

Israel Stakes Claim to Golan After Oil Find

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Netanyahu sounds out Obama on recognising annexation of Syrian territory as test drill promises energy independence

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took advantage of a private meeting this week with Barack Obama – their first in 13 months – to raise the possibility of dismembering Syria.

According to Israeli officials, Netanyahu indicated that Washington should give its belated blessing to Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan Heights, captured from Syria during the 1967 war.

Sources close to the talks told the Haaretz daily that Netanyahu [claimed](#) Syria was no longer a functioning state, allowing "for different thinking". Since 2011 the government of Bashar al-Assad has faced off against rebel factions that include al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and the Islamic State (IS).

On Wednesday an unnamed White House official confirmed that Netanyahu had raised the matter. The official [said](#): "I think the president didn't think it warranted an answer. It wasn't clear how serious he [Netanyahu] was about it."

However, it appears Netanyahu's comments to Obama are part of a coordinated effort by Israeli officials over several months to shift thinking in Washington.

The day before Netanyahu's meeting at the White House, Michael Oren, Israel's former ambassador to the US, published a commentary on CNN's website urging Obama to consider Israeli sovereignty over the Golan.

Had Israel handed back the area to Syria in earlier peace talks, he [wrote](#), it "would today have placed [the Lebanese militia] Hezbollah directly above Israeli cities and villages in northern Galilee" and Islamic State (ISIS) "would be dug in on the Sea of Galilee's eastern shore".

Neither Oren nor presumably Netanyahu highlighted another reason why Israel might be anxious to gain US approval of its annexation of the Golan, which it imposed in violation of international law in 1981.

'Billions of barrels'

Last month Afek, an Israeli subsidiary of Genie Energy, a US oil company, announced that it had found considerable reserves of oil under the Golan. Genie's chief geologist in Israel, Yuval Bartov, [said](#) the company believed the reservoir had the "potential of billions of

barrels”.

International law experts say any proceeds from such a find in the Golan should revert to Syria, but Israel has so far indicated it will ignore its legal obligations.

The Israeli energy and water ministry has [licensed](#) Afek to drill 10 experimental wells over three years in a 400-square kilometre area, about a third of the Golan’s total territory.

Afek claims that the discoveries it has identified in its first year could make Israel energy independent, satisfying Israel’s consumption of 100 million barrels a year for the foreseeable future.

That would be on top of Israel’s recent finds of huge quantities of natural gas off its Mediterranean coast, offering it the chance to become a gas exporter.

Were the US to recognise Israel’s illegal annexation of the Golan, it would likely clear the way for Israel to plunder any economically viable reserves located there.

Netanyahu appears to have long harboured an interest in tapping the Golan’s potential for oil.

In 1996, in his first term as prime minister, he [granted approval](#) for drilling in the Golan by the Israeli National Oil Company. International pressure meant the permit had to be withdrawn soon afterwards.

Resources plundered

Today, 22,000 Syrian Druze live in five villages, alongside a similar number of Jews in 30 illegal settlements.

A 2010 investigation by the Haaretz newspaper [revealed](#) that Israel had carried out systematic expulsions of some 130,000 Syrians in 1967 and destroyed 200 villages. The Druze alone were allowed to stay so as not to upset Israel’s own Druze citizens.

Nizar Ayoub, director of Marsad, a Druze human rights centre based in the Golan, said Israel had long taken resources from the Golan.

“Israel has always treated the Golan as a territory to be exploited and plundered, from its water to farming and tourism,” he told Middle East Eye. “Israel has simply ignored its obligations under international law.”

Rainwater from the Golan feeds into the Jordan River, supplying a third of Israel’s needs. The fertile volcanic soil allows Israel to cultivate vineyards and orchards, and graze cattle. And the mountain terrain has also made it a magnet for holidaying, including skiing on Mount Hermon.

In recent years Israel has [approved](#) the construction of a series of large wind farms.

Ayoub said Israel had taken advantage of the conflict in Syria to advance oil exploration in the Golan, but such a move was rejected by the local Druze population.

“Even if Netanyahu could persuade the Americans to agree [about recognition], it is not

their decision to make. The only people who can decide to change the sovereignty of the Golan are the Syrian people,” he said.

Quadrupling Jewish settlers

Officials close to Netanyahu have been promoting a change of status in the Golan’s since the early summer.

In June Naftali Bennett, leader of the pro-settler party Jewish Home and the education minister in Netanyahu’s current coalition, raised the question of the Golan’s future at the Herzliya conference, an annual meeting of Israel’s political, academic and security elites. The conference is also attended by senior US officials.

Bennett [urged](#) the international community “to demonstrate their ethics” by recognising Israeli sovereignty in the Golan.

He [added](#): “To this day, no state in the world has recognised the Golan as part of Israel, including our friend, the United States of America. It is time the world stand by the right side – Israel’s side.”

Israel would try to quadruple the Golan’s settler population to 100,000 using financial incentives, he said.

A month later Zvi Hauser, Netanyahu’s former cabinet secretary, [wrote a commentary](#) in Haaretz arguing that Israel should seize its first chance since 1967 “to conduct a constructive dialogue with the international community over a change in Middle Eastern borders”.

Recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Heights could, he said, be presented as serving a “global interest in stabilising the region”.

Hauser added that Israel should demand the Golan as “compensation” for Obama’s recent nuclear agreement with Iran. Such a claim could be based, he said, on a 1975 “pledge” from US President Gerald Ford recognising Israel’s “need to remain on the Golan Heights, even in peacetime”.

In his CNN piece last Sunday, Oren, a widely respected figure in Washington, asserted that, without Israeli sovereignty over Golan, Iran and Hezbollah would become a base from which to launch armed attacks on Israel.

“For the first time in more than 40 years, the Golan could again become a catalyst for war,” he wrote.

He added that Israel had “transformed this once-barren war zone into a hub of high-tech agriculture, world-class wineries and pristine nature reserves”. He did not mention the recent oil find.

Israel’s ‘solidified grip’

Before fighting took hold in Syria, polls [showed](#) between 60 and 70 percent of Israelis rejected returning the Golan to Syria, even if doing so would secure peace with Damascus. The percentages are likely to be higher now.

The White House official told Haaretz that recognition of Israel's annexation would disrupt US policy by suggesting that Syrian opposition forces supported by the US were "allies with people who want to give up the Golan".

However, a recent commentary by Frederic Hof, a Syria expert in the State Department under Hillary Clinton, hinted that US officials might yet change their view.

He [said](#) US efforts before 2011 and the outbreak of fighting to pressure Israel to give up the Golan, as part of talks over a peace treaty with Assad, had been proven "so wrong". Instead, the war in Syria had "solidified Israel's grip" on the Golan.

On its website, Genie's subsidiary Afek [claims](#) that its drilling in the occupied Golan Heights will extract "Israeli oil".

The two companies include figures who have close personal ties to Netanyahu and high-level influence in Washington.

Genie's founder, Howard Jonas, an American Jewish millionaire, made [political contributions](#) to Netanyahu's recent campaign for the Likud party's primaries.

Its "strategic advisory board" includes Dick Cheney, the US vice-president under George Bush and widely regarded as the architect of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch is also an adviser. He controls large sections of the rightwing English-language media, including his most influential outlet, the US TV news station Fox News.

In September, Genie added Larry Summers, a senior official under Democratic Presidents Bill Clinton and Obama, and James Woolsey, a former CIA director who became a neo-conservative cheerleader for the invasion of Iraq.

The chairman of Afek, Genie's Israeli subsidiary, is Effi Eitam, a far-right former general and cabinet minister who lives in an illegal settlement in the Golan.

His far-right views [include](#) demands to expel both Palestinians from the occupied territories and the large minority of Palestinian citizens from Israel.

After Eitam exited the Israeli parliament in 2009, Netanyahu sent him as a "[special emissary](#)" to US campuses as part of a "caravan for democracy".

International law violated

Hala Khoury Bisharat, an international law professor at Carmel Academic College, near Haifa, said it would be hard to persuade the US to recognise Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan.

"International law is clear that it is never admissible to acquire territory through war," she told MEE. "It would be very problematic for the US to do this."

She added that Israel, as an occupier, was obliged by the 1907 Hague regulations to "safeguard the capital" of the occupied party's natural resources and was not entitled to exploit any oil in the Golan for its own benefit.

The prime minister's office was unavailable to comment about Netanyahu's discussions with Obama, or respond to accusations that the operations in the Golan were violating international law.

Since its establishment, Israel has drilled some 530 exploratory wells, but none has produced commercially viable quantities of oil.

Israel briefly had access to significant quantities of oil after the 1967 war, when fields it occupied in the Sinai supplied two-thirds of domestic needs. Israel was eventually forced to hand the wells back to Egypt.

Meanwhile, Israel has discovered large natural gas deposits in the Mediterranean, stoking tensions with neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon, which has claimed that Israel is drilling in areas where maritime borders are disputed.

The Israeli courts are unlikely to place any obstacles in the way of drilling operations in the Golan.

In a ruling in late 2011, Israel's supreme court [created a new principle](#) of "prolonged occupation" to justify the theft of Palestinian resources, such as quarried stone, in the West Bank. The precedent could be extended to the Golan.

The only opposition so far has come from Israeli environmental groups. They have [expressed concern](#) that extraction of the oil, especially if fracking is used, could pollute aquifers or trigger earthquakes in a seismically unstable region.

Yuval Arbel, a ground water expert with Friends of the Earth Israel, said the Golan's deposits were likely to be in the form of "tight oil," making it difficult to extract. Israel would probably have to set up a grid of drills every half kilometre.

He told MEE that would increase the chances of oil spillages that could leak into the nearby Sea of Galilee, threatening Israel's main source of drinking water.

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