

Water Conflict Between Syria and Israel

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Abstract

The water conflict is one of the important criteria in determining the relation between Syria and Israel. Due to geographical nature of Middle East, shortage of water resources can be a huge problem. In this article water conflict between Syria and Israel has been discussed. Long standing disputed area which is known as Golan Heights, is one of the main reasons of many Arab-Israel conflicts. In this paper we have tried to connect the relation of Arab-Israel wars with the Golan height conflict. Importance of Golan height has also been touched, especially geostrategic and geopolitics importance of Golan Heights has been discussed. Short historical background is also been explained, started from 15th century to till now. Golan conflict has an international background we will explore how International actors reacted in resolving the issue, especially UN resolutions have great importance in Golan Height conflicts.

Keywords: Golan height, Syria, Israel, War, UN, Disputed

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Introduction

Despite some brief interludes of optimism in the early 1990s, the history of conflict and mistrust between Israel and Syria, the ongoing occupation of the Golan Heights, and periodic hostilities mean that a durable peace between them remains a distant prospect. Throughout the last two decades of official and unofficial peace talks between Israel and Syria, the position and concerns of each party to reach peace have become evident. The Syrians insist on a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, captured in 1967, down to the 4 June 1967 line, which would allow Syrian access to the Sea of Galilee/Lake Tiberias. Israeli leaders have stated their demand of keeping the Syrians off the water of the Lake and their intention to withdraw along the international border line of 1923, although it seems at least some of them do realise that the Syrian pre-condition of full withdrawal has to be fulfilled. Indeed, the stumbling block obstructing the implementation of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal is the disputed area between the 1923 international borderline and the 1967 pre-war (4 June 1967) line. Although small in size, this area carries a most significant and strategic position involving water access, sovereignty and control. This has been regarded as the sticking point through the two-decade period of negotiation. popular anecdote in the Middle East, coined by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, is that ‘no war is possible without Egypt, and no peace possible without Syria’ This paper will focus mainly on the prospect of conflicts between Israel and Syria on Golan heights.

The main Purpose of writing this article is to connects the events of Arap Israel conflict with the Golan Height geo-strategic and geo-politic importance. The Golan height issue is one of the main problem which caused long term conflict between Syria and Israel. In the first part I analysis the historical perspective and highlight the historical importance of Golan heights. In 2nd part I tried to explain the conflict between Syria and Israel over Golan Heights and try to connect the crisis of Golan directly to the Arab-Israel wars and I also tried to summarize the Israel annexation of Golan heights in 1981 despite

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strong global pressure The last part of this study sums up the strategic advantages of Israel's control over the Golan Heights, which would be forfeited by a withdrawal from this area. This part of this study explores the limited value to Israel of a peace treaty with Syria, emphasizing that the security disadvantages of transferring the Golan Heights to Syria in the framework of a peace treaty far outweigh the limited political advantages.

SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GOLAN HEIGHT CRISIS:

Historically, the Golan Heights had never been a part of a unified Jewish state, and the region had not contained a significant Jewish population for 3,000 years. The Ottoman Empire, the last of a millenium-long succession of Muslim rulers, governed the area until the end of World War I. Then France assumed control of it as part of the League of Nations Mandate for Syria, while Britain assumed control of the neighboring Mandate for Palestine. In 1922 the two countries established an international boundary between their Mandates. In 1946, the French Mandate was divided and Syria gained its independence. In 1948, when Britain withdrew from Palestine, Syria and four other Arab states attacked the new state of Israel as it fought to establish its borders within Palestine. The Armistice Agreement signed in 1949 left Syria in control of three small regions in northern Israel. Although they were demilitarized, competition and conflict over the three regions gradually escalated and in 1967 provided Israel with its primary justification for invading Syria following its successful attacks on Egypt and Jordan. By the time a cease-fire was arranged, Israel was in control of two-thirds of Syria's agriculturally prosperous westernmost Province of Al Qunaytirah; it subsequently renamed the region the Golan Heights. In 1973 Syrian forces attacked Israel and temporarily reoccupied about half of the Golan Heights before they were repulsed, and agreed to a new cease-fire line and buffer zone. The 1973 Middle East war proved

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to be only a temporary interruption in the gradual “Israelization” of the Golan Heights.¹²

More than 100,000 Syrian Arabs fled or were expelled from the area during and after the 1967 fighting. An Israeli census taken soon after the war counted only 6,400 Syrian nationals on the Golan, most of them Druze farmers living in a few villages in the north. Since then the Arab population of these villages has grown to about 14,000. Meanwhile, the Syrian imprint on the remainder of the Golan has been all but destroyed.³ Since 1967 some 6,000 Israelis have settled 31 new Golan communities, including Katzrin, the administrative and commercial center where the Israelis plan to house 20,000 citizens. Agriculture grain, vegetables, fruit, and livestock is the predominant activity. Although the Israeli settlements on the Golan have increased steadily in size and number, progress has been slower than planned, owing to a shortage of funds and a dearth of willing settlers. They nonetheless exist as “facts” created by Israel to strengthen its hold on the occupied Golan.⁴ Israel’s de facto annexation of the Golan Heights on 14 December 1981 Culminated a steady tightening of control over the region it had captured from Syria in 1967⁵. The population of the Golan was estimated at 147,613 in 1966. Well before the annexation, most of the Syrians who had not fled during the fighting had been expelled, many 146 Syrian villages had been razed, the Israeli curriculum was being taught even in the few remaining Arab schools, and many Jewish

¹ Elusive victory: the Arab-Israeli wars, 1947-1974, Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, YayinciHarper & Row, 1978

² M. Pollack, Kenneth, Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991, U of Nebraska Press, 2004, 3-7

³ AL-MARSAD, Ibid

⁴ Kirrish, Fadwa N., Druze ethnicity in the Golan heights the interface of religion and politics, Routledge publishers, 1992, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666959208716232>

⁵ Inbar, Efraim. (2018). Israeli Control of the Golan Heights: High Strategic and Moral Ground for Israel.

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settlements had been established and transferred from military to civilian control.⁶

According to the terms of the disengagement agreement signed in 1974, Israeli and Syrian military forces are separated by a buffer zone at the eastern margin of the Golan Heights, which is manned by the UN Disengagement Observer Force. Each country may maintain only limited forces and weaponry within specified distances of the buffer zone. Although force and weapon levels have varied considerably, both sides have generally adhered to the terms of the agreement with neither side normally maintaining as large a military presence as the agreement permits. Even during the Israeli military buildup on the Golan beginning in December, the Israelis apparently did not exceed the authorized levels. Syria limited its reaction to diplomatic efforts.⁷

Despite some brief interludes of optimism in the early 1990s, the history of conflict and mistrust between Israel and Syria, the ongoing occupation of the Golan Heights, and periodic hostilities mean that a durable peace between them remains a distant prospect. Throughout the last two decades of official and unofficial peace talks between Israel and Syria, the position and concerns of each party to reach peace have become evident. The Syrians insist on a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, captured in 1967, down to the 4 June 1967 line, which would allow Syrian access to the Sea of Galilee/Lake Tiberias. Israeli leaders have stated their demand of keeping the Syrians off the water of the Lake and their intention to withdraw along the international border line of 1923, although it seems at least some of them do realize that the Syrian pre-condition of full withdrawal has to be fulfilled. Indeed, the stumbling block obstructing the implementation of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal is the disputed area between the 1923 international borderline and the 1967 pre-war (4 June 1967) line. Although small in

⁶ AL-MARSAD - The Arab Center for Human Rights in the Golan Heights Report

⁷ UN report: ISRAEL-SYRIA: AGREEMENT ON DISENGAGEMENT* Done at Geneva, June 5, 1974

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size, this area carries a most significant and strategic position involving water access, sovereignty and control. This has been regarded as the sticking point through the two-decade period of negotiations.

THE GOLAN HEIGHTS IN PERSPECTIVE: SYRIA-ISRAEL:

The Golan Heights lies within an area of 444 km², from the Yarmouk River in the south, the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee in the west, Mount Hermon in the north, and Wadi al-Ruqqad in the east. After World War I, Britain and France drew the international boundaries of the region and through the Anglo–French agreement of 1923 which had evident water borders partitioned Ottoman Syria. The borders between Syria and mandate Palestine were demarcated so that all of Lake Tiberias, including a 10-metre wide strip of beach along its north-eastern shore, would stay inside mandate Palestine. To the north of Lake Tiberias to Lake Hula the boundary was drawn between 50-400 metres east of the Jordan River, keeping that stream entirely within mandate Palestine.⁸ Nevertheless, the land partition still granted Syrians water usage rights. Syrian farmers were allowed to use Lake Tiberias for fishing and drinking water purposes. This applied also to the Banias and Hasbani Rivers, where Syria withdrew water for drinking. Today Israel controls two-thirds of the Golan Heights, which provides about 30 per cent of Israel's fresh-water supply.⁹ The Golan Heights is inhabited by approximately 40,000 people; around 20,000 of these inhabitants are Israeli Jews while about 20,000 are Syrian.¹⁰ In addition to being a key source of water resources, the fertile land of the Golan has attracted farming and agriculture of multiple products. In addition, the area is ideal for generating renewable wind energy; Israeli firms are currently

⁸ Hof, F. , 'Mapping Peace between Syria and Israel', United States Institute of Peace Special Report, Washington, DC, 2009

⁹ Gurtler, A., Haimann, J. and Simmons, C. (2010) 'Syrian-Israeli Peace in the Golan: No Walk in the Park', The Institute of Middle East Studies Paper Series, George Washington University, Washington, DC

¹⁰ Ali, S. and Cohen, M. , 'Salvaging Peace with Syria', Policy Innovations, last viewed December 2010 , Available at: http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/peace_park

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operating small wind farms on the Golan. In the wake of rising demand for alternative forms of energy, the potential that the Golan holds is very attractive to investors and policymakers alike.¹¹ The Golan Heights has long held a special security significance in Israel's view. Israeli political leaders and the general public remember well the period before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when Syrian artillery on the Golan sporadically shelled Israeli farms and civilian communities in the disputed demilitarized zones in the Hula Valley. The scheduled final withdrawal from the Sinai next April, moreover, has generated new anxiety about increased vulnerability to the perceived Arab threat. This concern plus longstanding suspicions of Syrian intentions has further reinforced the Israelis' attachment to the Golan.¹²

Indeed, Knesset passage on 14 December of Prime Minister Begin's bill effectively annexing the Golan Heights culminates a steady tightening of Israeli control over the territory. In 1979 the Israelis established a Golan regional council controlled by the Interior Ministry. A year later, the Knesset authorized the Interior Ministry to confer Israeli citizenship on amenable Golan Druze. Most major Israeli parties, moreover, have long sponsored settlements in the territory a connection that has assured the settlers a formidable lobby within the government and Knesset. Public opinion polls in recent years showed consistently that an overwhelming majority favored eventual annexation. The timing and tactics used in passing the recent bill have sparked ineffective criticism by the opposition, which staged an unsuccessful no-confidence vote shortly after the 14 December annexation move.¹³

Control of the Golan Heights gives the Israelis a buffer zone beyond its borders within which to contain a possible Syrian invasion. From their

¹¹ Greenfield-Gilat, (2009) 'A Renewable Energy Peace Park in the Golan as a Framework to an Israeli-Syrian Agreement', United States Institute of Peace Briefing Report, Washington, DC

¹² Eiland, Giora, *Defensible Borders on the Golan Heights*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009, Available at: <http://www.jcpa.org/text/DefensibleBorders-GolanHeights.pdf>

¹³ Eiland, Giora, *Ibid*

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positions on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon, which dominates the local landscape, the Israelis can monitor not only the movements of Syrian units near the Golan but those of Palestinian guerrillas in southern Lebanon as well.¹⁴ Control of the northern Golan, moreover, ensures Israeli control over the headwaters of the Baniyas River, a tributary of the upper Jordan River.

THE SYRIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

The territory now known as the Golan Heights is a tiny part of the “fertile crescent,” the ancient pathway around the deserts of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq that has been a route of trade, migration, invasion, and shifting political control throughout recorded time. Although this particular area was never a part of a centralized Jewish state in the modern sense, ruins of Jewish synagogues on the Heights are continuing evidence of Jewish settlement there during the Second and Third Centuries A.D. Following the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 A.D. and the subsequent Jewish dispersion, the entire region eventually came under the control of the Byzantines¹⁵ and later of a series of Muslim powers periodically interrupted by Crusaders, the ruins of whose castles still dot the area.

During 15th and 16th centuries, in the northern Golan Druze began to settle and in the ensuing decades, Sudanese, Algerians, Turkmens and Samarian Arabs settled on the Heights. The Ottoman Turks brought in Circassians in the 1880's to fight against Bedouin brigands.¹⁶ The Ottoman Empire (1517-1917), the last of the Muslim sovereigns over the area, ended with World War I. Near the end of Ottoman rule, several Jewish philanthropists bought land in various areas of the Middle East for the resettlement of Jews from Europe and Russia. Although most of

¹⁴ Inbar, Efraim, *Ibid*

¹⁵ The Golan Heights: Geography, Geology and History, Jewish Virtual Library, 2010, Available at:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/golan1.html>

¹⁶ The Golan Heights, *Ibid*

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these purchases were in Palestine, two such resettlement communities were attempted on the Golan Heights.

The 1922 International Boundary.

During World War I, the British, French, and Italians encouraged the Arabs to revolt against Turkish rule by promising them independence. After the war, however, the Allies reneged on their promise and divided up the territory into Mandates under the League of Nations.¹⁷ The boundary between the British Mandate for Palestine (out of which Israel was carved) and the French Mandate for Syria (which included the Golan Heights and present-day Lebanon) was demarcated by an Anglo-French boundary commission in 1922 and formally accepted by those governments in March 1923. The boundary is about 65 kilometers long and extends from the current Lebanon-Syria-Israel tripoint to the present Jordan border (then British Transjordan).¹⁸

The Syrian-Israeli conflict began within the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The Syrian army in 1948 advanced west of the 1923 border and succeeded in reaching the shores of Lake Tiberias, also capturing the east bank of the Jordan north of the Lake in addition to a small section of Israeli territory west of the river.¹⁹ With the United Nations intervention in 1949, Syrian forces withdrew to their previous position while Israeli forces stayed out of the newly-evacuated areas, creating three demilitarised zones to the west of the 1923 international line and west of the Jordan. The armistice agreement was far from valued and numerous violations were recorded from both sides. Growing conflict marked the period after the signing of the 1949 armistice agreement through the unilateral decision of Israel to create facts on the ground and remove Arabs living in the DMZs, replacing them with settlers. The

¹⁷ 1921 [Cmd. 1195] 1921: 4. Franco-British Convention of 23rd December, 1920, on certain points connected with the Mandates for Syria and the Lebanon, Palestine and Mesopotamia. (FRANCE: Mandates (Syria, &C.))

¹⁸ 1921, *ibid*

¹⁹ Slater, J. (2002) 'Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001', *International Security*, vol. 27, no.1, pp. 79-106

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Syrians reasoned that since they had controlled the zones at the time the armistice was signed they had an obligation to protect the rights of Palestinian Arabs living there. The Israelis contended the zones were part of their territory based on the UN Partition Plan. The Israelis claimed that the only limit on their authority in the demilitarized zones was the prohibition on troops and military activity and that the chairman of a Mixed Armistice Committee appointed by the United Nations had authority only over the return of civilians to the zones and the hiring of local residents as police.²⁰

The Armistice Agreement directed that farming in the demilitarized zones be quickly restored to prehostility levels but gave no guidance on how the land was to be returned to its owners. The problem was complex because the fields of Arab and Jewish farmers often abutted and in some places were intermingled. Both Syria and Israel used the expansion of agricultural holdings as a means to establish control. As farmers returned to the war-ravaged zones, numerous disputes over land ownership occurred. The Syrians and Israelis had established defensive positions on the Golan Heights and in the Galilee Hills from which flat trajectory fire could be delivered to the zones on the valley floor. Despite UN willingness to arbitrate, the governments tended to back their own participants in local disputes, and disagreements quickly escalated to shootings and on occasion to more serious military actions involving armored vehicles and artillery.²¹ In 1981, the area was annexed by Israel, a move condemned internationally and called 'inadmissible' by the UN Security Council.²² Israel's occupation of the Golan also eliminated all Syrian access to Lake Tiberias. Israel has taken several measures to limit the remaining Arabs' use of the Golan's water supply.

²⁰ ISRAEL and SYRIA General Armistice Agreement (with annexes and accompanying letters). Signed at Hill 232, near Mahanayim, on 20 July 1949

²¹ ISRAEL and SYRIA, General Armistice Agreement, Ibid

²² UN Security Council resolution 497 (1981) on annexation of the Golan Heights, S_RES_497(1981), Available at:

<http://repository.un.org/handle/11176/66734?show=full>

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The 1967 War and Cease-Fire Lines.

By early 1967 artillery exchanges and even airstrikes were occurring fairly regularly. The climax came on 9 June 1967 when Israel invaded Syria following its earlier attacks on Egypt and Jordan. Israeli forces captured the demilitarized zones and penetrated about 25 kilometers into Syria, occupying about two-thirds of the Syrian Province of Al Qunaytirah. In response to a UN Security Council demand, a cease-fire was implemented on 10 June. During the next several days the line that marked the limit of advance of the Israeli forces was demarcated by UN observers. A buffer zone ranging in width from a few hundred meters to 2.5 kilometers was established east of this line.²³

Israel officially named the region it occupied the Golan Heights. The name Golan is derived from the name of a city of refugees in Bashan, as the region was known in Biblical times. Sometimes, the Israelis still refer to the region as Bashan. The Golan Heights remained relatively quiet between 1967 and October 1973. In part this was due to the Israeli policy of not allowing the return of the approximately 100,000 refugees who had fled or were expelled during and after the 1967 fighting. Beginning in 1968, the Israelis began establishing farm communities on the Golan; this violation of international law drew widespread international criticism and enraged the Syrians. Some of the new settlements were within 3 kilometers of the 1967 cease-fire line and in sight of Syrian Army positions. In effect, the Israelis had merely moved many contentious aspects of the Demilitarized Zone situation about 25 kilometers to the east.²⁴

The 1973 War.

²³ "Resolutions Passed by the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Arab-Israeli Conflict, June, July 1967." *Middle East Journal* 21, no. 3 (1967): 396-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4324166>.

²⁴ "Resolutions Passed by the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Arab-Israeli Conflict, Ibid.

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On 6 October 1973, in coordination with Egyptian attacks on the Sinai, Syrian forces launched a surprise attack on Israeli positions in the Golan Heights and penetrated the center of the Israeli line, passing to the south of A1 Qunaytirah and isolating several pockets of Israeli troops. By the morning of 7 October the southernmost Syrian elements had almost reached Al Al, about 10 kilometers east of Lake Tiberias, while in the north the penetration was shallower. The Israelis counterattacked on 7 October, and by 10 October the Syrian forces had retreated east of the 1967 cease-fire line except for units still holding a portion of Mount Hermon.²⁵ By 14 October the Israeli forces had carved out a roughly semicircular area that stretched from the lower slopes of Mount Hermon almost to Sasa, about midway, between Al Qunaytirah and Damascus, and rejoined the cease-fire line southeast of Al Qunaytirah. For the next 10 days the Israelis directed most of their efforts toward holding the 600-square-kilometer semicircle, although they also recaptured their positions on Mount Hermon. Large-scale hostilities ended on 24 October, but hostile incidents, snipings, and occasional artillery exchanges continued during the winter and spring while US Secretary of State Kissinger practiced shuttle diplomacy.²⁶

The 1974 Disengagement Agreement.

A disengagement agreement was signed by Israel and Syria on 31 May 1974 influenced by 1973 United Nations Security Council Resolution.²⁷ On 6 June Israeli and Arab forces began a staged withdrawal. Under the agreement, Israeli military forces pulled back to positions west which coincided with the 1967 cease-fire line except near Ar Rafid and A1 Qunaytirah.

²⁵ O'Ballance, E., *No victor, no vanquished: the Yom Kippur War*, Presidio Press, 1978, Available at: www.hativa14.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Edgar_Oballance.pdf

²⁶ O'Ballance, E., *Ibid*

²⁷ United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 338 of 22 October 1973.

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All territory of far east is under Syrian administration and with the exception of Qunaytirah, which was largely destroyed after the cease-fire by withdrawing Israeli units, was gradually repopulated by Syrian civilians. Syrian forces are required to remain east of mentioned area; the area between zone of separation where the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF strength about 1,250) is stationed to maintain the cease-fire. UNDOF also monitors the bulge between lines as specified in the disengagement arrangement went into effect on 26 June 1974.²⁸ In addition, the need for Syria and Israel to negotiate the future of the Golan Heights and to conclude a peace treaty is specifically mentioned in the Camp David Accords.²⁹

1981 Israel Annexes Golan

On Dec. 14, 1981, Israel annexed the territory on the Golan Heights that it had seized from Syria in 1967. It is an “abrupt move” that came as a surprise not only to international observers, but also to many Israelis who felt that it was hastily pushed through parliament by Prime Minister Menachem Begin. The annexation was met with international condemnation. Syria called it a “declaration of war,” while the United States, a staunch ally of Israel, called it “inconsistent with the Camp David accords, Three days later, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution declaring that Israel’s act was “null and void and without international legal effect.”³⁰

The Golan Heights is a strategically important plateau from which large areas of land on both the Israeli and Syrian sides can be viewed. When it was under Syrian control, it was used to launch shell attacks on the agriculturally rich Hula Valley in Israel. Prime Minister Begin used these attacks to justify Israel’s occupation and annexation, arguing that

²⁸ UN report:Ibid

²⁹ The Camp David Accords , Aframework for peace, 1978, Short info available at: <http://eipa.eu.com/wp-content/uploads-peipa001/2013/03/The-Camp-David-Accords-1978.pdf>

³⁰ UN Security Council resolution 497 (1981), Ibid

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Syrians “would open fire, from the heights, on our towns and villages, instituting a reign of blood and terror throughout the area. Israel had captured much of the Golan Heights as well as the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan after it defeated Egypt, Syria and Jordan in a six-day war of June 1967. Soon after the war, Israeli citizens began settling in the area, which was placed under military control. Israel intended to use the heights as leverage in peace negotiations, though Syria was not open to a settlement.³¹ Syria tried to reclaim the heights in 1973 with a surprise attack as part of the Yom Kippur war, but Israeli forces managed to drive back the advancing forces and capture more territory in the heights.

The Golan Heights remains under Israel’s control today, and is at the center of peace negotiations between the two countries. In 1999 to 2000, Israel offered to withdraw from the Heights, with the exception of the land around the Sea of Galilee, its primary source for fresh water. Syria has insisted that it will only accept a full withdrawal to pre-1967 borders.³²

THE GOLAN HEIGHTS: GEO STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE AND SECURITY CONCERNS.

The Golan Heights is a sloping plateau, ascending from 300 meters on its west end to 1,000 meters on its east end, and covering a total area of 1,800 km sq. The Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee (part of the Syrian-African Rift) mark its western border, the Yarmuk River demarcates its southern perimeter, and the hills along the watershed line and the Rokad River bound it on the east. The 2,814 meter-high Hermon Mountain (partially in Israeli territory) marks the northern boundary of

³¹ Davis, U. 'The Golan Heights under Israeli occupation 1967-1981.', Working Paper. University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham , 1983

³² Ali Kannan, Ahmad, Resistance in the Golan, 2013- Available at: <http://www.damascusuniversity.edu.sy/mag/human/images/stories/2013/35-85.pdf>

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the Heights. The Hermon provides an excellent vantage point for the entire region up to Damascus, only some 60 kilometers to the east, and over to the Haifa Bay, on the Mediterranean to the west. The Golan Heights dominate the Jordan River valley, the Israeli Galilee to its west, and the area leading to Damascus to its east. The possibility of extending demilitarization eastward into Syria is not a realistic option due to the proximity of Damascus. It is very unlikely that Israel could secure a demilitarization agreement with the rulers of Damascus that extends into areas in the vicinity of the city.³³

After all, a strong military presence in the capital is the mainstay of the regime. Control of the Golan Heights is thus a zero-sum game, one that cannot be modified by intellectual exercises. Defensible borders are particularly needed considering that the broad geo-strategic position of Israel has deteriorated since the mid-1990s. Syria and Hizballah, two allies of rising Middle East power Iran, are sitting on Israel's northern border. Moreover, the 2006 Lebanon War was not the best Israeli demonstration of its use of force as it exposed Israel's vulnerabilities. And Turkey, the non-Arab rising Middle East power, has become anti-Israel. Under such circumstance, Israel must heighten the threshold of what is meant by defensible borders.³⁴ In final analysis, the political uncertainties characteristic of the contemporary Middle East indicate the need for great caution and little faith in security arrangements that are driven by transient political considerations.

The Golan Peaks as part of Syria

Until 1967 the region now known as the Golan Heights formed about two-thirds of Al Qunaytirah Muhafazat, Syria's 13th province. In 1965 Al Qunaytirah Province had an estimated population of 142,600

³³Ali Kannan, Ahmad,, Ibid

³⁴ Shale, Aryeh, Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan 1994, Available at www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/mdf-articles/إسرائيل%20وسورية.pdf

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people, most living in small farming communities but about 30,000 living in Al Qunaytirah, a town in the center of the province. Most of the province residents were Muslim Arabs, predominantly Sunnites; minority groups included Druze, Alawites, Christian Arabs, and Sunni Muslim Circassians.³⁵ In addition to the Syrian population, some 13,000 Palestinian refugees were housed in the town of Al Qunaytirah.

Although its 1,770 square kilometers accounted for only about 1 percent of the country's total land area, Al Qunaytirah was nevertheless one of Syria's most productive agricultural regions. According to 1965 land use statistics, 58 percent of the land was suitable for cultivation, 16 percent consisted of scrub woodlands and orchards, 11 percent was in improved pasture, and the remainder was unsuited for any agricultural use. Most of the farmland lay between the towns of Fiq and Al Qunaytirah; the orchards were located mainly in the north, although some tropical fruit trees were grown near Lake Tiberias.³⁶ Although much of the pasture land was on the poorer, rocky slopes in the west, it still had the highest stock-carrying capacity in the country, about four times the national average. In 1965 Al Qunaytirah accounted for about 16 percent of Syria's corn production, 17 percent of its millet, and 7 percent of its fodder crops. Winter vegetables, especially tomatoes, were an important specialty crop. Fruit yields in the province were the highest in Syria; its output of apples, for example, accounted for a fourth of the country's total crop.³⁷

The Golan Heights Under Israel During and after the 1967 fighting in the Golan Heights, much of the population an estimated 100,000 Syrians and some 13,000 Palestinian refugees fled or were expelled farther into Syria. An Israeli census conducted in September 1967

³⁵ INBAR, N. GOREN, QUNEITRA: A MOUSTERIAN SITE ON THE GOLAN HEIGHTS, Published by: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990, pp 45-70

³⁶ Kennedy, R. Scott. "The Druze of the Golan: A Case of Nonviolent Resistance." *Nonviolent Struggle in the Middle East*. New society Publishers: 1985.

³⁷ INBAR, N, Ibid

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enumerated only 6,400 Syrian nationals most of them Druze living in a few villages northeast of Al Qunaytirah.³⁸ Since then, the population of these villages has more than doubled, but the Syrian population of the Golan Heights is still only a small fraction of its pre-1967 population. Except for the aforementioned villages, the original Syrian settlement pattern on the Golan Heights has been largely obliterated. Since 1967 the Israelis have razed at least 80 of the 190 former villages and have destroyed other Syrian private property to make way for Israeli settlements, farms, fortifications, and military training areas. In many areas the Israelis have removed the stone fences and markers that outlined Syrian fields, making any future individual Syrian land ownership claims nearly impossible.³⁹

The Golan Druze. Why the Israelis allowed these few thousand Druze (and Alawites) to remain on the Golan Heights is not known, but it is probably the result of a combination of circumstances. The Druze villages in the northern hills were outside the main battle areas; the communities were close knit, and determined not to abandon their rich farmlands; and the Israelis regard the Druze living in Israel as complaisant citizens who support the state for example, by serving in the military. In any event, the residents of the five surviving villages still farm the lands they farmed before 1967.⁴⁰ The 10,500 hectares under cultivation consist of extensive fruit orchards, vegetable gardens, grain fields, olive groves, and vineyards. Additional land in pasture supports herds of sheep, goats, and cattle. The Druze are neither united nor consistent in their political loyalties. Some express a desire to belong to an independent Druze state by flying the Druze flag. Others favor Israeli annexation, and still others want the return of Syrian sovereignty. Even family members disagree. Shaykh Sulayman Kanj

³⁸ Hani Ziade, The idea of establishing Druze country and the time it started, Available at <http://www.zefat.ac.il/Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/Theidea.pdf>

³⁹ Abu Hamid, Barkat Ammar, The suffering of the people of the Golan under the Zionist occupation, 2013 ,Available at: www.damascusuniversity.edu.sy/mag/human/images/stories/2013/35-85.pdf

⁴⁰ Kennedy, R. Scott, Ibid

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Abu Salih, the old leader of the Golan Druze, has provided inconsistent guidance. In 1974 he formally requested Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights. Later, he evidently changed his mind, for he was among the hundreds of Golan Druze who petitioned Prime Minister Begin not to be incorporated into the State of Israel. In 1980 some Golan Druze accepted Israeli identity cards (conferring upon the holders some of the privileges of citizenship) only to turn them in a few months later under pressure from their religious authorities.⁴¹ Some of these Druze have apparently welcomed the new Israeli law, for it requires them to have Israeli identity cards.

Thw Golan Heights as part of Israel

Israel worked hardly in the region for their own interest, A number of organizations are cooperating in the development of the Golan Heights. The Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) is the primary planner but coordinates closely with the Israeli Government and the Jewish National Fund (JNF), an international fundraising group.⁴² The JNF is responsible for preparing land for Israeli farming; various other ministries and agencies in the Israeli Government provide support. All major political parties sponsor settlements on the Golan Heights.⁴³

Israel militarily, withdrawal from the Golan Heights would be extremely problematic. Control of this area gives Israel several important advantages, including those that were crucial in repelling the surprise Syrian military onslaught in October 1973, and has enabled Israel to maintain stability along this border. Indeed, despite the absence

⁴¹ Abu Hamid, Barkat Ammar, *Ibid*, p.48

⁴² JNF Preparing 8,000 Acres for Nahal Settlements on Captured Golan Heights, Jewish telegraphic agency, 1968, Available at: <https://www.jta.org/1968/08/14/archive/jnf-preparing-8000-acres-for-nahal-settlements-on-captured-golan-heights>

⁴³ The World Zionist Organization: A Brief History, Available at: https://tinw.org/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/world_zionist_congress_election_faqs.pdf

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of a peace treaty, and despite regional tensions that eventually led to violent clashes between Israel and Arab actors, the border between Israel and Syria has remained quiet since 1974. Even the military confrontation between Israeli and Syrian units in 1982, in the Lebanese arena, did not extend to the Golan Heights. The current border along the watershed line the hills in the Eastern part of the plateau is the best defense line against a conventional military attack from the east. Such an attack must overcome the topographical superiority of the defensive force, as the terrain requires the attacking side to channel its forces in between the hills. These natural terrain bottlenecks allow a small defending force to repel an attack and bring in reinforcements if needed. In the 1973 October War, the Golan's topography enabled 177 defending tanks to stop approximately 1,500 Syrian tanks and gave the IDF the critical time to call up and deploy its reserve formations. An armored attack can hardly be successful and cannot be sustained for long without taking the hills that Israel presently controls.

No other line on the plateau can confer such defensive advantages as the current border is based on the watershed line and the whole terrain west of this line descends toward the eastern cliffs on the Jordan River. A withdrawal from the Golan would place Israeli troops at its bottom, about 200 meters below sea level, with a very steep gradient toward the plateau at about 300 meters above sea level, making recapturing this territory in a crisis a very complicated military operation. Control over the Golan Heights enhances the safety of the strategic Haifa Bay area on the Mediterranean Coast by increasing its distance from Syrian positions to almost 90 kilometers. The Bay area is an important industrial hub, houses one of two main Israeli ports, and forms part of the strategically vital triangle, alongside Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, that holds most of the country's infrastructure and population.

Israeli military presence in the Golan Heights also prevents the formation of an indefensible pocket in the narrow strip (about 7 kilometers wide and 26 kilometers long) of the Upper Galilee, the northernmost part of Israel, an area sandwiched between Hizballah

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controlled southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights. Tens of thousands of Israeli citizens in this “Finger of the Galilee” could be easily disconnected from Israel and taken hostage in the case of a coordinated attack by Syria, if it controlled the Golan, and an Iranian-inspired Hizballah. The capacity of this organization to inflict damage upon Israel has grown considerably since the end of the 2006 Lebanon War.⁴⁴ According to one WZO official, settlement activities for all the occupied territories including Golan Heights generally amount to about 3 percent of the national budget.⁴⁵ As the 1978-81 WZO planning cycle ends, five of the eight planned new settlements have been established,⁴⁶ and the settler population has grown to an estimated 6,500. Many of the new Golan communities left vacant housing units, but there are many evidence that large numbers of Israelis moved to the area.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the 14 December 1981 annexation eventually spur some increased settlement.

Agriculture importance for Israel:

All but a few of the 31 Israeli settlements are at least partly engaged in farming. In 1975 some 5,600 hectares (including field crops, orchards, and vineyards) were being cultivated by the Israelis; in addition, about 4,000 hectares (mainly along the rocky, western slopes) were being used for grazing. In 1977 the WZO claimed that almost 6,800 hectares were being farmed and that the total would reach nearly 12,000 hectares by 1981.⁴⁸ According to 1981 data, however, this goal like earlier ones was not met; a reported 6,000 to 7,000 hectares are under cultivation in

⁴⁴ Abu Hamid, Barkat Ammar , Ibid

⁴⁵ Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict A Primer, Available at:

[https://www.merip.org/sites/default/files/Primer_on_Palestine-Israel\(MERIP_February2014\)final.pdf](https://www.merip.org/sites/default/files/Primer_on_Palestine-Israel(MERIP_February2014)final.pdf)

⁴⁶ The World Zionist Organization, Ibid

⁴⁷ Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, Palestine, Ibid

⁴⁸ Shale, Aryeh, Ibid

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field crops and orchards. If pasture lands are added, the total area being used by the Israelis for farming amounts to more than 10,000 hectares.

El Rom and Ramat Magshimim are typical of the older Israeli agricultural settlements. El Rom, in the northern Golan, uses 290 hectares to grow wheat, apples, and avocados and to raise fish; in addition, it uses more than 1,700 hectares of land in the southern Golan for pasturage. Ramat Magshimim has some 450 hectares in wheat, 45 hectares in apple orchards, and 2,500 hectares in grazing land for 1,000 head of cattle. Israeli agriculture is more intensive than that practiced earlier by the Syrians. Irrigation is widespread, even on some of the large wheat fields, and is expected to expand as new land is brought under cultivation.⁴⁹ Data on total agricultural production from the Golan is not available to allow comparisons with former Syrian output or to determine the area's contribution to Israel's total crop and livestock production. In any event, the production is of little consequence to the national economy.

Important for Water Resources.

Although water resources on the Golan Heights were generally adequate for the area's Syrian population before June 1967, the Israelis are developing an expanded water distribution system designed to support irrigated agriculture. When completed, the new system will supply a lot of water as compare to now annually. Because this amount is not available on the Golan Heights, water is drawn from two taps in Lake Tiberias and pumped up some 600 meters through pipes to a system of water towers and tanks located at settlements and military facilities in the southern Golan. Birkat Ram, a natural lake in the northern Golan, has also been tapped to supply water to the settlement

⁴⁹ Shale, Aryeh, *Ibid*

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blocs west and north of Al Qunaytirah and to some of the Druze villages⁵⁰

IMPORTANCE OF THE GOLAN TO ISRAEL'S WATER SUPPLY.

Israeli governments have repeatedly claimed that control of the Golan is critical to ensuring adequate supplies of water to their water-short country. To guarantee control over the upper Jordan River, however, the Israelis would have to occupy the river's entire watershed, including the part in southern Lebanon. Specifically, the Israelis want full access to two Jordan River tributaries, the Hasbani and the Baniyas, which together provide about half the river's flow. Jordan River water stored in Lake Tiberias provides about one-third 500 million cubic meters per year of Israel's total water supply. The sources of the Hasbani River lie entirely within Lebanon. From the village of Al Ghajar the Hasbani forms the former Syrian-Lebanon boundary for about 3 kilometers before entering Israel's Hula Valley, where it joins the Jordan River. The Baniyas River rises in the Golan on the western flank of Mount Hermon and flows for about 16 kilometers across the Golan Heights before entering Israel, where it also joins the Jordan in the Hula Valley.⁵¹

International disputes over control of the Jordan's headwaters preceded the formation of the Jewish state. Early Zionist planners tried unsuccessfully to get the British to demarcate Lebanon's southern frontier so as to place the Litani River within Palestine. Since then, proposals to divert the Litani southward to double the Jordan's flow have been a recurrent theme within Israel and a source of apprehension to Lebanon. In the 1950s Israel and its northern neighbors failed to negotiate a treaty to establish water rights in the Jordan watershed. In

⁵⁰ Guzman, Timothy Alexander, *The Israeli Occupied Golan Heights: An Occupation for Natural Resources*. Water, Land and Oil, Global Research 2016, Available at: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-israeli-occupied-golan-heights-an-occupation-for-natural-resources-water-land-and-oil/5521207>

⁵¹ Israel's Hydro hegemony, PLO negotiations Affairs Department, Available at <https://www.soas.ac.uk/water/publications/papers/file38417.pdf>

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the absence of any agreement or international legal restraint, Israel and the Arab states forged ahead with their separate plans. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Israel began plans to divert water from the upper Jordan River, the Arab states threatened to divert major Jordan River tributaries. Lebanon proposed to divert the Hasbani into the Litani via a tunnel and canal; Syria proposed another conduit from the Hasbani, tapping its flow either at Al Mari or Al Ghajar. The Syrian canal would have intercepted the Baniyas River en route, to divert water southward across the Golan Heights to the Nahr al Yarmuk where it would tie in with the Jordanian irrigation systems. When the Lebanese and Syrians began actual work on these plans in 1964, Israel attacked the sites with artillery and aircraft, preventing further work⁵²

Along the southern boundary of the Golan, Jordan developed a number of plans to divert waters from the Yarmuk. The East Ghor Canal, an underground diversion of the Yarmuk largely financed with US aid, was completed in 1966. Jordan also planned to build two water storage dams farther upstream, including the Al Mukhaybah dam on which excavation work was halted when the Israelis occupied the Syrian side of the river during the 1967 war.⁵³ Initial Israeli planning for diversion of water from the upper Jordan to the south called for a canal beginning in the demilitarized zone along the Syrian border, but Syrian artillery fire prevented work in the area. As an alternative, the Israelis resorted to drawing water from Lake Tiberias. The National Water Carrier, as the system is known, was completed in 1964.

The Israelis do not need to occupy the entire Golan Heights to physically control all significant Golan tributaries to the Jordan's waters; they could accomplish this by occupying only a small portion of the northwestern Golan that includes the area from Baniyas to Al

⁵² Rogers, J. David, WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, University of Missouri-Rolla, Available at: indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/Water%20And%20Environmental%20Security%20In%20The%20Middle%20East-Peer.pdf

⁵³ Rogers, J. David, Ibid

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Ghajar. Lake Tiberias, Israel's primary water reservoir, would remain completely under Israeli control even with a withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Line or to the original boundary of the Palestine Mandate. The Israelis are also constructing small reservoirs for supplemental irrigation and for possible industrial use. Existing catchments store at least 7 million cubic meters of water; more are planned. The Baniyas River (annual flow 100 million cubic meters) is not a direct source of water for the Golan settlements. No dams have been built, and the entire flow goes into the Jordan, which feeds Lake Tiberias.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Before June 1967 the Golan Heights was mainly a farming region with one relatively large market center, Al Qunaytirah, which was also the provincial capital. Consequently, most of the roads in the region led directly or indirectly to Al Qunaytirah, and the only major road led from there to Damascus, some 65 kilometers to the northeast. The Israelis have significantly improved this Syrian road network. They have opened five paved, two-lane access routes to the Heights, the Trans-Arabian Pipeline TAPline carries crude oil from Saudi Arabia's oilfields across the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon to the Lebanese oil port and refinery town of Az Zahrani.⁵⁵ The Arab-Israeli wars or to Israeli occupation of the Golan expectations of the international community for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors are almost universally based on the "Land for Peace"

⁵⁴ Izabela, Shentsis, Database compilation: hydrology of Lake Tiberias, 20114, Available at: <https://meetingorganizer.copernicus.org/EGU2014/EGU2014-8283-3.pdf>

⁵⁵ Kaufman, A. (2014). BETWEEN PERMEABLE AND SEALED BORDERS: THE TRANS-ARABIAN PIPELINE AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46(1), 95-116. doi:10.1017/S002074381300130X

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formula, which, in the case of a possible Israeli-Syrian deal, links withdrawal from the strategic Golan Heights with a peace agreement. Such a formula, however, does not serve Israel's interests.

Giving up the Golan plateau deprives Israel of its best defense against potential Syrian aggression. It also signals Israeli weakness and undermines Israel's deterrence. Designing borders in accordance with current but changing military technology and transient political circumstances is strategically foolish.

Moreover, the expected political returns for Israel from a peace treaty with Syria are meager. Syria is unlikely to align itself with pro-Western Arab states and abandon its regional alliance with Iran in return for Israeli territorial concessions on the Golan Heights. Damascus has made abundantly clear that such realignment is not on the table. Its ability to "deliver" Hizballah in Lebanon is also questionable. Moreover, a peace treaty with Syria is not going to affect the diplomatic fortunes of Israel in the region or in the world. And, Syria, as well as the rest of the Arab world, has little to offer to Israel in economic or cultural terms. Israel hardly desires to integrate into a despotic, corrupt and poor region. This calculus is not affected by the prospects of a change in Syria's leadership. Since retaining the Golan is more important for Israel than reaching a peace treaty with Syria in the foreseeable future, Israel should insist on a new paradigm, "Peace for Peace," based on the principle of defensible borders. The demand for secure borders seems reasonable and is rooted in international resolutions such as UNSC Resolution 242. The political unrest and volatility in the region, including questions about the foreign policies of Israel's neighbors, similarly prescribe against taking any significant security risks by ceding the Golan to Syria. Syria should augment its claims for defensible borders on the Golan Heights with normative, legal and historic arguments. Syria, should not pay any price for its flagrant violation of international norms. Israel should also emphasize its historic rights to this piece of territory and point out that these claims were accepted in the 20th century in internationally recognized

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documents. It should use these historical and legal arguments to bolster its claim of sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

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