Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights: President Trump Voices Support for Israeli Sovereignty Claim

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On March 21, 2019, [President Trump stated on Twitter](#), "After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!" The President did not specify if and when he would officially change U.S. policy or whether his support for Israeli sovereignty corresponds with specific territorial boundaries. Israel gained control over the western two-thirds of Syria's [Golan Heights](#) (hereafter, the Golan)—a plateau overlooking northern Israel—during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and effectively annexed it unilaterally by [applying Israeli law to the region in 1981](#) (see **Figure 1** and textbox below for a map, synopsis, and timeline). In reaction to President Trump's statement, [others in the international community have insisted](#) that the area remains under Syrian sovereignty. Nevertheless, a change in longstanding U.S. policy on the Golan may have other effects (see "[Outlook](#)" below).

President Trump's statement came during [a closely contested Israeli campaign](#)—with elections scheduled for April 9, and only a few days before Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's scheduled visit to Washington, DC. During the campaign, [Netanyahu has called on the international community](#) to recognize Israeli sovereignty in the Golan, and his position is [widely popular in Israel](#). In Congress, [Senate](#) and [House](#) bills introduced in February 2019 support Israeli sovereignty.

Figure 1. Map of the Golan Heights

Source: CRS, based on data from ArcGIS, U.S. State Department, ESRI, and United Nations.

Golan Heights: Brief Synopsis and Timeline of Key Events

Israel's military has a strategically important presence in the Golan, and the largely rural area known for its water resources and agriculture is home to about 22,000 Israeli settlers and a similar number of Druze. Most of the Druze retain Syrian citizenship while having the option to apply for Israeli citizenship.

1949-1967 Sporadic Israel-Syria conflict takes place over disputed demilitarized zones at the margins of the Golan Heights following an armistice agreement after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war

1967 Israel captures a portion of the Golan Heights during the June Arab-Israeli war; approximately 100,000 Syrians relocate to other areas of Syria; the U.N. Security Council adopts Resolution 242

1973 Israel ultimately retains its antebellum control of the Golan Heights after an initial Syrian push during the Yom Kippur War

1974 Israel-Syria disengagement agreement creates a demilitarized zone between areas of Israeli and Syrian control to be monitored by the U.N. Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)

1981 Israel effectively annexes the Golan Heights unilaterally; the U.N. Security Council adopts Resolution 497

1991-2011 Various rounds of indirect Israel-Syria negotiation take place over the Golan

Background on U.S. Policy and International Involvement

Historically, successive U.S. Administrations supported the general international stance that the Golan Heights was Syrian territory subject to Israel's military occupation. During the Reagan Administration, in December 1981 the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to adopt Resolution 497 in response to Israel's de facto annexation of the Golan. The resolution stated that the annexation was "null and void and without international legal effect" and demanded that Israel rescind its action.

Previous U.S. Administrations consistently supported Israel's security interests in the Golan Heights while maintaining the position that final borders were subject to Israel-Syria negotiation. A key example was a 1975 letter from President Gerald Ford to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which stated that the United States supported a peace agreement with Syria that would assure Israel's security from attack from the Golan, and would give weight to Israel's position that such assurances might be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan.

Since 1974, the U.N. Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) has patrolled an area of the Golan Heights between the regions controlled by Israel and Syria, with about 880 troops from five countries stationed there as of January 2019. During that time, Israel's forces in the Golan Heights have not faced serious military resistance to their continued deployment, despite some security threats and diplomatic challenges. Periodic resolutions by the U.N. General Assembly (the latest in November 2018) have criticized Israel's occupation as hindering regional peace and Israel's settlement and de facto annexation of the Golan as illegal.

Outlook

A change in U.S. policy on the Golan Heights could have multiple effects. Some observers assert that, in response, Arab states may be less willing to encourage the Palestinians to consider future Trump Administration peace proposals. U.S. support for Israeli action against the "land for peace" principle set forth after the 1967 war in U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 would contradict Arab states' position—articulated in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—that regional peace depends on the return of Arab lands previously captured by Israel's military. The Arab League responded to President Trump's statement on the Golan by saying that it was "completely beyond international law." Some Palestinians reportedly fear that U.S. support for Israeli claims in the Golan could be a "stepping stone" to acquiescing to an Israeli annexation of the West Bank.

For decades after 1967, various Israeli leaders, reportedly including Prime Minister Netanyahu as late as 2011, had entered into indirect talks with Syria aimed at returning some portion of the Golan as part of a lasting peace agreement. A number of factors may have influenced Netanyahu to shift focus from negotiating with Syria on a "land for peace" basis to obtaining international support for Israel's claims of sovereignty. These could include Iran's increased presence in Syria, the effect Syria's civil war has had on its leadership and stability, and the Trump Administration's 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In March 20 remarks justifying a permanent Israeli presence in the Golan, Netanyahu asserted that Israeli intelligence had uncovered efforts by Hezbollah (the Iran-backed Lebanese group), to build a terror network in the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights.

Given the dramatic changes in Syria since its civil war began in 2011, a U.S. policy change also could affect regional security. Since 2018, Israel and Iran have engaged in periodic conflict in Syria, with Iranian missiles targeting Israeli positions in the Golan. In criticizing President Trump's statement, the Syrian government vowed that it would recover the Golan from Israel. Additionally, an observer has argued that the President's statement could unintentionally bolster Syrian President Bashar al Asad and Iran within Syria.

Note: Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Carmelina Palmer, previously an intern at CRS, provided valuable background research and analysis for this product.