



The centers of crisis in the Levant region: The Golan Heights

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Abstract

Aim: This research aimed to identify the factors that have contributed to the lengthening of the Golan crisis and to lay out potential outcomes for the conflict over the territory of Golan.

Methodology: The researchers used a qualitative approach, gathering their information through a careful examination of the existing literature.

Findings: We found that the credibility of a region's economy, military, and sense of identity are all important in determining whether or not a regional dispute can be resolved, supporting the hypothesis that political elites' resolve and expertise are crucial. Thus, the Golan dispute settlement has become more complicated due to a lack of determination and the necessary skills among political elites and Golan's insufficient economic, military, and identity credibility.

Key Words: Golan Heights, Israel, Syria, Hydro politics, Deterrence, Identity Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous territorial-border disputes exist between Middle Eastern countries due to miscommunication and divergent interpretations, claims of borders by colonial powers disregarding geographic and demographic structure, the strategic need of political actors for economic expansion, and the achievement of strategic deterrence. The border disputes between Israel and Syria have strained relations in the Golan Heights and other areas.

The Golan Heights have long been a source of contention between Israel and Syria. Parts of the Golan Heights are vital to the economies, militaries, national identities, and water supplies of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, so their loss would be devastating. Golan's identity, in addition to its exceptional military and water resources, is highly sought after. The Golan Heights are significant to Israel's sense of self, but they also have significant historical significance for Syria. Therefore, Syria needs to preserve its cultural heritage. Damascus's demand to retake the occupied Golan Heights has been put on hold due to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East and the civil war in Syria. Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, is fighting for survival. Also, he's trying to dispatch domestic rebels and opposition groups. However, Israel is unwilling to withdraw from the Golan Heights due to security concerns caused by the presence of Islamists and Iranian troops in Syria. Most of the published works on the Golan Heights focus on the strategic and historical value of the region. Israel's expanding settlements in the area around the Golan Heights, the ongoing civil war in Syria and the presence of ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra in that country, the presence of other countries' troops in Syria like those from Russia and Iran, and Israel's rising security concerns along its borders all contribute to the plateau's rising strategic importance. The issues mentioned above demonstrate the importance of the Golan Heights in Israeli and Syrian politics. The strategic, hydro-political, geoeconomic, military, and finally identifying aspects of the Golan Heights are discussed below. In the end, three potential outcomes will be examined as a conclusion.

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Figure 1. Map of Golan heights

Before Israel's 1967 war of occupation, the Golan Heights were part of Syria. A map of the Golan Heights is presented in Figure 1. The Golan Heights span 60 kilometers in length, 32 kilometers in width, and an area of 1860 km² in southeast Syria. The Golan Heights are bounded north by Lebanon, south by Jordan, and west by the Israeli high-tech, urban, and rural centers (Panel discussion 2010). The Yarmouk River forms part of the frontier between the Golan Heights and Jordan. After breaking away from Syria, it would no longer fall under Syrian jurisdiction. The 212-meter-high Sea of Galilee is a popular tourist destination and an important economic driver. It can be found in western Golan Heights. If Israel keeps the Golan Heights, Syria will lose access to the Sea of Galilee, and Israel will gain access to a large supply of water (Alizadeh 2011; Raksorn 2016).

Northern Golan is strategically significant due to its proximity to water sources and Mount Hermon, which stands at a lofty 2814 meters in elevation. Mount Hermon looks down on Damascus and Haifa, as shown in Figure 2. The occupying power has the upper hand in terms of military and security in the region (Tabatabaie & Moses, 2008).

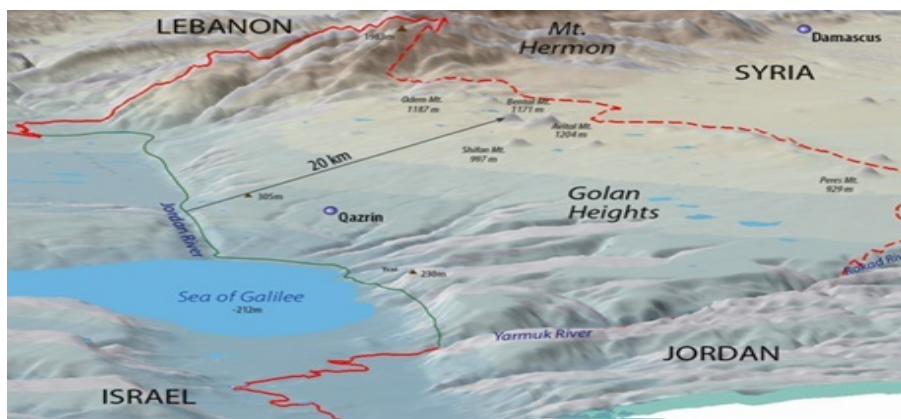


Figure 2. Mount Hermon

Hydro-Political and Geo-Economic Status of Golan Heights

In the semi-desert area of the Middle East, there are several rainy and snowy areas. In such a condition, the region's population is growing rapidly, and the majority of it is living in cities. Therefore, industrial and agricultural development is inevitably considered for employment and feeding of this population, both of which consume water. Besides demographic, social, and economic issues, we should add another element, which is the linking of economic welfare to political legitimacy. Since, as a key element, efficiency has become an essential pillar of legitimacy of governments and failed governments inevitably lose their legitimacy. On the contrary, with pass of time, efficient governments can gain an acceptable legitimacy. Accordingly, with water shortages in urban areas or lack of access of industrial complexes to adequate water, the legitimacy of the central government is questioned.

This sensitivity is doubled in the Levant, as one of the actors in this region (Israel) always seeks to increase its optimized exploitation and share of the water resources of the region and this expansionist policy is stimulating on its own (Holf 1997).

Hence, as the Middle East is a dry region, and water shortage has become one of the main sources of tension and conflict between countries, water resources of Golan and the quality of distributing them have become very important. Golan Heights feed many underground aquifers of the region. Rainfall in Golan is 700- 800 mm and in the Golan Heights (Mount Hermon) is about 1700 mm (Holf 1997).

This amount of rainfall causes floods in the winter and enriches the Baniyas spring water and even The Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias). Annual rainfall in Golan creates 2.1 billion cubic meters of water and 30% of the all water consumed by Israel is supplied from the Golan Heights. Syria's dependence on Golan water is equal to this or even more. As industry and agriculture of Syria are not significant around Golan and the population density of the area is not urban, Syria considers the issue of Golan more political-honor rather than purely economic. However, if occupation of Golan continues by Israel, economy, industry, and agriculture of Syria will suffer a stable deprivation and depression (Holf 1997).

In addition to agricultural, urban, and industrial development, rich water resources lead to the acquisition of other incomes, including income from tourist services. Now, by establishing tourist projects such as ski resort (for competitions), restaurants, hotels, country houses, and other entertainment venues, Israel has turned Golan to one of the most attractive areas for foreign tourists and citizens of Israel. The volume of infrastructure facilities and the increasing pace of these projects are to the extent that has forced the Syrian side to have doubts to reclaim this region. Israel uses the region's waters in power generation as well, and power requirement of the region is provided by taking advantage of the hydroelectric plants of Golan. Hence, we can defend the claim that due to having water resources and water-dependent economic facilities, Golan has become a strategic region in the border between Israel and Syria, and this has made it difficult for the parties to resolve disputes because each side has great political-economic incentives to have control over Golan. Figure 3 shows Hydro-political source of Golan Heights.

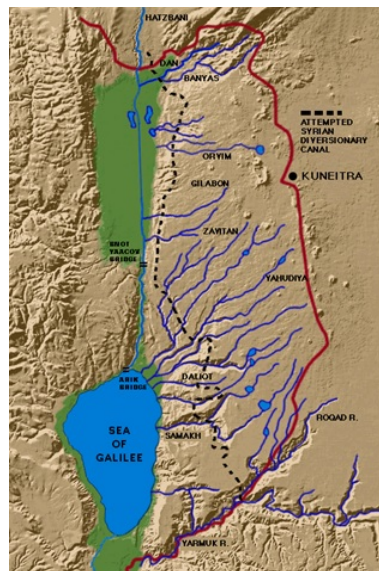


Figure 3. Hydro sources in Golan Heights Golan

Military and Strategic Status of Golan Height

The Golan Heights is located 60 kilometers from Damascus. The distance of these heights is less from industrial centers and populated areas of Israel. Dominating Golan leads to relative dominance over vital installations and any movement of troops in Jordan and Lebanon. During the War of 1967 and earlier, military importance of the Golan was impressive (Ben-Meir, 1997) since the heights have features such as steep slopes, deep valleys, great camouflage structure, and proper height for the deployment of defense and surveillance devices, which are of great importance in military programs. Syria's dominance over Golan places the strategic region of Haifa under direct

command of Syria. In contrast, from the Golan Heights, Israel can control strategic, industrial, and agricultural areas of West of Syria, including. Israel's lack of strategic depth makes it always feel besieged by the Arabs, so it has put occupying strategic areas (like Golan) on the agenda. Hence, control of Golan is an opportunity and a strategic capability that Israel does not want to lose easily. Even during talks in the 1990s between Israeli Arabs when Israelis were mentioning the plan "land for peace", not all heights of Golan were included in the plan, and they were trying to make the Arabs recognize Israel's existence by evacuating a small part of Golan, so that the Arabs recognize the legitimacy of Israel forever. Moreover, they wanted to establish their embassies in Jerusalem (Curtiss 1992).

Identity Importance of Golan Heights

In recent years, most countries' foreign policies have significantly distanced from material positions and issues such as land power and economic wealth and have focused on element of identification (Wendt 1999; Raksorn 2016). In this context, establishing and expressing Arabic, Islamic, Oriental, American, French, Hindi, black identities, and so on have become a value in foreign policy and great thinkers such as Wendt (1999); Buzan and Waeber (2003) have spoken of this substantial change. In this regard, in the wake of successive failures, the Arab world is eager to express its triumph and one of the areas of this self-expression is reclaiming the Arabic lands. That is why, over the past five decades, the Arab world has always praised the Syrians strategic position of forefront of the struggle against Israel and given significant diplomatic and financial support for the Damascus regime. To the Arabs, the history of the last half century is humiliating for them because despite being rich in ideological resources, Arabs have failed to take any advantage from the Israeli side. This is while Israel has managed to attract the world Jewish people and make its population 8.1 million in 1993-2013 with a steady increase and Growth rate of 1.9% and its GDP 37, 556 US\$ per capita in 2016 (OECD 2017). This is while the problems like discrimination, illiteracy, poverty, humiliation of women, lack of freedom, primitive legal system, and generally, agonizing welfare and human development indicators have distorted dignity of the Arabs. It is in this context that ignoring the Golan Heights to Syria and the entire Arab world is embarrassing, and Israel's insistence on accession of Golan to the occupied lands accounts a double presumption. In general, given hydro- political, military, and economic-identity status of Golan, it seems that this area has a special role in the negotiations. However, which side will have the edge in the region in the future depends on will, skill, and political elites to advance their political positions. By knowing these crucial components, we examine future scenarios.

Future of Golan Heights

Predictions about the future of the Golan Heights will not be easy, as the future of these heights is intertwined with future of Syria and Syrian civil war. On 26 January 2011, Syria faced civil war, which caused humanitarian issues such as hitting Syria by chemical weapons as rockets containing sarin and killing hundreds in August 21 of 2013; sieges several areas of Syria controlled by rebels by Syrian military; (Mariwala 2014) and Homelessness of Millions of civilians in Syria: 13.5 millions of Syrian population are in need of humanitarian assistance; of these, 6.3 million are internally displaced and 4.9 million live in hard-to-reach and besieged areas (ECHO 2017).

Thus, the Damascus government has used its utmost power to deal with rebel groups, the conflict which has created the International Involvement from the UN, NATO, and Syrian Allies such as Iran and non-government entities, like the Lebanese Hezbollah. In the meantime, preserving the Assad regime and Damascus was placed on the agenda, and by this policy, naturally, long-standing tension between Israel and Syria and border dispute in the Golan Heights found priority. Even if the Syrian civil war is over, whether the Assad regime remains in power, or another person rises to power, no doubt, the government's ability will be used to rebuild war-torn country. This is while, in addition to the extraordinary importance of Golan, involvement of multiple and conflicting countries and proxy war in Syria, has caused the prolongation of dispute over Golan Heights, since Israel insists on controlling its borders, especially in Golan Heights. Figure 4 shows areas of Influence in Syria.



Figure 4. Areas of influence in Syria

However, several general scenarios can be assumed:

Israel's evacuation of Golan Heights

This scenario occurs if Israel puts comprehensive peace with the Arabs on the agenda, and in return for acceptance by Muslim countries, give back the occupied territories after 1967. Meanwhile, domestic crisis in Syria and the presence of Iranian military forces in Syria to support Assad, as well as Iran's relationship with Hezbollah make Israel more determined to stay in Golan and protect its borders. Israel Army Forces exercise in the Golan Heights in February 2017 and the emphasis of Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister of Israel, on staying in this area weaken the scenario of the Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. Israel is concerned that on one hand, Hezbollah forces form a front along the border with the Syrian, and on the other hand, al-Qaeda militants and group called Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Nusra threaten the area (Danin 2016).

Syria's ignoring of the Golan Heights

In this scenario, knowing its limitations on one hand, and political, economic, and military capabilities of Israel in the region and the world, while ignoring Golan, Damascus government suffices to numerous economic and political advantages. Although this position will be realistic, we should not ignore the identity aspect of Golan to the Syrians because of ignoring Golan.

Division of lands and water resources of Golan

In case of stability in Syria and integrity of effective Arabic powers and non-Arab countries such as Iran and Russia, it is likely that Israel's international supporters force it to negotiate and evacuate Golan. Although Israel, currently, has striking military-political power, it has no guaranteed security and it is not clear what future awaits Israel in further developments in the Arab world. With the crisis in Syria and the activities of Islamist groups such as ISIS near Israel's borders, strengthening of Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah, and generally, axis of resistance, Israel's strategic depth has developed cracks, and this crack deepens by distancing of Turkey from Israel. Although Syria grapples with civil war now, this war will not assure security guarantees to Israel, and maybe even after war and subsequent developments, Syria will not be determined to get Golan back. If effective pressure is placed on Israel by the major, international powers, then Israel will have to adjust its positions.

The continuation of the current tense atmosphere

It seems that continuation of the current trend and the tense situation is the most probable choice ahead. Currently, there is no powerful force to make Israel retreat. The Syrian government, besides involvement in the

civil war, is deprived of institutions and effective forces supporting it. On the other hand, survival of the Assad regime in Syria is not guaranteed, and it is not clear what alternative may assume power instead of Assad in Syria. In any case, it seems that whether Assad remains in power or someone else gets the power, the power changing the equations of Syria will be weak, and current stabilizing force will have the upper hand and the current arrangements will continue to exist.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Now, in the Golan Heights currently, the Israeli side continues to the development of economic, military, and tourism infrastructure in the region and rejects negotiations over the Golan extradition. On the other hand, Syria faces internal crisis and the presence of rebel groups threatens Golan. Hence, Damascus will not ignore Golan that shows a dead end. The real winner of this is Israel and the losers are the Arabs, especially the government of Syria. Various countries such as Arab-Muslim and non-Arab Iran and Turkey, Western countries such as Europe and the United States of America all have a stance in the story of Golan, which is not only inconsistent, but also covers a range of anti-absolute to compromised unconditional. With this description, it seems that Golan Heights will always experience the issue of domination of Israel and Arabs protest. This is while proxy war in Syria and the crisis of civil war make the future of Syria and the Golan Heights hazy.

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