



SYRIAN GOLAN HEIGHTS: A POLITICAL CHIMERA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



“President Trump has just made history...he did it again.”,¹ declared a buoyant Israeli Prime Minister on March 21 after the United States’ President, Donald Trump tweeted his recognition of the legitimacy of Israeli control of the Golan Heights.² President Trump’s recognition regarding the legitimacy of Israeli control was met with much reprobation, with world leaders calling the move “invalid”.³ Even UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that Israel’s annexation of the Golan did not hold “international legal effect.”⁴ In response, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo called these assertions baseless.⁵

Israel captured the Golan Heights in 1967, and then annexed it in 1981. Situated about 60 kilometers from Damascus, the Golan Heights cover an area of 1000 square kilometers.⁶ Even though most nations do not recognize the Israeli occupation, the latter has continued to control the territory. The forgotten piece of occupied territory now is home to almost 23,000 Druze, an Arab Muslim minority⁷, as well as an estimated 20,000 thriving Jewish population.⁸ Syrians who are in opposition to Assad blame him for the continued occupation since he had done nothing to liberate the Heights even though

¹ "In Golan Heights, Trump Bolsters Israel's Netanyahu but Risks Roiling Middle East," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2019.

² "Golan Heights: Trump Signs Order Recognising Occupied Area as Israeli," *BBC News*, March 25, 2019.

³ "Israeli Prime Minister Cuts Short White House Visit," *Voice of America*, March 25, 2019.

⁴ "U.S. Golan Recognition Proves Israel Can Retain Occupied Territories, Senior Israeli Official Says," *Haaretz*, March 27, 2019.

⁵ Michael R. Pompeo and David Friedman, "Opinion | International Law Backs The Trump Golan Policy," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Israel PM Inaugurates Golan Settlement," *The News*, June 16, 2019.

⁸ "Golan Heights Profile," *BBC News*, March 25, 2019.

during his campaign he bombed neighboring Queintera. Since there are no present negotiations taking place, it is unlikely that Israel will withdraw even in the distant future. Even if the issue were brought before the Security Council, the United States would veto any move. The tweet by President Trump is not the first time that he has paid homage to the US-Israel relations. In May 2018, Trump had announced that the US will be moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem upending years of US policy and causing a series of protest worldwide.

In a ceremony on June 16, 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu inaugurated the new settlement in the Golan Heights named after President Trump. Trump Heights - known as "Ramat Trump"⁹ in Hebrew, is not only a testament to the strong alliance between the US and Israel, but is also an emblem of appreciation for President Trump's actions in support of Israel. There is of course opposition to the practicability of the plan. According to an Israeli opposition lawmaker Zvi Hauser, the decision is a phantom decision since, "There's no funding, no planning and there's no real binding decision."¹⁰

According to a proposal presented to the Knesset, the blueprint for the development of Trump Heights will use a previous plan approved in 1992, but never carried out. It focused on building a community named Bruchim with 110 plots denominated for them. The new community will be under the jurisdiction of the Golan Regional Council, with the administrative tasks falling under the authority of the Construction and Housing Ministry, while the finances and budgeting will be handled by the Finance Ministry. All Ministries are required to submit feasibility reports within 90 days.¹¹

The initial announcement by Trump to recognize Golan Heights was just a cog in the wider wheel that is Syria. When the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared victory over the Islamic State (IS) on March 23, 2019, many marked it as the beginning to the end of the nearly eight year war.¹² Few had anticipated that this was just the continuation of much more carnage in what was left in the already war ridden country. Since April 2019, the Syrian military with the help of Russian forces has been on a campaign to retake territory now held by militants, particularly the jihadist alliance Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - previously known as the Al-Nusra Front. At the moment, the focus is on Idlib - a previous buffer zone - which is home to around 3 million people.¹³ President Assad's display of barbarity during the war has left only a handful in the region still willing to side with him. Coupled with this fact is that at present, without exception, all the Arab countries are adamant to partner with Israel with one of the main motives being to reign in any semblance of Iranian power. Moreover, the

⁹ "New Israeli Community Named after U.S. President Goes to Government Approval," *Haaretz*, June 13, 2019.

¹⁰ "Israel Announces New Golan Heights Settlement Named 'Trump Heights,'" *CNN*, June 17, 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "International Reaction to Fall of ISIL's Last Bastion," *Syria News / Al Jazeera*, March 23, 2019.

¹³ "Assad Just Raised the Stakes for Catastrophe in Syria. Trump Is Silent," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2019.

decline in their respective economies and domestic uprisings have forced many Arab countries to focus on calming their stormy waters instead. Hence, the world is witnessing a bend towards 'normalization' of Israel within the region.

The war in Syria has left the country fragile and relegated. There are few in the international community who care what happens to Syria or its people. Syria has indeed become the model example of where the international community has failed to execute its own regulations. At this point, it is only wise for the Assad regime to focus on reconstruction and rehabilitation and join hands with willing partners - in this case China.