Beyond Diplomacy In Middle East: The Case Of Israel, Syrian Conflict In Golan Heights

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Abstract: *For more than four decades, the Syrian and Israeli governments have been in prolonged dispute over the territorial status of the Golan Heights, a rocky plateau located in western Syria. This issue has been largely overlooked in current discussions surrounding the Israeli-Arab conflict. Originally part of Syria, the Golan Heights came under Israel military occupation following the conclusion of the Six-Day War in 1967, leading to the displacement of most Syrian Arab residents from the area. The territory's favorable climate for agriculture, strategic location and abundant natural resources have made it highly valuable for both nations. This essay aims to explore the impact of this conflict on Israeli-Syrian diplomatic relations, including economic, political, and cultural boycotts, as well as the refusal of Syria's international allies to recognize Israel's sovereign right to exist as a nation.*

Keywords: Beyond, Diplomacy, Israel, Syrian, Conflict, Golan Heights.

Introduction

The Golan Heights, located in southwestern Syria, is a plateau and mountainous area that was historically part of the vilayet of Damascus during the Ottoman Empire. Sunni Muslims constituted the majority of the population, with approximately 85% residing in the region. In addition to Sunni Muslims, the Golan also attracted various minority communities, including Druze, Christians, and Alawites ((Brenton, 1988). Other groups such as Turkomans, Bedouin tribes, and descendants of 19th-century Circassian Muslim refugees from the Caucasus, as well as Palestinian refugees, who arrived during the 1948 war, also settled in the area. Some villages in the Golan were characterized by religious or ethnic diversity, while others were predominantly inhabited by a single group. The region was closely interconnected with the surrounding areas through shared language, religion, trade, and kinship bonds. The establishment of borders by the British, French, and the League of Nations introduced barriers where previously there were none (Sakr, 2000).

The ownership of the Golan Heights, a disputed border area in Israel, is heavily contested by the international community. This mountainous region spans approximately 1,800 square kilometers along the border between Israel and Syria (Kevin & Julie, 2012). Israel has controlled and administered the Golan Heights since capturing it during the Six Day War in 1967 (Dunstan, 2009). Despite Syria's continued claim of sovereignty over the region, minimal progress has been made by the international community in resolving the dispute and returning the Golan Heights to Syria. Strategically significant to the Israeli military during the Six Day War, the Golan Heights provided high ground for launching and defending attacks against Syria and Lebanon. However, its importance has evolved over time, with the region now supplying approximately one-third of Israel's fresh water supply. Israel's expansion of settlements and infrastructure in the Golan Heights has further complicated the prospect of returning the land to Syria (Kevin & Julie, 2012).

The contested nature of the Golan Heights in recent history is influenced by various factors. Initially part of the Ottoman Empire, the region later became part of the French Mandate of Syria after World War I. The headwaters of the Jordan River, including Dan Spring, were located in the Golan Heights and were incorporated into the British Mandate territory and subsequently transferred to Palestine in 1924 (Glassner & Fahrer, 2004). The other two springs, Banias and Wazzani, remained within the French Mandate of Syria and were later incorporated into the independent state of Syria in 1944 (Marshall, 2002). During the Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49, Syria captured areas of the former Palestine Mandate that had become part of Israel. Armistice talks in 1949 resulted in a compromise, leaving a significant portion of the Golan Heights as a demilitarized zone (Garfinkle, 1998). Ambiguities arising from the 1949 Armistice led both Syria and Israel to seek tactical advantages in the region, ultimately leading to tensions that culminated in the Six Day War of 1967 (Ma'oz, 1998).

Due to its strategic importance as a regional high ground, the Golan Heights held significant tactical value. Following the 1967 war, Israeli military administration was established in the region due to its hostile nature. During the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Syrian troops advanced into much of the Golan Heights before being repelled by a substantial Israeli counter-attack (Marshall, 2002). As per a cease-fire agreement, Israel retained control over most of the Heights. Subsequently, Israel initiated settlement construction in the Golan Heights, and in 1981, enacted the Golan Heights Law, extending Israeli law across the territory (Korman, 1996). However, this move was widely condemned by the international community as a forcible annexation, deemed illegal under the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Convention (Garfinkle, 1998).

As the international community grapples with finding a resolution to the Golan Heights issue, Israel persists in expanding settlements and developing the region. Due to its tumultuous history, the Golan Heights is heavily mined, making the process of clearing landmines hazardous and time-consuming. This has impeded development efforts, but by 1989, the Israeli population in the Golan Heights had reached 10,000 (Ma'oz, 1995). By 2010, the population had doubled to over 20,000 people residing in thirty-two settlements. Defensive urban planning, characterized by gated communities and military patrols, is commonplace in the region. Despite this, the quality of life in the Golan Heights is enhanced by the presence of six large nature reserves, three wineries, a snow skiing complex on Mount Hermon, and a wind turbine farm in the eastern part of the territory. The Israeli government continues to invest in amenities in the region to attract settlers and tourists despite the precarious nature of the territory (Kevin & Julie, 2012).

Conceptual Clarification of Terms:

The Concept of Beyond

Beyond refers to something that lies outside or exceeds the boundaries of what is familiar or comprehensible. It can encompass various domains, including the physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Intellectually, beyond may denote ideas that are too intricate or abstract for human cognition to grasp fully, such as the fundamental nature of reality or the origins of the cosmos. Ultimately, the notion of beyond serves as a reminder of the perpetual quest for discovery and comprehension in our surroundings, acknowledging the inherent limitations of our knowledge and understanding (Davis, 2023).

The Concept of Diplomacy

Diplomacy involves the use of intelligence and tact in managing official interactions between the governments of independent states, and occasionally their interactions with dependent states. In short, it refers to the peaceful conduct of intergovernmental affairs (Satow, 1962:1). Diplomatic dialogue serves as a tool of international society, characterized by a civilized approach grounded in understanding and respect for differing perspectives. It is also a civilizing force, as ongoing exchanges of ideas and efforts to find mutually agreeable solutions to conflicts contribute to enhanced awareness and respect (Watson, 1987:20).

The Concept of Conflict

Conflict is characterized by a clash of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, accompanied by efforts to assert control over each other and harboring antagonistic feelings (Fisher, 1990). This incompatibility or divergence may be actual or perceived by the involved parties. Nevertheless, the actions taken in opposition and the hostile emotions experienced are tangible aspects of human conflict. Conflict has the potential to result in significant destruction or lead to positive social change and creativity (Kriesberg, 1998). Social conflict, as defined by Coser (1956), involves a struggle over values and assertions of scarce status, power, and resources, where opponents aim to neutralize, harm, or eliminate their rivals. **The Concept of Middle East**

The term "Middle East" encompasses countries that are members of the League of Arab States, along with Israel (comprising both Jewish and Arab populations), and the non-Arab nations of Turkey and Iran (which also have small Arab populations). These countries are grouped into three sub-regions. North Africa comprises Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as sub-Saharan states such as the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. The region along the eastern Mediterranean, known as the Fertile Crescent or Greater Syria (also referred to as the Levant or its colonial name), includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, as well as non-Arab Turkey to the north. Lastly, the oil-producing nations of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula encompass Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and the non-Arab Persian state of Iran (Jillian, 2020).

The Security and Strategic Important of Golan Heights to Israel

Israel's decision to occupy the Golan Heights was motivated by several factors. Initially, Israel sought to capitalize on the strategic location of the Golan Heights, which acted as a geographic buffer between Syria and Israel. The region's elevated position provided a commanding view of key areas such as Haifa Bay, the Mediterranean Sea, and, notably, Damascus, situated approximately 60 kilometers to the east. Additionally, Israel's control of the Golan Heights conferred numerous military advantages, including the ability to defend against and repel surprise attacks from the Syrian military, as demonstrated during the October 1973 conflict. This control has played a crucial role in maintaining stability along the border (Hamza, 2016).

Moreover, despite the absence of a formal peace treaty and ongoing tensions in the region, the border between Syria and Israel has remained relatively calm since 1974, with no major confrontations occurring. The existing border serves as an effective defensive line against potential military attacks. Any hostile incursions must navigate the geographical advantage of the defensive forces, maneuvering through the rugged terrain of the Golan Heights. This terrain enables small defensive forces to withstand attacks and, if necessary, call for reinforcements (Hamza, 2016). For instance, during the October 1973 war, the strategic location of the Golan Heights allowed 177 Israeli tanks to successfully repel an onslaught of approximately 1,500 Syrian tanks, while also facilitating the summoning of reinforcements by the Israeli defense forces (Hamza, 2016).

Israel's control over one of the peaks of Mount Hermon, which rises to an elevation of 1,983 meters in the northern Golan Heights, is strategically significant as it provides the country with crucial intelligence gathering capabilities. This vantage point

allows for the deployment of electronic surveillance deep into Syrian territory, granting Israel early warning capabilities in the event of a potential attack. Additionally, the topographical advantage of the current defense line enhances access to targets. The utilization of precise guided munitions (PGMs), in particular, necessitates accurate intelligence gathering, as sight lines are of utmost importance in the realm of electronic warfare (Efraim, 2011).

Resources and Economic Important Of Golan Heights to Israel

The Golan Heights provides security by offering a vital natural resource: water. The Banias, the main tributary of the Jordan River, originates from the Golan Heights. Additionally, the Golan Heights encompasses Israel's largest water reservoir, the water basin of the Sea of Galilee, with water from the plateau contributing roughly half of the total annual flow into the basin (Hamza, 2016). Furthermore, water sourced from the Golan Heights plays a significant role in meeting Israel's water needs, though it falls short of fulfilling them entirely, accounting for approximately 30%-40% of Israel's current water supply (Hamza, 2016). The fertile land and volcanic soil of the Golan Heights support agriculture, including vineyards, orchards, and livestock farming. Additionally, the Golan Heights is home to Israel's only ski resort (BBC, 2023).

Internally Displaced Persons in Syria

The experience of the Golan residents who were displaced in 1967 has been markedly different from that of other displaced populations. While families and entire villages were uprooted and citizens of Quneitra were scattered by the war, they have managed to maintain family ties despite the loss of their homes and property. Displaced communities often remain connected, settling in the same neighborhoods or suburbs of Damascus or other areas. Although some continue to live in poverty, they have integrated well into Syrian society and have not faced the marginalization experienced by Palestinians confined to refugee camps. Unlike Palestinians, they have not dispersed worldwide, and their cause has largely been forgotten, overshadowed even by those living under occupation. Since they have remained within Syria, they are technically considered "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs) rather than refugees. However, detailed information about them is scarce, and they remain relatively unknown in the West (Global IDP Project, 2002).

Many villagers displaced from the Golan initially moved from place to place before finding a permanent settlement. Mamduh Ahmad described the difficulties faced by older individuals in adapting to their new lives, with many succumbing to sorrow within the first year. Fatima al-Ali recounted living in a tent provided by villagers to shield themselves from the harsh June sun, surviving on cow's milk, wild plants, and meager amounts of bread while hoping to return to their village. Property owners and educated individuals, in particular, may have felt a sense of disgrace in relying on the charity of others. The Circassian community was the most organized in responding to the crisis, providing transportation, food, medical care, and housing on donated land. Assistance was also provided by the Red Cross, while some relied on government aid and others utilized their own resources. However, the Turkomans faced difficulties in reaching a consensus on collective action (Global IDP Project, 2002).

Despite the upheaval in their lives and the loss of their homes, properties, and businesses, the displaced individuals from the Golan Heights appear to have successfully reintegrated into mainstream Syrian society. They predominantly reside in 10 new villages near the Golan, housing projects in five neighborhoods or suburbs of Damascus, and various other cities. Initially housed in tent camps, these projects were later replaced with single-family homes constructed by the Syrian government. Many individuals were able to either rent or purchase homes and establish businesses. A significant portion of the displaced population, including their children and grandchildren, has secured employment abroad, particularly in the Gulf region. However, some continue to experience poverty and overcrowding issues. Syria considers this resettlement arrangement as temporary, pending the withdrawal of Israel from the Golan Heights and the residents' return. The government has granted internally displaced persons (IDPs) preferential status in terms of employment opportunities in public works projects and access to university education (Sakr, 2000).

The Syrian government has established various institutions and initiatives to address the situation of the Golan Heights. These include the Bureau of Golan Affairs, the Popular Commission for the Liberation of the Golan, and sponsorship of a Golan newspaper. The government encourages Golan residents allowed by Israel to cross the ceasefire line to maintain their Syrian identity and assigns them Syrian national identity numbers. In 2001, it began providing salaries and benefits to school and government employees from the Golan who were displaced during the early stages of the occupation by Israel. Syrian television has a presence in the Golan, and villagers have access to Syrian TV programs. The ruins of Quneitra have been preserved as a memorial to the war and as a reminder of Israeli aggression, with visits from notable figures such as Pope John Paul II in 2001. Plans to reconstruct the city and two destroyed villages were announced in 2004, but progress has been limited. Twelve new housing projects aimed at attracting people back to the area have seen minimal success due to limited employment opportunities. The second generation of Golan residents, who grew up in Damascus, have found employment as workers, office employees, artisans, or merchants, while the older generation still desires to return home (ICRC, 2009).

In the aftermath of a catastrophic event that led to the displacement of an entire population, government assistance provided to internally displaced persons (IDPs) replaced the support typically offered to ordinary migrants by networks based on kinship, religion, or ethnicity, which were overwhelmed by the scale of the displacement. Despite their physical destruction by the Israelis in 1967 following the war, the people maintain a strong attachment to their former villages. One housing project accommodating 22,000

people, known as Bteha, is named after the residents' village in the Golan Heights, with street names corresponding to those of the original village. Additionally, the town still features a Golan Fishermen's Association (Julian, 2009).

Past- Resolutions and Treaties

- Resolution S/RES/242(22 November, 1967): This resolution served as a compromise that was sponsored by the British, which called for the end of all territorial claims by all parties, for them to respect the sovereignty of other parties as well as for Israel to withdraw their forces from the territories that they had occupied. Moreover, the resolution confirmed that establishing lasting peace in the Middle East should incorporate the use of specific principles.
- Resolution S/RES/338(22 October, 1973): This resolution decided that, concurrently with a ceasefire, peace negotiations should start in the context of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.
- Resolution S/RES/350(31 May, 1974): This resolution established the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).
- Resolution S/RES/497(17 December 1981): This resolution nullified Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights.
- Resolution S/RES/1276(24 November, 1999): This resolution called upon the parties concerned to implement immediately its resolution 338.
- Resolution A/RES/64/95(10 December, 2009): This resolution determined that all legislative and administrative measures and actions taken or to be taken by Israel, the occupying power, that purported to alter the character and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan were null and void (Hamza 2016).

Failed Solution Attempts

The UN has not had much involvement regarding this issue has not been tackled thoroughly by the international community, so, not much has been done towards solving it. However, from the few solutions that the UN as well as other parties has come up with to solve the issue, none of them have been successful. Syria and Israel have, on several occasions, held peace talks regarding the Golan Heights yet the negotiations between the two parties have, on each and every instance, broken down due to different reasons. However, the negotiations did witness some progress before stalling and Israel, Syria and the international community believe that the negotiations were the closest solution towards solving the issue and thatit is the way to resolve the issue(Hamza,2016).

Golan Heights, a Contemporary Issues in Israel politics

Since the 1990s, certain influential Israelis have contended that advancements in modern technology have reduced the strategic importance of land, providing a rationale for being open to territorial concessions. Shimon Peres, in particular, has consistently advocated against the retention of territories, asserting that physical barriers and topographical advantages have become less consequential in the era of missile technology (Peres, 1993).

Recently, the Israeli government initiated a significant public awareness campaign emphasizing the strategic importance of the Golan Heights for Israel's future. Water from all three springs in the Heights now flows through Israeli-controlled territory into the Jordan River. This is primarily due to the fact that the region contributes approximately one-third of Israel's freshwater, with its springs playing a crucial role in maintaining the health of the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. These two water bodies are of immense significance for Israel's agriculture, fishing, and residential sectors. Israeli authorities believe that if Syria were to gain control over the headwaters of the Jordan River, there is a risk that Syria would divert the water in a punitive manner (Kevin & Julie, 2012).

The recent public outreach campaign and ongoing settlement and development activities in the Golan Heights contradict previous public statements made by significant Israeli government officials. In 1995, acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres acknowledged the Golan Plateau as Syrian territory, stating, "the Golan Plateau is Syrian land and we have settled on the Syrian land" (Koshy, 1995: 1562). Additionally, Peres, during his tenure as the ninth president of Israel, affirmed Syria's rightful sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Syria maintains its demand for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. There have been instances where the Israeli government has contemplated withdrawal from the Golan Heights with the aim of normalizing relations with Syria.

The border between Israel and Syria is tightly closed, with no official entry points accessible along the border. Peace along the border is upheld by the United Nations, which monitors activities and ensures a safe distance between militants from both sides. Communication via telephone between Israel and Syria is not possible. This starkly delineates the contrast between the developed and developing worlds, as Israel boasts a gross domestic product per capita of $31,000 compared to Syria's $5,100 (CIA, 2012).

To exacerbate the situation, several of Syria's key allies in the international community refuse to recognize the state of Israel and its right to exist. While many Israelis perceive belligerent rhetoric and threats to their sovereignty as manifestations of ongoing anti-Semitic attitudes, the reality remains that Israel's borders are contested, with numerous Israeli settlements expanding into territories recognized by the United Nations as Palestinian territory. Moreover, regimes in neighboring territories such as the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria show little interest in engaging in peaceful negotiations to address regional disputes. Israel is

apprehensive that relinquishing territory and water rights in the Golan Heights to Syria's current government would preclude any possibility of sharing water and infrastructure in the region (Korman, 1996).

The Map of Golan Heights
(The Economist, 2022)

Challenges face by Israeli Government to handover Golan Heights to Syrian Government

Withdrawing from the Golan Heights and transferring control to Syria would entail significant economic costs for Israel. These costs would stem from the expenses associated with removing and relocating Israeli military forces from the area, as well as the displacement and resettlement of approximately 20,000 Jewish residents of the Heights. Projections suggest that these relocation efforts alone would require at least $20 billion to execute (Hamza, 2016).

Drawing a comparison with the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, which incurred an estimated cost of approximately $2.56 billion, it is important to note that the Jewish population residing in the Golan Heights is roughly three times larger than the population in the Gaza Strip at the time of withdrawal. Additionally, the military infrastructure currently present in the Golan Heights is considerably more extensive. Therefore, relocating the Israeli army, all Israeli Defense Force (IDF) installations, and the residents of the Golan Heights would impose a significant economic burden on Israel. Moreover, given the unlikelihood of receiving support from the United States for such a withdrawal, owing to its current economic crisis and the substantial costs involved, Israel would be unable to undertake this costly endeavor alone, particularly considering its own economic situation. Consequently, Israel is hesitant to relinquish its territorial control over the Golan Heights (Hamza, 2016).

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has introduced a new settlement in the occupied Golan Heights, named after former US President Donald Trump. During the naming ceremony, Netanyahu expressed gratitude to Mr. Trump for his decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the territory. While construction has not yet commenced, a sign featuring Mr. Trump's name alongside the flags of the United States and Israel was unveiled (BBC, 2019). The Israeli government has also approved a $317 million plan aimed at doubling the Jewish settler population in the Golan Heights, four decades after annexing the territory captured from Syria. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's cabinet voted in favor of the plan, which entails constructing 7,300 settler homes over a five-year period. The meeting to approve the plan was held in the Mevo Hama community in the Golan, with the proposal involving an investment of 1 billion Israel shekels into housing, infrastructure, and other projects. The objective is to attract approximately 23,000 new Jewish settlers to the area captured during the 1967 Six-Day War (France 24, 2021).

Conclusion

Israel took control of the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War and has maintained control over the region since then. Despite international pressure and calls for relinquishing the territory to Syria, Israel has been unwilling to do so. In addition, Israel enacted The Golan Heights Law, which formally annexed the territory and placed it under Israeli jurisdiction. Israel has defended the Golan Heights against Syrian attempts to reclaim the land, and although peace negotiations have been conducted with Syria regarding the territory, these negotiations have failed to yield significant progress and ultimately broke down.

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