

High Stakes on High Ground: “The Golan Heights, a Zero-sum Game for Regional Dominance.”

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Key Points

- The Golan Heights holds profound historical significance and serves critical tactical and strategic purpose.
- Since Israel's unilateral annexation of the Golan Heights, the region is generally viewed as stable.
- Various actors possess diverse interests, positions, and perspectives regarding the historical context and future of the Golan Heights.
- Recent military activity and the growing tensions between Israel and Hezbollah have significantly increased the risk of transforming the Golan Heights into a volatile flashpoint.

Introduction

The Golan Heights, a hilly 460 square mile (1,200 square kilometer) strategically vital plateau, was seized by Israel from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War. Despite Syria's attempt to reclaim the territory in the 1973 conflict, Israel maintained control and unilaterally annexed it in 1981. This annexation, however, lacks international recognition, with Syria continuing to demand the territory's return.¹ Since the 1974 armistice between Israel and Syria and the deployment of UN personnel, the Golan Heights has remained relatively stable. However, the Golan's strategic importance has not diminished and has recently garnered renewed attention from various actors. The area's significance has been underscored by recent military activities and the looming of a full-scale conflict after recent cross border incursions of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) into Lebanon.

The Golan Heights

The Golan Heights offers an occupier significant advantages due to its elevated position. It provides a view of parts of Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan, making it an excellent vantage point.² It provides opportunities for monitoring, surveillance, and offensive artillery positions. The Golan Heights also creates a natural buffer allowing defensive positions. The Golan Heights contains fertile agriculture soil, and it is a crucial water source in the region. Water

from the Golan feeds into the Sea of Galilee and Jordan River and contributes to the water supply of the region where water is scarce.³

Prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, the population of the Golan Heights was estimated to be between 90,000 and 148,000 people, with the majority being Syrian Arabs. This population was distributed across numerous settlements and farms throughout the region. During and immediately after the war, a vast majority of Syrians fled or were driven from the Heights, resulting in a dramatic demographic shift. A census conducted by Israel approximately two months after taking control of the Golan Heights revealed that only a small fraction of the original population remained, with the vast majority of those being Druze transforming them from a minority group to the majority population in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.⁴

After annexing the Golan Heights in 1981, Israel offered the Druze community the option of citizenship, although most declined and continue to identify as Syrian.⁵ Currently, approximately 50,000 people live in the Golan with around half of them being Jewish settlers and the other half being Druze, along with a small minority of Alawites.⁶ Despite Israel's annexation and subsequent efforts to alter the demographic landscape of the Golan Heights, a significant Druze population in the region continues to identify as Syrian.

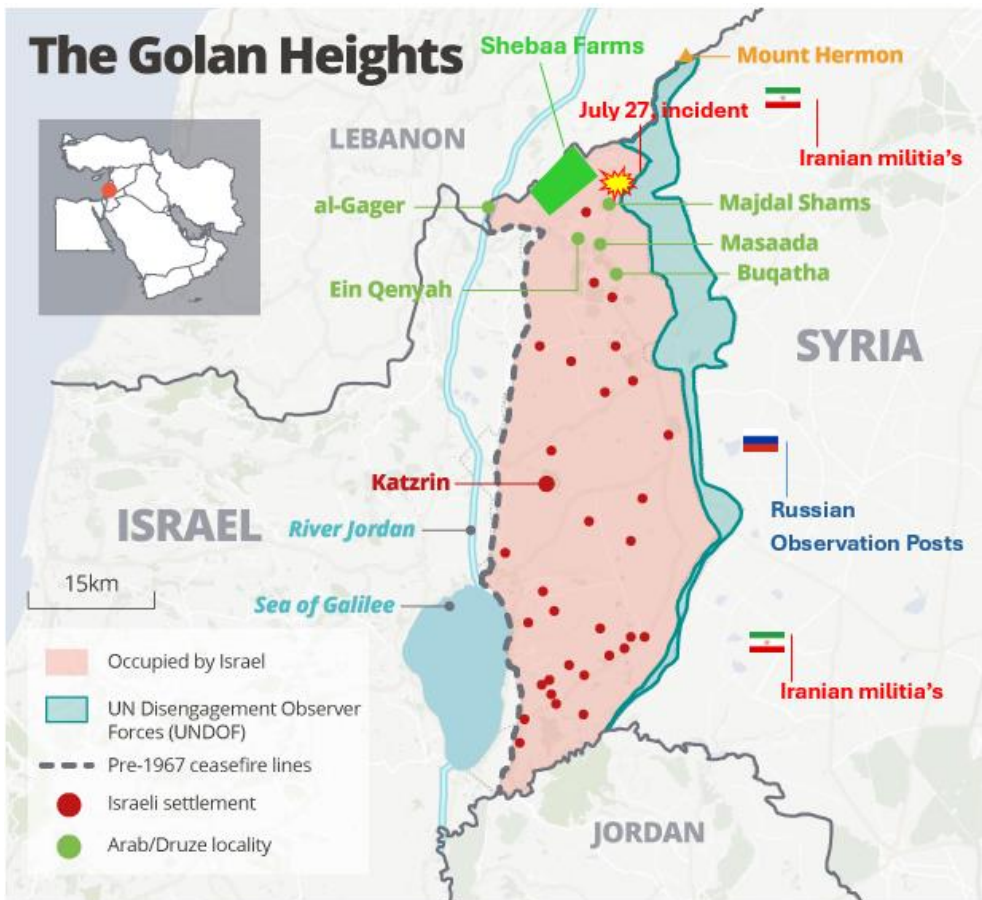


Figure 1, Golan Heights current situation.
 Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016 PEW Research Center study, UNDOF.org.
 Modified by Author. Russian and Iranian positions depicted for illustrative purposes.

Perspectives and Positions

Syria

Syria aims to reclaim the Golan Heights through a peace deal. In 2003, President Bashar al-Assad expressed readiness to restart peace talks with Israel which has previously considered returning the territory for peace (1999-2000 U.S.-brokered talks when Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered to return most of the Golan). The main friction points include Syria's demand for a complete Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 borders, which would give Syria control over the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Israel's important source of fresh water), and the dismantling of Israeli settlements on the Golan.⁷

Reclaiming the Golan Heights is a matter of national pride, territorial integrity, and a long-standing goal for Syria. The dispute over this territory has been a significant obstacle in achieving a peace deal with Israel. Although, Syria is in no position to engage in a conflict due to the country's dire internal situation. Assad is likely to prioritize internal stability and economic recovery over any military confrontation with Israel.

Israel

For Israel, the Golan Heights holds immense political and symbolic importance in the context of Arab-Israeli relations throughout history. Israel has maintained its hold on the territory for over five decades. This region, being viewed by many Israelis as an integral part of the Jewish state, serves as a “memento of war,” symbolizing Israel's resilience and strategic victories. This sentiment is reflected in the strong public opposition to any withdrawal from the Golan.⁸ While the Golan Heights played a strategic role in Israel's overall defense posture, during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War the primary battles and confrontations occurred along the Israel-Lebanon border rather than in the Golan region.

Israel views Iranian and Hezbollah's proximity near its border as a significant threat, as Iran and Hezbollah have solidified their presence in Syria by backing the Assad regime during the ongoing civil war. Israel considers the Golan Heights essential in preventing Iran from establishing an additional front in Southern Syria and potentially connecting it with the front in South Lebanon via Hezbollah.⁹ Therefore, the Golan Heights is a crucial buffer zone for its security.

Lebanon

The presence of Hezbollah in Lebanese politics complicates the country's official stance, as Hezbollah has been involved in conflicts related to the Golan Heights. Therefore, Lebanon's government typically refrains from commenting on strikes against Israel or the occupied Golan Heights.¹⁰ Hezbollah justifies its armament and attacks on Israel in the Golan area due to the Israeli occupation of Shebaa Farms, which it claims as historically Lebanese territory.¹¹ Hezbollah can easily target the Golan Heights, including the disputed Shebaa Farms area. However, even if Lebanon gained control of Shebaa Farms, Hezbollah's hostility towards Israel would persist. Aligned with Iran,

Hezbollah's goal is Israel's destruction, and it would find other pretexts to continue its aggression regardless of territorial disputes.

Jordan

Jordan's stance aligns with that of most countries worldwide, asserting that the Golan Heights is Syrian territory under occupation.¹²

Iran

Iran is maintaining its alliance with Syria to ensure it can operate within Syrian territory, primarily for strategic and geopolitical reasons.¹³ Even though Iran does not directly project power on the Golan Heights due to its limited military capability, it utilizes its proxies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and various militias in Syria. This approach is part of Iran's broader strategy to undermine Israel's influence in the region without engaging in direct confrontation, which Iran seeks to avoid due to Israel's superior military strength and U.S. support.

United States

In March 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then President Donald Trump signed a proclamation recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights.¹⁴ In June 2021, the Biden administration confirmed it would uphold the previous administration's policy of recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.¹⁵ The U.S. administration's recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights in 2019 contributed to the image of the U.S. applying a "double standards" approach, appearing to contradict the U.S. traditional emphasis on upholding international law and promoting a rules-based order.

Russia

After its withdrawal of forces in 2018, Russia reestablished air patrols (in 2024) and multiple observation posts in the Syria border region near the Golan Heights (late 2023).¹⁶ In September 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the U.S. of being "hypocritical" in its recognition of the Golan Heights as part of sovereign Israel. He compared the Golan Heights to the Donbas region in Ukraine and suggested that the U.S. did not respect legal sovereignty of UN member states.¹⁷ Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and U.S. recognition allows Russia a narrative that their actions in Ukraine are alike and justified. In the light of the upcoming change in U.S. administration, Russia might use the Golan Heights issue as leverage to negotiate its position in Ukraine.

In the context of an Israeli-Hezbollah war, Russia's enhanced presence in the Golan area could serve as a deterrent against escalation or provide a channel for de-escalation. However, it also complicates the regional dynamics, potentially limiting Israel's freedom of action in the area while also serving as a counterbalance to Iranian influence and actions.

United Nations

The Golan Heights dispute between Syria and Israel has been addressed through several key United Nations Security Council Resolutions. These resolutions were issued to pave the way for a peaceful solution for the Golan Heights. The most significant resolutions were adopted in response to Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights through the Golan Heights Law. Resolution 350 established the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Resolution 497 declares Israel's imposition of its laws, jurisdiction, and administration in the Golan Heights as "null and void and without international legal effect."¹⁸

UNDOF was established to "maintain the ceasefire between Israel and Syria, supervise the disengagement of Israeli and Syrian forces and supervise the areas of separation and limitation."¹⁹ UNDOF comprises 1162 peacekeepers, including military personnel from various contributing countries.²⁰ The mission faces significant challenges, such as increased tensions due to the ongoing Syrian civil war, the presence of armed groups and military activities in the area of separation, unexploded ordnance, and landmines in the region, and maintaining neutrality and operational effectiveness in a complex geopolitical environment.²¹ After October 7, 2023, UNDOF continued their mandated task in a challenging operational environment deteriorated by renewed tensions in northern Israel, southern and eastern Lebanon and the Golan. The UNDOF mandate appears to have been effective in keeping the peace between Israel and Syria, however, the force is unlikely to be empowered to prevent any kinetic action from armed actors on the Golan Heights.

Recent Developments

Multiple reports after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, described the movement of a significant amount of Assad regime forces and pro-Iran militias to the Golan area. Some reports suggested that the various groups were coordinating attacks on the Golan Heights.²²

Most Hezbollah attacks since October 7 were targeted at northern Israel, with fewer strikes on the Golan Heights where Israel has multiple military installations.²³ On July 27, 2024, a rocket explosion in a Druze village on the Golan killed 12 people.²⁴ On August 21, 2024, Hezbollah launched 50 rockets hitting a number of houses in the Golan area.²⁵

Conclusion

The Golan Heights remain a strategically significant territory in the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Its elevated topography provides substantial military advantages, making it a key asset in regional security dynamics.

The territory's contested status has been a subject of international debate and multiple UN Security Council Resolutions. Despite the UN resolutions and witnessing the growth of Israeli settlements in the Golan, Israel's ceding this territory is unlikely today, as it is vital in deterring its adversaries locally, and diminishing threats regionally.

The ongoing territorial status quo predominantly serves Israel's strategic interests, with its preservation contingent upon maintaining Israel's military superiority. Syria's capacity to challenge this status quo remains constrained

diplomatically and militarily. However, an escalation of regional tensions could prompt Syria to reassert its claim to the territory on the international stage, potentially scrutinizing the U.S.' stance on the issue.

One may conclude that under Israeli control, the Golan Heights seem to be relatively stable and secure. While the Golan Heights currently receives limited international attention, the potential expansion of the Israel-Hamas conflict into a broader regional war could reignite tensions in the Golan Heights area. Such an escalation would significantly raise the stakes for all parties involved, turning the Golan Heights into a potential flashpoint once again.

Recommendations

To maintain stability in the Golan Heights and prevent it from becoming a new front in a broader Middle Eastern conflict, USCENTCOM could provide Israel with U.S. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that are crucial in monitoring potential militia buildups along the Syrian border. Maintaining open communication channels with Russia, given its involvement in Syria, is essential to prevent misunderstandings and unintended escalation.

The increased U.S. military presence in the Middle East currently serves as a deterrent against ITN threats and potential escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict, indirectly maintaining stability in the Golan Heights while demonstrating commitment to allies and partners. However, the long-term sustainability of these reinforcements is questionable. Given the uncertainty surrounding ceasefire negotiations and the potential effectiveness of any future agreement, USCENTCOM should develop contingency plans for prolonged engagement in the region.

¹ Israel occupies the western two-thirds of the geological Golan Heights territory, along with the area of Mount Hermon.

² "The resulting natural terrain bottlenecks allow a small defending force to repel an attack, and even buy time to send for reinforcements, if needed. In the 1973 October War, the Golan's topography enabled 177 defending tanks to stop approximately 1,500 Syrian tanks and gave the IDF the critical time to call up and deploy its reserve formations." Efraim Inbar, "Israel's Presence on the Golan Heights: A Strategic Necessity," *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, April 10, 2019, <https://jiss.org.il/en/inbar-israels-presence-on-the-golan-heights-a-strategic-necessity/> (accessed July 24, 2024).

³ Mayaan Lubell, "What is the Significance of the Golan Heights," *Reuters*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/what-is-the-significance-of-the-golan-heights-idUSKCN1R22IR/> (accessed July 24, 2024).

⁴ Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research, "Displacement in the Heights: How the Population of the Golan Heights Vanished in 1967," <https://www.akevot.org.il/en/article/displacement-in-the-golan/> (accessed August 15, 2024); AL-MARSAD – The Arab centre for Human Rights in the Golan Heights, *Suggested issues for Consideration Regarding Israel's Combined tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)*, NGO Report, January 25, 2007, [The Arab Centre for Human Rights in the Golan Heights: NGO Report](https://www.ahrc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/AL-MARSAD%20-%20The%20Arab%20centre%20for%20Human%20Rights%20in%20the%20Golan%20Heights%20-%20Suggested%20issues%20for%20consideration%20regarding%20Israel's%20combined%20tenth%20eleventh%20twelfth%20and%20thirteenth%20periodic%20reports%20to%20the%20UN%20Committee%20on%20the%20Elimination%20of%20Racial%20Discrimination%20(CERD).pdf) (accessed July 20, 2024).

⁵ Mayaan Lubell, "What is the Significance of the Golan Heights."

⁶ Druze are an Arab minority that practice an offshoot of Islam. Many Druze speak Arabic and share cultural similarities with Arabs. Alawites are a branch of Shiite Islam. Syrian President Bashar Assad and key figures in his regime are Alawites. Chase Winter, "Golan Heights: Why it Matters to US, Israel and Syria," *Deutsche Welle*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/golan-heights-why-it-matters-to-us-israel-and-syria/a-48019484> (accessed July 24, 2024).

⁷ BBC News, "Golan Heights Profile," August 29, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14724842> (accessed July 24, 2024).

⁸ Florence Dixon, "Power Play and Wars of Influence: What is the Importance of the Golan Heights," *The New Arab*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/explainer-golan-heights-what-s-big-deal> (accessed July 20, 2024); Efraim Inbar, "Israel's Presence on the Golan Heights: A Strategic Necessity," *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security*, April 10, 2019, <https://jiss.org.il/en/inbar-israels-presence-on-the-golan-heights-a-strategic-necessity/> (accessed July 20, 2024).

⁹ Security Council Report, “December 2023 Monthly Forecast,” December 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-12/undof-golan-3.php?print=true> (accessed August 6, 2024).

¹⁰ Al Jazeera, “Will Attack on Occupied Golan Heights Push Israel, Hezbollah Towards War?” July 28, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/28/will-attack-on-occupied-golan-heights-push-israel-hezbollah-towards-war> (accessed August 01, 2024).

¹¹ Rose Sunniva, “Shebaa Farms: Why Hezbollah Uses Israel's Occupation of a Tiny Strip of Land to Justify Its Arsenal,” *The National*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/shebaa-farms-why-hezbollah-uses-israel-s-occupation-of-a-tiny-strip-of-land-to-justify-its-arsenal-1.857998> (accessed on Aug 1, 2024); Shebaa Farms is a small strip of land at the intersection of the Lebanese Syrian border and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. It is area roughly 14 kilometers in length and 2 kilometers in width and remains unclear if it was a part of Lebanon or Syria. UN declares Shebaa Farms as a part of Syria occupied by Israel; The United Nations, “The Question of Palestine,” *The United Nations*, May 15, 2000, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-178425/> (accessed on Aug 1, 2024).

¹² The Jordan Times, “Jordan Affirms ‘Unaltered Stance’ That Golan is Occupied Territory,” March 23, 2019, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-affirms-%E2%80%98unaltered-stance%E2%80%99-golan-occupied-territory> (accessed September 03, 2024).

¹³ International Crisis Group, “Golan Heights and South/West Syria,” August 15, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-usisrael-trigger-list/flashpoints/golan-heights-and-southwest-syria> (accessed August 20, 2024).

¹⁴ “The State of Israel took control of the Golan Heights in 1967 to safeguard its security from external threats. Today, aggressive acts by Iran and terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, in southern Syria continue to make the Golan Heights a potential launching ground for attacks on Israel. Any possible future peace agreement in the region must account for Israel’s need to protect itself from Syria and other regional threats. Based on these unique circumstances, it is therefore appropriate to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.” US Embassy in Israel, “Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel,” March 25, 2019, <https://il.usembassy.gov/proclamation-on-recognizing-the-golan-heights-as-part-of-the-state-of-israel/> (accessed July 24, 2024).

¹⁵ Jewish News Syndicate, “White House: No Policy Change on Golan Heights,” July 30, 2024, <https://www.jns.org/white-house-no-policy-change-since-trump-recognized-golan-heights/> (accessed August 01, 2024).

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¹⁷ Tal Spungin, “Russia: US Hypocritical on Ukraine War, Double Standard for Israel,” *The Jerusalem Post*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-760342> (accessed August 01, 2024); The Jerusalem Post, “A message to Israel? Russia Deploys More Forces in Syria's Golan Heights,” April 03, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/a-message-to-israel-russia-deploys-more-forces-in-syrias-golan-heights-795200/> (accessed July 2024, 2024).

¹⁸ The UNSCR 242, 338, 350, and 497. UNSCR, “Search Engine for the United Nations Security Council Resolutions,” <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/> (accessed July 24, 2024). The mandate of UNDOF is renewed every six months (since 1974) by the UNSC to adapt to the evolving situation and ensure continued peacekeeping efforts in the region. UNDOF. “Mandate,” <https://undof.unmissions.org/mandate> (accessed July 17, 2024).

¹⁹ UNDOF, “Mandate.”

²⁰ UNDOF, “Facts and Figures,” <https://undof.unmissions.org/facts-and-figures> (accessed July 17, 2024).

²¹ Security Council Report, “December 2023 Monthly Forecast.”

²² Andrew J. Tabler, “Syria and the Hamas Attack: Another Potential Iran-Backed Front?” October 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-and-hamas-attack-another-potential-iran-backed-front> (accessed July 24, 2024); Josef Federman and Jon Gambrell, “Israel Says Iran Launched More than 300 Drones and Missiles, 99% of Which Were Intercepted,” *The Associated Press*, April 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/strait-of-hormuz-vessel-33fcffde2d867380e98c89403776a8ac> (accessed July 20, 2024).; Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, “Iraqi Groups and Yemen's Houthis Claim More Joint Attacks on Israel,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-groups-and-yemens-houthis-claim-more-joint-attacks-israel> (accessed July 24, 2024).

²³ Adam Lucente, “Hezbollah Airs Drone Footage of Israeli Military Sites in Golan Heights,” *Al Monitor*, July 09, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/07/hezbollah-air-drone-footage-israeli-military-sites-golan-heights> (accessed 24, 2024); Raffi Berg, “Hezbollah, Israel and the Golan Heights: What is happening and Why?” *BBC*, July 29, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c29dwwgp3rr7o> (accessed August 01, 2024).

²⁴ Tia Goldenberg and Bassem Mroue, “Strike in Israeli-controlled Golan Heights Kills at Least 12 and Threatens to Spark a Wider War,” *Associated Press*, July 28, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-israel-hezbollah-golan-kfar-kila-141600af654f48f733b33f9f0a26dbfe> (accessed August 01, 2024).

²⁵ Associated Press, “Israel-Hamas War Latest: Hezbollah Fires More Than 50 Rockets, Hitting Israeli-Annexed Golan Heights,” August 21, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-latest-21-august-2024-e81f90961a6b16e47e3203e3a0261218> (accessed August 21, 2024).