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[Israel denies helping Iraq Kurds, sees one Iraq](#)

Triple pipeline project to carry oil, gas, water from Turkey to Israel possible within three years, infrastructure minister says

TEL AVIV, JERUSALEM - Israel on Wednesday denied claims that it was helping Iraqi Kurds in their purported efforts for independence, with two senior cabinet ministers saying the Jewish state saw Iraq as a united country.

When asked by a reporter in a group of visiting journalists from Turkey if Israel was providing assistance to the Iraqi Kurds, National Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer said: "As far as I know, there's nothing."

He said he believed Iraq would remain a united country. "I can't see a possibility of Iraq being divided into three pieces. The Shia, the Sunnis and the Kurds have to learn to live together," Ben Eliezer said in Tel Aviv.

Earlier in the day, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni also said that Israel regarded war-torn Iraq as a united country. "We see Iraq as one unit," she told the same group of reporters at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, declining to comment further.

Some reports in the Turkish and international media over the past two years have suggested that Israel has been providing the Iraqi Kurds with military training and political and economic assistance.

Enjoying close defense and economic ties with Israel since the mid-1990s, Turkey is concerned over Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war.

Top Iraqi Kurdish leaders, including Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq, have been saying that the Kurds have a right to independence, but that they are presently opting for staying inside a federal Iraq.

Livni said that the Turkish-Israeli relationship had a strategic nature and that the Jewish state viewed Turkey as a model for the Middle East region in terms of democracy.

In Israel's coalition government, Livni is from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's centrist Kadima Party, and Ben Eliezer is a senior member of the left-leaning Labor Party. A veteran of Israeli politics, Ben Eliezer had served as deputy prime minister and defense minister in earlier cabinets.

Pipeline for peace

Ben Eliezer, who overlooks the country's energy and water matters, said a plan to bring oil, natural gas and water to Israel through a triple pipeline system from Turkey could be finished in three years if ongoing feasibility studies supported the project.

"This project can be a reality within three years," he said. "On May 1 and 2, I will be visiting Turkey to discuss the project with Turkish officials... By the end of the year, a memorandum of understanding can be signed with Turkey."

The project calls for the construction of triple pipelines beneath the Mediterranean Sea between the ports of Ceyhan in Turkey and Ashqelon in Israel.

One pipeline is planned to carry Azerbaijan's oil that reaches Turkey via a pipeline through Georgia. Ben Eliezer said the oil then can be pumped to Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat through an existing pipeline system and then part of it could be exported to countries, including India, Japan and China.

A second pipeline is planned to bring Russian gas to Israel. Ben Eliezer said he was also considering adding Azeri gas to the project.

A third pipeline should carry Turkish water to relieve Israel, Palestinian territories and Jordan, the Israeli minister said.

One potential problem with the oil leg of the project is related to the volumes to be carried from Azerbaijan. The oil-rich Transcaucasian country's oil flowing in the pipeline through Georgia and Turkey is estimated to reach a peak of around 20 million tons per year in the next decade, which is seen as a modest figure.

Analysts say that to make the Azeri-Georgian-Turkish pipeline more effective, the system should also carry part of the vast oil resources of Kazakhstan in central Asia. Russia is also vying for that oil.

Ben Eliezer said he was hopeful that the Kazakh oil could be added to the Azeri oil.

Israel earlier had planned to import Turkish water via tankers, but then resorted to desalination of sea water as the Turkish project proved to be much more expensive, according to Eliezer. He said he expected that carrying water through the planned Turkish pipeline would be more cost-effective.

Middle East peace

Both Livni and Ben Eliezer said a Saudi plan to normalize relations between Arab nations and Israel in return for the solution of the Palestine problem was worth discussions. The plan calls on Israel to withdraw to its borders in 1967 and division of Jerusalem.

Livni said the plan was negotiable, while Ben Eliezer said he supported serious negotiations on the proposal. But Livni said a later plan proposed by the Arab League was not favorable because it was also urging the return of Palestinian refugees.

Turkey is also involved in the peace efforts.

Ben Eliezer said that he was pleasantly surprised by the four-year performance of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government and that he has great respect for him.

Livni said that world leaders, including those in Turkey, had a role to play in the fight against a worsening wave of anti-Semitism. "There's a role for leaders who should say that this (anti-Semitism) is against the values of our society," she said.