



AT SEA: Photo shows an aerial view of the Tamar Israeli gas-drill platform in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Israel. —AFP

## Tensions flare in Mediterranean gas scramble

**NICOSIA:** Warships, militia threats and multi-billion dollar deals: the scramble for gas in the Eastern Mediterranean is fuelling hope and tensions across a volatile region. In an area riven by geopolitical feuds the quest for underwater resources has sparked dreams of economic transformation that could bind wary neighbors closer. But while there still remain major questions over the scale of deposits simmering disputes have erupted to the surface as the race for claims heats up.

Off the divided island of Cyprus on Friday, Turkish warships forced back an Italian drillship after a two-week standoff that has stirred up a decades-long row and dragged in Egypt and the European Union. At the same time the US is trying to mediate between foes Israel and Lebanon as they spar for control along a disputed maritime border where Beirut is looking to catch up. "What we see is that energy becomes another flashpoint—so when there is tension between countries, that tension spills over into energy," said Nikos Tsafos, a senior associate at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

### Cyprus vs Turkey vs Egypt

February appeared to bring good news for the

Greek-majority Republic of Cyprus. After a string of disappointments since a first find in 2011, Italy's Eni and France's Total announced they had hit potentially major gas deposits off the EU member's southern coast. But days later, Turkey once again began flexing its muscles. As an Eni drillship sailed to explore a contentious area it was blocked by Turkish warships who said they were conducting manoeuvres. After a costly two-week standoff, Ankara's forces refused to budge—and when the Italian vessel tried to break the blockade it was forced to turn back, Cypriot officials said Friday.

The confrontation is just the latest with Turkey over the hunt for gas around Cyprus. Once seen as an incentive to reunify the island, the struggle for resources has become a major stumbling block to restarting peace talks that collapsed last year. Ankara, which invaded in 1974 and supports a statelet in the north, has consistently sought to halt drilling—saying it is defending the claims of Turkish Cypriots. Cyprus has enlisted the help of the EU, which eyes the region's resources as a potentially valuable alternative energy source, and warned that there can be no peace negotiations unless Turkey respects its "sovereign rights".

Egypt, which sits on the region's biggest gas reserves and has a key agreement with Cyprus that allows development, has also traded angry barbs with Ankara. But Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to have little incentive to give way as he plays to nationalist sentiments and looks to protect Ankara's role as a key transit hub. "I don't think Turkey is willing to spark a confrontation, but I think it cannot be fully dismissed," said analyst Andrew Neff from IHS Markit. "If one of these drillships wanders too far into disputed waters then I think we'll see Turkey engage in some additional 'gunboat diplomacy' in defense of its interests."

### Lebanon vs Israel

Further to the east, Israel has been setting the pace ever since it made the first find in the region in 2009. And Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared jubilant—and vindicated as he hailed a "historic" \$15-billion deal to export gas to Egypt on February 19. "Many people did not believe in the gas plan," he said in a video. "This is a joyous day." Israel's authorities have pitched gas as a potential bonanza that can help smooth fraught relations with its neighbors. Thawing ties with Turkey, in addition to

major supply deals with Jordan and now Egypt appeared to back up its claims.

But to the north trouble is brewing. After years of debilitating political deadlock Lebanon earlier this month signed its first exploration deal with a consortium of Italian, French and Russian firms. The agreement includes a block on the disputed maritime border that Israeli officials insist belongs to the Jewish state. The United States has dispatched a senior official to try to mediate, but as the two sides spar the war-of-words is ratcheting up. The leader of Hezbollah—which fought a war with Israel in 2006 and has missiles that could hit its offshore projects—insisted it could win the "oil and gas war".

"If Israel threatens you, you can threaten it," Hassan Nasrallah said. The Jewish state is taking no chances, bolstering its missile defense at sea and navy. But despite the sabre-rattling, some insist that given Lebanon's need for energy and Israel's multi-billion dollar deals on the line—neither side is willing to start fighting. "I don't think that there is any question of it here because nobody is interested in a conflict," said Eyal Zisser, head of department of Middle Eastern history at Tel Aviv University. "It's all about money; everybody can lose, everybody can win." — AFP

## Fates of foreign jihadists held in Iraq, Syria vary

**QAMISHLI:** Iraq and Syria's Kurds have netted foreign jihadists by the thousands but while the former is expediting trials, the latter would rather send them home. A Baghdad court on Monday sentenced Frenchwoman Melina Boughedir to seven months in prison, a term she had already served by the time she was tried. The authorities only found her guilty of entering Iraq illegally and she will soon be able to return to France, a country which was one of the Islamic State group's main suppliers of foreign fighters.

The 27-year-old is one among the thousands of foreigners suspected of having fought for or supported jihadist groups, more or less directly, over the past years. Iraq, which has detained at least 560 women, as well as 600 children, identified as jihadist or relatives of suspected IS fighters, is wasting no time in putting them on trial. In January, a court sentenced a German woman to death on charges of providing logistical support to IS and on Sunday a Turkish woman was also handed the death penalty.

France so far has ignored appeals by families and lawyers advocating repatriations and said it supported the idea of its nationals detained in Iraq and Syria being tried there. Paris has said it would only intervene if death penalties were handed down. Iraq is one of the countries in the world that carries out the most executions. Most countries, especially in Europe where a string of deadly attacks has had a major impact on public opinion, do not want to see those detained nationals return on their soil.

There appears to be little ambivalence in Iraq over the fate of the foreign fighters and their families. "These people have killed, put women into slavery... They have committed war crimes on Iraqi soil, and Iraqi law prevails," said the main spokesman of Iraq's judiciary, Abdel Sattar Bayraqdar. Across the bor-

der, the Syrian Kurds have more misgivings. "We have arrested thousands of foreign jihadists and we still capture some every day," Redur Khalil, a senior spokesman said in the Kurdish region of Syria. Khalil is an official in the People's Protection Units, a group which formed the backbone of an outfit that was the US-led coalition's main ground partner in the fight against IS in Syria.

"We want foreign jihadists to be tried in their home countries," he said. The Kurdish forces have more immediate priorities, such as fending off a Turkish military offensive on the enclave of Afrin. The Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria is self-proclaimed, which leaves many legal question marks hanging over its dealing with foreign states over such an issue. The semi-autonomous region is led by a de facto government and elections are due for its parliament but its fledgling institutions are not recognized internationally.

"According to which law can we sentence them?" Khalil asked, adding: "We don't have big prisons." Abdul Karim Omar, a senior official in one of the three cantons of the autonomous Kurdish territory, said a bilateral deal had been reached with Indonesia and Russia, calling for others to follow suit. "We wish to deliver these prisoners to their countries," he said. But after being held up as the heroes of the war against IS, Syria's Kurds face the risk of isolation on the international scene and appear ready to accommodate some of the states least willing to take back their jihadists. "If it's not possible to deliver them, we will put them into court here," Omar said.

Sentences in Syrian Kurdish courts go up to 20 years in jail for terrorism-related charges but can be reduced. The families of and lawyers of some of the detained foreign jihadists have voiced concern that these foreign detainees will turn into bargaining chips in geopolitical horse-trading. — AFP

## Once the world's fattest, Mexican man dreams of walking again

**GUADALAJARA:** The folds of flesh on Juan Pedro Franco's back sway heavily as he cranks the pedals of a modified bicycle with his arms, exercising to boost his already jaw-dropping weight-loss total of 250 kilos (550 pounds). Franco, who comes from northern Mexico, used to be the world's fattest man. Guinness World Records certified the title after he weighed in at 595 kilos (1,310 pounds) in October 2016. At the time, he was completely bed-ridden, suffered from diabetes and high blood pressure, and had a severely obstructed lung. Doctors warned his life was at risk if he didn't lose weight.

That's when Franco decided to undergo double gastric surgery. He and his mother moved from his home state, Aguascalientes, to Guadalajara in the west, the city where his bariatric surgeon, Jose Antonio Castaneda, has his clinic. Castaneda put Franco, who suffers

from hypothyroidism, on a "very severe" diet of Mediterranean cuisine for six months. Then, in May 2017, came the first surgery: a gastric sleeve operation, which involves removing part of the stomach to reduce its volume by up to 80 percent.

Six months later, he underwent a gastric bypass, in which Castaneda halved what remained of his stomach, and then connected one of the smaller pouches to the intestines. The intestines themselves were also divided, to reduce his absorption of nutrients. Since Franco could barely move at the time, burning off calories would never have been enough, doctors said. The only option was to radically reduce the size of his stomach.

Now 33 years old, Franco currently weighs in at 345 kilos (760 pounds). Castaneda expects him to lose about 100 kilos more in the next year and a half. He is still connected to an oxygen tube 24 hours a day, but he spends less and less time lying in bed. Using a walker, he has managed to take his first steps in years. Now, he says, he has one big dream: "I want to walk again."

Franco's skin is pale white from lack of exposure to the sun. He spends his days knitting scarves and making sweets for his family to sell his way of contributing to the household budget. In his free time, he likes to sing and play guitar. But a large part of his day is devoted to his exercises. These include lifting weights, pulling resistance

cords and pedaling his hand-cranked stationary bike. "I'm very happy because everything is going very well," he said from his bed, which is outfitted with a custom-built metal structure that enables him to lift himself to his feet.

"He's doing more exercise each day," said Castaneda, at his side. "He is making an effort to stand up by himself, to get his life on track. He has a very positive attitude." According to the clinic, a lot now depends on how well he progresses and how he responds to treatment for the lymphedema in his legs—accumulated fluid caused by the blockage of his lymphatic system. "He remains a complex patient and will be at risk until he no longer suffers from extreme obesity," his medical team said in a statement. "We are trying to save a life, and we will remain vigilant until he is out of danger."

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, 58 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean are overweight. Mexico is one of the countries worst affected by the problem, along with the Bahamas and Chile. Franco is not the only Mexican to have been the world's fattest man. His compatriot Manuel Uribe claimed the title in 2007 after weighing in at 597 kilos. He later went on a diet that brought him down to 394 kilos. Uribe got married in 2008, after being lifted to the ceremony by a crane. He died in May 2014 at age 48. — AFP



GUADALAJARA: Mexican Juan Pedro Franco exercises at his house in Guadalajara, Jalisco state. Franco, 33, lost 250 kilograms after undergoing a medical treatment which included two surgeries and now dreams of being able to walk again. — AFP