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December 17, 2006

Pipeline power for Israel?

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Relatively quietly, and with tantalizingly few details available, Israel and Turkey have reached [agreement](#) on construction of a strategic pipeline linking the Black Sea and Red Sea, traversing Israel to eventually deliver energy resources to Far Eastern markets. If plans proceed to construction and operation, it will represent a major step forward for Israel, and will reinforce Turkey's moderating power among Muslim nations.

Pipelines matter in the balance of world power. A lot. Their importance goes virtually unnoticed by the public, for they are not glamorous and they do not require large numbers of workers once they are completed. But let Russia, for instance, turn off the flow of natural gas to Ukraine in the dead of winter, and a crisis quickly develops for Ukrainians. Russia sees its control of energy resources as an [instrument of national power](#), and is increasingly aggressive in its use.

The Caspian region contains huge oil reserves already discovered and "proven." It is believed that far more oil and gas lies in wait, ready to be discovered and developed. Some believe the region may even surpass the Persian Gulf in its potential. But getting the oil and gas to market is still a challenge. Russia controls most practical overland routes. With one exception.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) was built connecting the region with Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, where oil could be loaded onto large tankers for transport to European markets. Tanker traffic through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, lining the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, is already over 5000 movements per year, and cannot be safely expanded. Construction of this pipeline represented a major [victory for American policy objectives](#), strengthening our allies against the influence of the Russia. The key fact is that this route does *not* pass through territory controlled by Russia. Already a terminal for other energy projects, Ceyhan is emerging as an important node in the network of world energy flows and markets.

Now comes [word](#) that Turkey and Israel have signed a memorandum of understanding on the construction of a \$4 billion pipeline linking Ceyhan and Ashkelon, on Israel's Mediterranean coast. From there, gas and oil could be transported through existing and new pipelines to Eilat, Israel's port on the Red Sea. From there, it could flow into tankers, bound for markets in Asia. The exact route has not been specified, but obviously it would have to pass under Mediterranean waters, as Turkey and Lebanon cannot be regarded as realistic overland routings.

The proposed pipeline would be a multi-tasker, carrying conduits for oil, gas, water,



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electricity, and possibly fiber-optic cable. Turkey has relatively abundant water resources, while Israel, Jordan, Syria, and other neighbors are rather parched. Water resource control is a major underlying dynamic of conflict between Israel and its neighbors. Adding to the region's supply is precisely the sort of measure which could ease tensions, and strengthen Israel's bargaining power.

Right now, the next stage is a \$40 million feasibility study. If this project goes forward, there is actually reason to have some optimism about the possibilities of peace, which is a commodity more rare and valuable than oil itself. There are many obstacles to overcome, but the fact that serious people are spending serious private money (the funding for the project does not rely on governmental money) on preparations is an excellent sign.

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