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

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Abstract

Golan Heights have been occupied by Israel for about half a century. Current evidence shows that the settlement of this dispute is gradually becoming more difficult as no strategic and particular development capable of changing the status quo can be seen. The question is, what factors led the Golan Heights to become one of the centers of crisis in Levant? And why is tensions among countries continuing after years of conflict? Apparently, a combination of economic and military factors and identity issues are involved in the dispute’s prolongation. Since these three factors (economic development, military immunity and deterrence, and identity politics) continue to take on more importance over time, the prospect for settlement of disputes over Golan doesn’t seem much promising. Accordingly, the present study was aimed at finding “the causes of Golan crisis prolongation” and unfolding “the scenarios pertaining to the dispute over Golan”. This was achieved by testing the research hypothesis. According to the hypothesis, the settlement of regional disputes usually depends on the political elites’ determination and skills, on one hand, and the economic, military and identity credibility of the region under dispute, on the other. Thus, due to the lack of determination and the required skills among political elites and Golan’s insufficient economic, military, and identity credibility, the Golan dispute settlement has become increasingly complicated. Looked at from another perspective, the issue assumes more importance. The new perspective deals with the political developments and regime changes taking place in the Middle Eastern countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and, in a not so far future, Libya. Some civil unrests in Syria have overshadowed the continuing Israeli occupation of Arab territories.

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

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle Eastern countries have numerous territorial-border disputes caused by misunderstandings and differing interpretations of the parties, claims of borders by colonial powers regardless of geographic and demographic structure, the strategic need of political actors to the economic expansion, and the achievement of strategic deterrence. The Golan Heights is among the regions that the border disputes have shaken the relationships between Israel and Syria.

Over the years, the Golan Heights was disputed between Israel and Syria. Both countries were worried to lose partial economy, military, identity, and water facilities by losing parts of the Golan Heights. In addition to having extraordinary military and water resources, Golan identity is also among the mutual requests. In fact, the Golan Heights means Israel’s sense of identity; however, it has historical identity for Syria. That is why Syria does not want to lose this identity. Now, with the crisis in the Middle East and civil war in Syria, the claim of Damascus to regain the occupied Golan Heights has been postponed. President Bashar Assad is trying to maintain power. Meanwhile, he tries to send out the opposition groups and domestic rebels. On the other hand, Israel, concerned with actions of Islamists near its border and Iranian troops in Syria as a threat to its own security, is not willing to withdraw from the Golan Heights. There have been several papers about Golan Heights and most of them are about its historical and strategic significance. Israel settlement, particularly near Golan Heights, civil war in Syria and the presence of ISL and Jabhat al-Nusra in this country, presence of some other country in Syria such as Russia and Iranian troops, and finally increased Israel concerns about insecurity on its borders have been led to grow the significance of Golan Heights. Above-mentioned issues show the importance of the Golan Heights.
in Israeli and Syrian political affairs. In the following, in addition to the importance of strategy, hydro-political and geo-economic status, military aspect, and then Identity importance of Golan Heights are discussed. Finally, as the conclusion, three possible futures will be investigated.

The Golan Heights used to be a part of Syrian territory until 1967 occupied by the Israel in 1967 war. Figure 1, shows a map of Golan Heights. The Golan Heights is located in the South East of Syria with 60 km length, 32 km width, and an area of 1860 km$^2$. The Golan Heights borders with Lebanon to North, Jordan to South, and Israel’s industrial, populated, and agricultural regions to the West (Panel discussion 2010). Yarmouk River flows on the border between the Golan Heights and Jordan. It would be out of Syrian control after separating from Syria. The Sea of Galilee, 212 m above the sea level, is an economic and tourist attraction. It is located in western Golan Heights. In case of Israel’s continued occupation of the Golan, Syrian access to the Sea of Galilee will disappear forever and Israel will gain significant water resources (Alizadeh 2011; Raksorn 2016).

In addition to water resources, Mount Hermon with the height of 2814 meters is located in northern Golan, giving great military importance to the region. Figure 2, shows Mount Hermon Overlooks Damascus and Haifa. The power conquering the region is able to control the military-security affairs (Tabatabaie & Moses 2008).

**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](image)

**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 installa-
tions 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; Rakson 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 Waever (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](image)

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 threat 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**

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.

**REFERENCES**


