



## THE GOLAN HEIGHTS QUESTION AND SYRIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS: ISRAELI POLICY AS A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT

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### **Annotation**

This article examines the role of the Golan Heights issue in Syria's domestic and foreign policy, analyzing its military-strategic, political, and geopolitical significance. The territory, captured by Israel during the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, is regarded as one of the fundamental principles underpinning Syria's territorial integrity and national security doctrine. The article highlights the water resources of the Golan Heights, its military advantages, the history of inter-state negotiations, and the implications of the United States' 2019 political decision for regional stability. It also demonstrates how the Syrian civil war, the involvement of international powers, and Israel's strategy aimed at solidifying its control over the area have contributed to the increasing complexity of the Golan issue.

**Keywords:** *Golan Heights, Syria, Israel, territorial conflicts, Arab–Israeli War, national security, sovereignty, geopolitics, water resources, U.S. policy, 2019 decision, Middle East.*

### **Introduction**

The Golan Heights issue holds a distinctive place in Syria's domestic political agenda. It constitutes not only a matter of restoring territorial integrity but also a



central element shaping the country's national unity and security strategy. From a military-strategic standpoint, the Golan Heights represent the most critical point on Syria's north-western front. Its loss has been interpreted not merely as a territorial setback but also as a blow to the state's security doctrine. Consequently, within the Syrian political elite, the Golan question has been elevated to the level of a "non-negotiable" national interest and has long remained an inseparable component of every government program.

Located in the south-western part of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Golan Heights were occupied by Israel on 5 June 1967 during the Arab–Israeli War. The territory covers a total area of 1,860 km<sup>2</sup>, amounting to approximately 1 percent of Syria's overall land area. Nearly 1,500 km<sup>2</sup> of this territory remains under Israeli control today.

Before the 1967 occupation and the outbreak of hostilities, more than 140,000 Syrians resided in the Golan Heights. As a result of the conflict, the majority of them were forced to abandon their homes. Despite the passage of nearly four decades, they have still been unable to return. Today, the total number of such displaced persons exceeds 500,000.

The political crises, civil war, and external interventions that emerged after 2011 rendered the issue even more complex. The Syrian government's search for legitimacy, competition among internal political groups, and the interests of international actors contributed to shifts in positions concerning the Golan. Its water resources, its value as a military-strategic high ground, and its function within Israel's national security doctrine make it a pivotal element in the geopolitical balance of the Middle East.

For Israel as well, the Golan Heights serve as a significant strategic asset: they provide a buffer against regional threats, ensure the preservation of military superiority, reinforce domestic political legitimacy, and function as an instrument of



diplomatic pressure. In recent years, maintaining firm control over the Golan has become one of Israel's principal policy priorities. The United States' 2019 recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the territory elevated the issue to a new geopolitical stage and further intensified Syrian–Israeli relations.

### **Main Body**

The Golan Heights constitute one of the most strategically important territories in the Middle East and remain at the center of Syria's domestic and foreign political agenda. Captured by Israel during the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, the area continues to exert a direct influence on Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability.

The war took place from 5 to 10 June 1967 between Israel and a coalition consisting of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

In a short period, Israel seized the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. After achieving its main objectives against Egypt and Jordan by 6–8 June, Israel redirected its attention to the Syrian front. On the morning of 9 June, Israeli forces launched a large-scale offensive against the Golan Heights.

A ceasefire was declared through UN mediation on 10 June, marking the end of the Six-Day War. As a result, Israel occupied approximately 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> of Syrian territory—constituting the majority of the Golan Heights.

In the following years, the Golan Heights reemerged as a focal point of conflict during the 1973 Yom Kippur (October) War. Together with Egypt, Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel and temporarily regained parts of the Golan in the initial days of the conflict. However, Israel's counteroffensive restored its control over the highlands and brought its forces close to Damascus. After the war, peace negotiations began with U.S. and Soviet mediation. In 1974, Syria and Israel signed



the Disengagement Agreement, under which the two sides withdrew their forces to designated lines and established a demilitarized zone monitored by UN peacekeeping forces. Although Syria maintained its legal claim to sovereignty over the Golan, Israel continued to exercise de facto control.

In 1991, the Madrid Peace Conference initiated a new phase of negotiations between Syria and Israel. The return of the Golan Heights constituted the central issue of these talks. According to Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to Washington, “The Syrian leadership categorically insisted that it would not sign a peace treaty with Israel without the complete restoration of the Golan within the 1967 borders—this was a principled demand for Damascus.”

In 2008, Turkish mediation briefly revived negotiations between Israel and Syria. However, the outbreak of the Gaza War abruptly interrupted the process. By the 2010s, the eruption of the Syrian civil war and the country’s deepening political crisis rendered direct negotiations between Damascus and Tel Aviv impossible.

Although the Syrian civil war began in 2011, the situation along the Israeli–Syrian border in the Golan region initially remained relatively calm. While the Assad government focused its resources on combating domestic opposition, Israel adopted a policy of avoiding direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. In 2018, with Russian support, the Syrian army recaptured the south-western regions (Daraa and Quneitra), thereby reestablishing its presence along the Syrian side of the Golan frontier.

In March 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that the time had come to recognize the Golan Heights as sovereign Israeli territory. This declaration provided substantial domestic political support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but provoked significant criticism on the international stage. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscored that the “annexed portion of the Golan is unquestionably Syrian territory,” describing the U.S. decision as a disregard for international law. The European Union and the United Nations also affirmed that the



status of the Golan had not changed. Thus, according to international law, the Golan Heights continue to be classified as occupied Syrian territory, and their future status remains one of the most pressing unresolved issues in Syrian–Israeli relations.

Another critical factor for Israel is the Golan’s water and natural resources. The region partially encompasses the Yarmouk River and the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret) basin. Springs and rainwater streams originating in the Golan contribute significantly to Israel’s water supply, providing an estimated one-third of its drinking and irrigation water. Both Israel and Syria highly value the Golan’s water sources and fertile lands as vital national assets. Consequently, the loss of control over this region would constitute not only a military setback for Israel but also an economic one.

As a tool influencing Syria’s domestic politics, Israel’s firm control over the Golan and its uncompromising policy indirectly affect political dynamics within Syria. Israel employs its military superiority as a means of pressure, as Damascus is fully aware that any attempt to reclaim the Golan through military action would immediately provoke a powerful Israeli response.

Israel has also undertaken diplomatic efforts to secure international recognition of its control over the Golan. Trump’s 2019 decision may be regarded as the result of Israeli diplomacy and lobbying. Israeli leaders view this development as a significant geopolitical achievement. According to Professor Fawaz Gerges, “Trump’s move condemned Israel to a conflict with its Arab neighbors that will persist for decades. It drove the final nail into the peace process—there is nothing left worth negotiating.” Indeed, the unilateral U.S. decision further diminished prospects for a Syrian–Israeli settlement and pushed Damascus closer to Tehran and Hezbollah.

The Golan Heights issue remains a symbolic reminder that the Arab–Israeli conflict is far from resolved. For Israel, the region represents an essential guarantee



of military security and a source of domestic legitimacy; for Syria, it represents a lost homeland, a matter of national pride, and a symbol of historical justice. Although Syrian society, exhausted by civil war, is focused on overcoming internal crises, the Golan remains an open wound in the national political consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

The Golan Heights issue remains one of the most complex and enduring problems in Syrian–Israeli relations, situated at the core of regional geopolitical balance. The loss of the region inflicted a serious blow to Syria’s national pride and security system, making it a strategic priority for every Syrian government. Israel’s policy of consolidating its control over the area, competition for water and natural resources, and the international political support it receives—particularly the United States’ 2019 decision—have further complicated the conflict and reduced the prospects for meaningful peace negotiations.

For Syria, the Golan represents lost territory, historical justice, and national unity; for Israel, it is a crucial element of military security. Therefore, resolving the issue is essential not only for the two states but also for the broader stability of the Middle East. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the Golan Heights conflict remains unresolved and that its settlement is possible only through adherence to international law, diplomatic negotiations, and the reconciliation of regional interests.

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