

Notes on a National Strategy for the Golan Heights

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This paper was prompted by recent events in the Middle East bringing into sharp relief the risks and opportunities emerging from on-the-ground realities that formed in the absence of a national strategy for the Golan Heights. In the fifty years since it was conquered, the possibility of withdrawal from the Golan has never been off the agenda, with the area remaining a "land in limbo" in times of both peace and war. This paper aggregates and lays out all the facts, issues, principles and considerations in order to paint a multidimensional and multilayered picture that can serve as a vital and effective tool for decision makers in formulating a national strategy for the Golan Heights.

The **first chapter** details the history of Jewish settlement in the Golan, and the **second chapter** explains the disputed border.

The **third chapter** examines the Golan Heights Law – was it an administrative arrangement or a national vision?

The **fourth chapter** discusses the Golan Heights as a region in limbo, and the **fifth chapter** as one in perpetual custodianship.

The **sixth chapter** looks at the aspects of law and security, and **the seventh** deals with Israel's treatment of the Druze people residing in the Golan.

The **eighth chapter** discusses Israeli sovereignty as a *fait accompli*.

The **ninth chapter** explores Syria's fracture, and the ethnic realities and geo-strategic interests and security concerns in that context.

The **tenth chapter** lays out the idea of a system of alliances in the region, while the **eleventh** makes the case for an Israeli Golan being an international interest.

The **twelfth** chapter defines Israeli interests in the context of the Golan Heights.

Summary:

The Golan has always appeared to be Israel's stepchild. Its status has become fixed somewhere between a temporary custody in peacetime and a maneuvering ground for the next war. Despite enacting the Golan Heights Law in 1981, Israeli governments failed in both establishing a Jewish majority in the Golan and in securing international recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the region. Despite the Golan being a disputed area where Israel has a strategic interest in strengthening its presence, Israeli

governments have managed to settle only some 22,000 people over the course of half a century. This is a testimonial to the executive's inability to carry out national strategic missions as well as evidence of a historical and continuous dereliction of duty.

The long history of both right and left wing Israeli governments willing to withdraw fully or partially from the Golan Heights, has suspended the area in limbo for fifty years – in anticipation that Israel might soften its position and redraw the boundaries of its sovereignty for "the right price". Ideas of withdrawal were silenced for the first time only after Syria's collapse in the civil war that broke out in early 2011. However, more than six years into the fighting and with the end of the bloodshed in sight, there has been no political soul-searching or public debate in Israel on the concept of withdrawing from the Golan or on the perception that has guided Israel over the years regarding the possibility of an arrangement with Syria and the attendant implications, for security among others.

The recent upheaval in the Middle East opens a window of opportunity to change the formula of any future settlement of the Golan Heights. Iran's return as an equal member of the "family of nations" and its status as a nuclear threshold state create a new risk equation for Israel, as Iran's tentacles fill the vacuums left by collapsing regimes in the Middle East to form an effective geographical Tehran-Damascus "axis of evil".

The catastrophic war in Syria and Iraq has created a new reality on Israel's northern border - Israel finds itself at frequent intervals confronting various threats posed by alternating terrorist organizations across the border. The apparent reassertion of Assad's control over areas of Syria rests on Iranian and Russian bayonets; for the majority of Syria's population, the Iranian-Assad alliance is not a natural one and its durability is questionable. In the coming decades, as the flames of the ethnic conflict in Syria and Iraq continue to burn, in open combat and below the surface, uncertainty will continue to reign. Unlike the territorial conflicts Europe experienced in both World Wars, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are internal struggles, posing security challenges for Israel dissimilar to those posed by military confrontations between hostile states; accordingly, the traditional diplomatic model is not relevant to the Middle Eastern maladies of the twenty-first century. Only time can heal these wounds, if at all.

Consequently, any Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights will increase the threat to the State of Israel, because of the inherent instability on its northern front. Continued Israeli control of the Golan Heights has a clear self-defense rationale, in the deepest sense of the term.

International recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Golan is an Israeli interest but it is an international one as well. Israeli presence in the Golan, which overlooks southern Syria, is, for the Western world, akin to a friendly aircraft carrier in a sea of peril. This

presence is obviously beneficial to the stability of the region as well as to the security of the Druze population and other endangered minorities. The Western world has a clear interest in entrenching such presence.

Israel stands now in the eye of the storm. It cannot continue to ignore the major changes taking place on its doorstep, as a regional power confronting other regional powers aspiring to hegemony, such as Iran and Turkey. Instead of the strategy of non-intervention and standing aside, Israel should consider getting involved in a way that would ensure its interests in the reshaping Middle East. The perception that non-involvement allows Israel to remain a bystander and ostensibly avoid confrontations is precisely what could drag it into instability – due to the lack of its influence on the situation. Israel must initiate and respond to events, with the understanding that this entails significant challenges but also great opportunities.

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