

# ISRAEL AND TURKMENISTAN: SIGNIFICANT PARTNERSHIPS

## ISRAELI COMPANY 'MERHAV' AND YOSEF MAIMAN IN TURKMENISTAN

Merhav, a privately owned Israeli investment company has been heavily involved in the development of Turkmenistan's oil and gas production for over a decade. The company CEO Yosef Maiman made several agreements with the country's late dictator Saparmurat Niyazov, and also managed to draw other foreign businesses into the projects lead by Merhav – for example, the renovation project of Turkmenistan's largest oil refinery, Turkmenbashi, and the construction of a polypropylene factory in the same area, the overall costs of which exceeded \$1 billion. In the Turkmenbashi oil refinery project Merhav acted as the official representative of the Turkmen government. In 2003 Turkmenistan revealed that it would invest \$1,5 billion into the reconstruction of the Seyydi oil refinery, and appointed Merhav to lead the project. Since Niyazov's death, Merhav has continued operating in Turkmenistan, developing its projects further and proposing various new ones.

According to the Turkmen political refugee Boris Shikmuradov Jr. (son of Boris Shikmuradov Sr., former Turkmen Foreign Minister and close acquaintance of Yosef Maiman), Maiman's company Merhav was responsible for the Ruhnama's Hebrew translation. Maiman, a former Israeli intelligence agent, has often been referred to as Turkmenistan's honorary consul in Israel. He has also been described as Niyazov's right-hand man on energy matters. In this role Maiman actively furthered U.S. and Israeli goals while persuading Niyazov to bypass Russia and Iran in building the country's main gas-export pipeline. Maiman acted as an intermediary in Niyazov's \$2,5 billion contract with the American joint venture PSG International on building a gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and Turkey. For Washington the deal froze out Russia and Iran, both of which Niyazov had previously been reluctant to challenge.

"This is the Great Game all over", Maiman said during an interview in his office in Herzliyah, an Israeli resort town, referring to a late 19th century, three-way contest for control of Central Asia. "Controlling the transport route is controlling the product.". Maiman also furthered the Israeli security interests in the area. "Maiman is the Israeli-Turkmenistan relationship", says Shmuel Meron, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's director of Commonwealth of Independent States affairs. "He is our ambassador at large. He opens doors and understands the rules of the game."

During the US Presidential transition in November 2000, however, the Russians managed to flip Niyazov. According to James Dorsey's report in The Scotsman in November 2000, Niyazov had halted the American attempts to secure the transportation of Caspian gas through Turkey. Niyazov announced that an agreement had been reached with the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom, leaving little over to the United States-backed Trans Caspian Pipeline.

According to an article published in the Financial Times in May 2006, US energy officials now regarded Turkmenistan as "a lost cause". The dictator's sudden death, however, brought new hope to the situation. In a Reuters report a massive fight for power in Turkmenistan was predicted to take place between pro-U.S. and pro-Russian forces, in which gas would be the "key asset to get hold of". Since Berdymuhammedov's rise to power, the U.S.-Turkmen relationship paved by Maiman has become increasingly important. Both U.S. and European Union leaders have aggressively courted the new president with the TCP and Nabucco pipelines, while Russia has actively lobbied against them, promoting its own South Stream pipeline as a more viable transportation route.

*Turkmenbashi*

[http://profcutler.com/wordpress\\_blog/?p=214](http://profcutler.com/wordpress_blog/?p=214)

*The Great Game - The War For Caspian Oil And Gas*

<http://www.rense.com/general15/game.htm>

*Israeli investment in Turkmenistan tops \$1 billion*

<http://www.bu.edu/iscip/digest/vol3/ed0311.html>

*Israeli Merhav offers new projects to Turkmenistan*

[http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page\\_id=3&lang\\_id=en&elem\\_id=10394&type=event&highlight\\_words=merhav&sort=date\\_desc](http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=10394&type=event&highlight_words=merhav&sort=date_desc)

*Western diplomatic offensive in Central Asia throws Russia on the defensive*

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060608.shtml>