

The Logic of Annexation: Israel and the Golan Heights

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Any measure of annexation is based on the extension of a military's boots. Diplomats tend to be silenced before the noise of tanks, weaponry and garrisons. Countries may claim to possess territory but can only dream in the absence of military weight. When it came to the issue of negotiating the post-World War II agreements, Generalissimo Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union had a clear sense of this in charting out Soviet influence in east European states. Israel also bullied its way into recognition, making sure that it acquired, at various stages, the Sinai (since relinquished), the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights.

The status of the Golan Heights has been a disputed business since the 1949 armistice line hammered out between Syria and Israel. The seven-hundred-square-mile stretch features all gazing vantage points: Jordan to the south, Syria to the east, Lebanon to the north, and Israel to its west. To military advantage could also be added water security: the edge of the Golan Heights features the freshwater Sea of Galilee.

Israel remained convinced that the mandate lines of Palestine and Syria should have finalised the issue but rendered much of that moot with the seizure of the territory in the Six Day War of 1967. (Syrian forces made use of their elevation during that war by [shelling](#) Israeli farms in the Hula Valley.) The UN Security Council proceeded to [pass](#) Resolution 242, calling for Israeli forces to be withdrawn from territories occupied during the conflict and “acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries.” The international lawyers duly fussed over the wording and quibbled over niceties: the issue of “secure... boundaries” kept plaguing the issue, as Israel refused to budge; translation matters between the French and English versions of the resolution were also seized upon.

No international body was going to stop the Israeli push to incorporate the heights and do what it has become so adept at doing: colonising it into new reality. The Knesset showed its disdain in 1981 by adopting the [Golan Heights Law](#), passed by 63 votes to 21, which effectively acknowledged that the law, jurisdiction and administration of Israel would be duly extended into the territory. **Prime Minister Menachem Begin**'s views on Syrian hostility, reflected in the deployment of missiles on Lebanese soil, was also cited as an excuse.

The recent turn of events centred on the Syrian Civil War renewed interest in the Golan. Syria seemed to be collapsing, the Assad regime in dire straits. Iran and Hezbollah came into play. Given the assisting presence of Teheran's Quds Force, Israel's strategists have seen a further need to maintain a forward presence, mindful of militants of all persuasion moving through the territory.

The position of Israel's unqualified and foremost ally was, at least notionally, with international reservation on the status of the Golan. But that contested state offered another overturned convention for the Trump administration and US foreign policy. On March 21, **President Donald Trump** decided, via his own [chosen, special medium](#), to claim that,

“After 52 years, it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel’s [s]overeignty over the Golan Heights.”

After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel’s Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [March 21, 2019](#)

As is operating protocol in the administration, it was not initially clear whether Trump had merely cyber-aired an opinion in an act of spontaneous release or announced a genuine policy shift. The US State Department preferred to direct press concerns to the White House; certainty was, for a period, suspended in the scramble for elusive facts.

Those scrounging for some hook to hang their questions on did have an additional statement from **National Security adviser John Bolton**, also [made](#) on Twitter:

“To allow Golan Heights to be controlled by the likes of the Syrian or Iranian regimes would turn a blind eye to the atrocities of Assad and the destabilizing presence of Iran in the region. Strengthening Israel’s security enhances our ability to fight common threats together.”

Unsurprisingly, for Bolton, there was no reference to the body of international norms he has come to regard as absent.

In Israel, clarity had cooled, and the mould set. **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** [was convinced](#) by Trump’s meditations, revealing that the White House had been most accommodating towards a shift. Trump had “made history.” Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights had been recognized, and there was no better time than now, “when Iran is trying to use the Golan Heights as a platform for the destruction of Israel.” But in addition to the security justification came the old sinister and stretched [notions](#) of exclusive, lengthy habitation. “Jews lived there for thousands of years and the people of Israel have come back to the Golan.”

Next to Netanyahu was US **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo**, who made the stumbling [affirmation](#) of the position: the Golan Heights were to be considered an appropriate “sovereign part of the State of Israel.” Israelis should also “know the battles they fought, the lives that they lost on that very ground, were worthy and meaningful.”

It all comes as a measure of grades. Start gradually, then push the issue with force and settlements. Over time, the attrition might convince; international opposition would melt away. The Golan-based human rights group Al-Marsad is [gloomy](#) about Syrians in the area, seeing the existential demise of its residents. “Syrians in the occupied Golan face

calculated Israeli efforts to restrict their building and land use, destroy their enterprise, cleanse their Arab culture, manipulate their Syrian identity, and suffocate their freedom of movement.”

The Trump decision, similarly to its stance on East Jerusalem, tilts the head of US foreign policy away from the basic principles of peace and security embedded in the UN Charter, as weak a document as it has proven to be over the years. It will also further muddy the waters with the Assad regime, ever keen to restore order as the bloody civil war painstakingly comes to a close. And as for the issue of Arab-Israeli peace? Forget it. Boots, construction and missiles are proving far more effective than diplomatic advances.

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