Palestinian gas” and providing indirect support for the “occupation enterprise” and funding its crimes. Economically, reliance on Israeli gas was presented as a dangerous gateway to turning the Egyptian and Jordanian economies into Israeli hostages. This concern, expressed in slogans such as “the enemy’s gas is occupation,” builds on inherent distrust of Israel and the stereotypes about its alleged malicious conspiracies.²⁰

Despite the anti-normalization majority’s prominence in various media platforms, it did not succeed in bringing more than a few thousand protesters to the streets or recruiting mass support on social media. In contrast, the proponents of the gas deals, who enjoyed the active support of the establishment, were impressive in their determination to defend what was considered by their opponents as “unacceptable normalization.” Official and unofficial spokespersons pointed out the wide interests served by the gas deals with Israel, and assisted the Egyptian and Jordanian governments in upholding the deals despite the opposition. The regimes and their supporters emphasized economic over political considerations as the prevailing criteria in the question of importing gas from Israel. At times, they stated explicitly that the country’s unique economic agenda is more important than the pan-Arab agenda; at other times, they attempted to distance themselves from direct involvement in the controversial normalization and attributed the gas

deals to “private companies” working according to considerations of profit and loss. Either way, commerce with Israel was presented as legitimate in contrast to the traditional inclination to regard normalization and progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as integrated and indivisible processes.

Egypt’s openness to a gas deal with Israel is closely connected to the enormous economic challenges it faces today, including the energy supply crisis. Economic considerations have softened the traditional Egyptian aversion to closer relations with Israel and eased the development of a utilitarian and pragmatic outlook, even if not always accompanied by the spirit of reconciliation. Egyptian foreign policy in the el-Sisi era has espoused developing economic relations with all countries based on mutual interests, and Israel is no exception. Tel Aviv, for example, was mentioned in an Egyptian government document on the topic of foreign commerce as one of the nine Asian cities in which Egypt was working to encourage business connections (alongside Beijing, Jakarta, Sydney, Tokyo, New Delhi, Seoul, Shanghai, and Kuala Lumpur).²¹ Similarly, the Egyptian officials who examined the gas deal with Israel used economic rather than political eyes for their assessment. In January 2015, the current Prime Minister, Sherif Ismail, while serving as the minister of petroleum and mineral resources, called for the decision on Israeli gas imports to be made according to purely material considerations:

Everything comes into consideration: the interest of Egypt, its economic needs, and its leading political and economic role in the region are the matters that will decide importing gas from Israel. Egyptian interests are above all, and we must assess the issue from a strategic point of view.²²

Opponents of the regime called him by the derogatory nickname “the Zionist gas importer,”²³ but this did not deter Tareq el-Molla, the new minister of petroleum and mineral resources, from towing the same line and announcing in October 2015 that he “did not find any flaws in importing gas from Israel, on the condition that it contributes to Egyptian national security and provides added value to the Egyptian economy.”²⁴

As with Egypt, Jordanian support for Israeli gas imports was based on preferring material considerations over reservations regarding normalization. The gas deals were justified prior to their signing by claims that this was a measure that favored economic interests over empty slogans and had the

power to assist the kingdom in diversifying its energy sources. Supporters stated that this was one move among others that would reduce the cost of electricity and encourage Jordanian industry to use gas to increase its competitive potential.²⁵ Dr. Ahmad Hiasat, CEO of JEPSCO, stated in 2014 that there was no room for political falsification in denouncing the gas deal with Israel, at a time when the cumulative losses of the Jordanian electricity market was causing “a crisis threatening its overall stability.”²⁶ Dr. Khaled Kalaldeh, minister of political and parliamentary affairs, added that the Jordanian people need to understand that non-ratification of the gas import agreement with Israel would lead to a rise in electricity prices.²⁷ In deliberations of the Jordanian parliament in December 2014, the minister of petroleum and mineral resources, Dr. Mohammad Hamed, justified the gas deal by reference to JEPSCO’s losses and the low cost of importing local natural gas compared to the high cost of transporting liquid gas over long distances. He mentioned that Noble Energy had signed similar agreements with companies in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority and claimed that JEPSCO was therefore entitled from a political perspective to do the same. He rejected arguments that the deal would turn Jordan into the hostage of “a certain country,” namely, Israel.²⁸

In February 2016 the current minister of energy and mineral resources, Dr. Ibrahim Saif, again swore to the Jordanian parliament that he would protect Jordan’s national interests, diversify its energy sources, and not put the country at the mercy of any one supply source.²⁹ After signing the deal in September 2016, Mohammad al-Momani, minister of state for media affairs and government spokesman, stated that the argument that the gas agreement is tantamount to supporting the Israeli occupation is the “height of superficiality” and is the “politicization” of an economic step meant to reduce government expenses. According to al-Momani, there is nothing in the peace agreement or in the commercial relations between Jordan and Israel that impacts Jordanian opposition to the occupation.³⁰

In an attempt to deflect criticism of normalization, the Egyptian and Jordanian governments emphasized that they did not conduct the gas agreements directly with Israel but rather that the agreements are between non-governmental companies in Egypt and Jordan and the private international companies developing the Israeli gas fields. This minimization of the role of official institutions on both sides has helped the Egyptian and Jordanian governments to bypass the need for parliamentary approval and to deflect

criticism from those opposed to normalization.³¹ It has also hinted at the willingness of the government to give a green light to non-governmental sectors to trade with organizations in Israel in contrast to restrictions that prevailed in the past, primarily in Egypt, which significantly hampered the development of economic normalization relations that were beyond close state scrutiny. In November 2015, after the signing of the agreement in principle between the Leviathan partnership and the Egyptian Dolphinus Holdings, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources declared that it “was not a party in the agreement but has no opposition to the private sector importing gas [from Israel], providing it is done with the state’s approval and serves national interests.”³² Likewise, Jordanian Minister Hamed declared that his ministry allows all Jordanian companies, public or private, to import gas from any source they like in order to decrease the soaring energy costs and meet growing electricity needs.³³ This framing of the gas deal signed in September 2016 as a deal between American and Jordanian companies was demonstrated by the fact that the economic rationale was defended mainly by spokespersons from JEPSCO and not from the government. The company’s headquarters in Amman subsequently became the focus of protests against the deal.³⁴

Positions advocating the import of gas from Israel and defending the deal from criticism have also emerged in the public discourse in both countries. An article in the Egyptian pro-regime *al-Masry al-Youm* came out against “empty propaganda that harms nations and does not help them” and determined that “importing gas from Israel is not a crime.”³⁵ Khaled al-Berry, editor-in-chief of the independent Egyptian news site *Dot Masr*, called for closer relations with Israel, specifically on the gas matter, in light of the many interests currently shared by the countries. He wrote that “good relations with Israel, against the backdrop of current conditions and alliances in the region, have become a security and cultural necessity.”³⁶ In the same spirit, an article in the Jordanian *ad-Dustour* entitled “Needs Make Prohibitions Permissible,” determined that “Israeli gas may turn out, unfortunately, to be the quickest and most stable source, despite the political and moral difficulties that accompany this kind of decision.”³⁷ A publicist in the Jordanian newspaper *al-Ra’i* attacked those opposing the gas deal, noting that they have no right “to demand that the government, the company Arab Potash, the national electric company, and Jordanian industry adopt a position that would mean economic suicide.”³⁸ A comment posted by Jordanian Mohammad Ahmad

claimed that without a better alternative, Jordan should import gas from anywhere it wants, “even from the devil.”³⁹

After the deal between JEPSCO and Noble Energy was signed, Jordanian journalists and analysts offered additional justifications. These included claims that: opposition to purchasing Israeli gas amounts to a “Don Quixote” position, comparable to fighting windmills;⁴⁰ the position of the Muslim Brotherhood against the deal stems from their desire to drown the Jordanian state in debts and cause it to fall into anarchy, which would allow the Brotherhood to take over;⁴¹ the gas deal enjoys legal validity according to Paragraph 19 of the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement, which discusses energy cooperation between the two countries;⁴² and the Jordanian government prefers public protests against the gas deal with Israel over the louder protests expected from the opposition should the gas deal not be signed and gas prices rise.⁴³ In an article entitled “I Too Am against Importing Gas from Israel,” Dr. Safwat Haddadin attempted to reconcile the dissonances stemming from the deal with the “Israeli enemy” by differentiating between national feelings and the rationale expected of state leadership:

I am the last person who would justify the decision to purchase gas from Israel. I have never been satisfied with it, and I will keep opposing it forever. However, political decisions do not always need to square with the desires of the people. Many are opposed to the gas deal, just like the peace agreement itself, but national interests required their existence... I do not demand that [public] discourse stop or the opposition be silent, quite the opposite. We must all stick to our opinions, but also remember that the official position and the people’s position sometimes do not overlap, and that this is very healthy.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The discourse in Egypt and Jordan on the gas deals with Israel has demonstrated internal disagreements between the regimes and the oppositions, as well as some of the public, surrounding normalization. Moreover, it has demonstrated the limited influence of the international BDS movement on interactions between Israel and its neighbors. The willingness of the Jordanian and Egyptian governments to promote the gas deals despite disagreements and criticism indicates the heavy weight of economic considerations in shaping

relations between the sides at this time. The mutual dependence that has formed between Israel and the two countries and the mutual advantages that the gas deals offer have allowed shared interests to overcome the traditional political and cultural barriers to developing relationships, albeit for only a specific and limited issue. Cooperation between Israel and its neighbors on the gas issue is likely to deepen in the coming years and might extend to include Israeli gas exports to Turkey and the creation of Arab-Israeli partnerships with Cyprus and Greece. At the same time, Israel must take into account that just as the economic consideration served as a trigger to promote the gas deals between Israel and its neighbors, it may in the future serve as grounds to break off relations. This warning, however, is not a rebuke; from the very moment that economic interests become the be-all and end-all of relations between countries, that is the very essence of normal relations.

Notes

- 1 A process in which natural gas is condensed to become LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) and transported large distances by sea.
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- 5 David Wainer, Yaacov Benmeleh, and Jonathan Ferziger, "Israel, Egypt Said Nearing Compromise on Natural Gas Dispute," *Bloomberg*, March, 18, 2016, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-05-18/israel-egypt-said-close-to-agreement-on-natural-gas-dispute.
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- 11 "Energy Minister: The Agreement with Noble Energy Will Save 100 Million Dollars a Year at Current Oil Prices," *Petra*, October 14, 2016, http://petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=2&lang=1&NewsID=272651&CatID=14.
- 12 Hedy Cohen, "Gas Pipeline to Jordan Will Begin Operation in 2017," *Globes*, March 10-11, 2016, <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001109338>.
- 13 Mahmud al-Waqi, "What is the Difference between Exporting Gas to Israel and Importing from Israel?" *al-Masry al-Youm*, December 25, 2015, www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/862787.
- 14 "Do You Support Importing Israeli Gas?" *al-Ghad*, n.d., <http://goo.gl/zyIKqV>.
- 15 The establishment of the BDS chapter in Egypt was announced on April 20, 2015 at an event in Cairo attended by political parties, student associations, union heads, and civil society organizations. The chapter operates a Facebook page that received some 10,000 likes by November 2016, www.facebook.com/BDSEGYPT/timeline. See also Salma Shukrallah, "Boycott Israel – BDS Egypt Chapter – Launches with Wide Political Support," *Ahram Online*, April 21, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/128223/Egypt/Politics-/Boycott-Israel--BDS-Egypt-chapter--launches-with-w.aspx>; Souzan Mansour, "Is Egypt Ready for a BDS Movement?" *Middle East Eye*, May 4, 2015, www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/egypt-ready-bds-movement-122425667. The BDS chapter in Jordan was established in August 2014, and it opposes all forms of normalization between Jordan and Israel on all levels, exposes goods produced in Israel that are sold in Jordan, and pressures international companies operating in Jordan to boycott Israel. It operates a Facebook page that received some 24,000 likes by November 2016, www.facebook.com/BDSJO/timeline.
- 16 "Communiqué: Jordan is Boycotting," August 10, 2014, http://jordanbds.net/?page_id=81; Michael Barak, "Incitement and Boycott: The BDS Movement in the Social Media," *Beehive* 3, no. 10 (2015): 3-5, http://dayan.org/he/sites/default/files/Beehive_2015_november_HEB_1.pdf.
- 17 The campaign's Facebook page can be found at <https://goo.gl/xGzeMW>.
- 18 Hedil Ghabon, "Protests against Israeli Gas and the 'Normalization Government,'" *CNN*, September 30, 2016, <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/09/30/me-300916-jordan-protests-against-gas>.

- 19 The chorus of the song declares: "I'll light up my home with candles, I don't want gas. I'll light a fire with wood, I don't want gas. Listen to me and my neighbors, we don't want gas. Don't try to convince me," Tashwish Wadeh, "We Don't Want Gas," *YouTube*, October 18 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4JDXAbDC0o&sns=fb&app=desktop.
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- 27 Hamza Da'na, "Kalaldeh: The Nation Must Bear the Consequences of not Importing Gas from Israel," *al-Ghad*, December 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/mWVFo5>.
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