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Will gas help build peace?

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The impending decline of the strategic importance of Mideast oil is a blessing.

What if the Middle East suddenly became irrelevant? What if the Palestinians and Israelis could sit down and bargain over peace terms without meddling by the great powers or hostile Islamic nations? It could happen and, in fact, to some degree it is. The reason: A radical change in the geopolitical map of the world due to massive discoveries of natural gas, through the process known as 'fracking' (hydraulic fracturing of rock layers by pressurized liquid to release natural gas), developed first in America.

The world consumes about 2.4 trillion cubic meters of natural gas yearly.

The estimated annual supply of natural gas through fracking is: US 24.4 (trillion cu. meters), Argentina, 21.9; Europe, 18.1; Australia, 11.2; and China, 36.1. Total: 111.7 trillion cubic meters. In other words, about 50 years' worth of consumption.

Even if you assume that some of the natural gas will be converted to fuel to run cars and trucks, there is still at least 25 years' worth of annual consumption.

One estimate suggests that there is as much as 900 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves in the world.

What this means is that the world can now liberate itself from the tyranny of Mideast oil.

It is true that crude oil is still vital to produce gasoline for cars and trucks; some 70 percent of proven world crude oil reserves are in the Mideast. But technology exists both to run cars and trucks on natural gas and to convert natural gas into gasoline. Qatar, for instance, has already built a massive plant that makes gasoline from natural gas. Israel and America should do the same. Israel's Better Place already enables cars to run on electric power, used to recharge electric car batteries at night when electricity is cheap. With natural gas-driven cars, Israel could run its cars and trucks without refining crude oil at all. So could every country.

The massive new supplies of gas have already reduced the price of a unit of energy from gas from rough equality with crude oil in 2009 to only one-fifth today. With the right infrastructure, the cost of fuel for cars and trucks can fall by half using natural gas as fuel.

The impending decline of the strategic importance of Mideast oil is a blessing. Despotism in Saudi Arabia, Iran and elsewhere are kept afloat solely by petrodollars.

Leaders of oil-rich Mideast and North African countries have utterly failed to build any semblance of a modern economy; Libya is the ultimate poster boy. They did not have to upgrade their economies – oil money lubricated their pockets and those of their cronies and kept them in power. Now there will be no choice. Either modernize or be swept away by hungry masses.

This is highly positive for Israel.

When crude oil is no longer important, Iran will have to join the 21st century, and build a real economy – today, Iran cannot even refine its own crude oil and has to import gasoline – the ayatollahs' reign could end and Saudi money will no longer fund Islamic extremists all over the world.

Since the discovery of the Noa North gas field in 1999, Israel has discovered offshore gas amounting to 1.23 trillion cubic meters, worth almost a whole year's Gross Domestic Product. A great debate now rages over what to do with this resource. I think it should be used to make Israel a showcase for an oil-free nation. Let's show the world why oil is, and should be, irrelevant. And natural gas emits a fifth less environment-unfriendly CO₂ than gasoline.

Not all experts agree the future is rosy.

There is evidence that hydraulic fracking pollutes groundwater and even causes minor earthquakes. Bulgaria and France have banned it and Britain has suspended fracking temporarily. US experts believe the downside of fracking can be overcome.

In his new book, *The Gulf States in a Changing Strategic Environment*, Institute for National Security Studies expert Yoel Guzansky notes the rising power of Iran and the weakening influence of America. The question is will the decline of oil or the decline of America dominate? Mideast peace, perhaps, lies in the balance.

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