



PROFILE OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT : SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

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PROFILE SUMMARY

Syria: no political solution in sight for Golan's displaced

Little international attention has been paid to the tens of thousands of Syrian Arabs displaced from the Golan Heights more than 38 years ago. They left their homes in disputed circumstances during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan Heights, a strategic narrow stretch of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The area was formally annexed by Israel in 1981. The annexation was not recognised internationally. The Syrian government estimates that around 305,000 people remain displaced today, a figure which includes the descendants of those displaced since 1967. Most of the internally displaced population have settled in the suburbs of Damascus and in Sweida, in the south of the country.

Return for the majority of the internally displaced has been impossible in the absence of an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement. Despite recent attempts to enter into dialogue by both Israel and Syria, formal peace talks have not resumed since 2000. Golan's displaced continue to face great difficulties in exercising their right to family life. Contact between tens of thousands of Syrian residents living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members remains nearly impossible, with the exception of specific cases, facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In a positive development in 2005 the government of Syria indicated that it may rebuild the town of Quneitra which was regained by Syria in 1974 but never rebuilt. In March 2005, the Syrian Prime Minister laid the foundation stones for the rebuilding of two villages near Quneitra that were destroyed in the 1967 war. It is estimated that some 50,000 people displaced from the town may be able to return if it is reconstructed.

Background and main causes

Displacement occurred during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan Heights, a strategic narrow stretch of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The exact circumstances are subject to controversy, and Syrian and Israeli accounts differ. According to the Syrian government, Israeli forces physically expelled the inhabitants of the Golan and destroyed villages and farms, while the Israeli government maintains that these people fled following reports of violence (UN Human Rights Committee, 25 August 2000; Arnold, 1 February 2000). The Syrian government estimates that there were about 250 villages and farms and 160,000 Syrian inhabitants in 1967. Today five of these villages are still inhabited, with a population of 25,000 Syrians (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, para. 10; UNCHR, 16 March 2003).

Following the 1967 war, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242 calling for the Israeli armed forces' withdrawal from the occupied territories and for the respect and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of every state in the area (UNSC, 22 November 1967). Conflict broke out again in 1973 and Syria attempted to regain the Golan Heights, but failed. The 1973 war prompted the Security Council to adopt Resolution 338 urging Israel on the one side and Syria and Egypt on the other to agree to a ceasefire (UNSC, 22 October 1973).

An Israeli-Syrian ceasefire agreement was signed in 1974 ("Agreement on Disengagement"), which also allowed Syria to regain Quneitra, an area in the Golan Heights emptied of its 50,000 inhabitants and left in ruins by the Israeli army (Schneider, 8 May 2001; Khawaja, M 2002). The agreement also provided for a UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to maintain the ceasefire along the UN demarcation line which separates the occupied Golan from the remaining Syrian territory (UNSC Resolution 350 (1974)). There have been no major security incidents, yet the UN Secretary-General has renewed the mandate of UNDOF every six months given the absence of a Middle East peace agreement (See UNSC, 7 December 2004 and UNSC Resolution 338 (1974)).

Since December 1981, the Golan Heights have been annexed and administered under Israeli law. Despite this fact, people displaced from the Golan are considered internally displaced people (IDPs) since the demarcation line between the Israeli-occupied Golan and Syria is not an internationally recognised border. In 1981, the Security Council found that “the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan was null and void and without international legal effect” (UNSC Resolution 497, 17 December 1981). The UN has since reaffirmed this principle on numerous occasions and has regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced to return to their former homes and repossess their properties (UNCHR, 15 April 2004). The displaced living in Syria have much less clear legal status than those who were able to remain within the occupied Golan, who are protected under the Fourth Geneva Convention (ICRC, 12 April 2005).

Figures

Reports of the number of people displaced from the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day War vary according to the source. The Syrian government maintains that 130,000 persons were displaced from the Golan as a result of the conflict and that those displaced and their descendants now number 305,660 (Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, October 2004). Israel says that only 70,000 were displaced from the Golan in 1967 (USCR 2002, Dammers 1998, p.189). Most of the displaced have resettled into villages close to the Golan. The majority are living in Jermana, a suburb of Damascus and in Sweida, in the south of Syria.

Prospects of return

Return of the displaced population to the Golan cannot be envisaged without a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. However, identifying the terms of a peace treaty is not only linked to the return of the Golan’s original inhabitants but also involves finding solutions to key issues including disputed boundaries, access to water resources, security and the normalisation of bilateral relations (ICG, 16 July 2002).

At the end of 2003 and during 2004, there was some hope that peace discussions would reopen following calls by the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, but negotiations did not materialise (ICG, 11 February 2004; The Guardian, 8 May 2003). Syrian-Israeli negotiations had broken down in January 2000 when previous Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered to return the Golan Heights to Syria in accordance with its pre-1967 border. However, the government of Syria has held to an unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 line, which would ensure its access to the Sea of Galilee (MEMRI, 23 Jan 2000; The Guardian, 8 May 2003, 17 July 2003). In turn, Israel also wishes to control access to the Sea of Galilee, and wants its security concerns addressed before agreeing to withdraw (Ben-Nahum Yonatan, 19 Dec 1995; MEMRI, 24 March 2000). Returning the Golan Heights would also mean that Israel would have to dismantle its settlements in the area (BBC, 10 October 2004; BBC, 31 December 2003). Some analysts suggest that increasing US pressure on Syria along with the fall of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq may lead Syria to compromise its position. International political and economic pressure on Syria, mainly from the United States, increased in 2004 and 2005 based on allegations that the Syrian government was supporting rebel groups in Lebanon and Iraq, its purported efforts to develop chemical and biological weapons, and its military presence in Lebanon (HRW, 13 January 2005; ICG, 11 February 2004).

Prospects for the eventual rehabilitation of the Golan Heights, property repossession, and return of the displaced population are also complicated by the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in the area (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, p.3; BBC News, 31 December 2003; “Arutz 7”, 11 December 2002). In 2004, Israel’s Ministerial Committee on Settlement Affairs announced a decision to double investments in the Golan, including the construction of nine new settlements (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.91; UNECSO, 7 June 2004; UNHRC, 19 October 2004). Although figures are not consistent, reports suggest that there are some 40 Israeli settlements with more than 15,000 Israelis living in the area. A public opinion poll in January 2004 suggests that a majority of Israelis opposed plans to hand back the Golan to Syria (BBC News, 10 October 2004).

In a positive development, some IDPs may be able to return in the foreseeable future to the Quneitra area which borders the occupied Golan. In mid-March, Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri laid the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two villages near Quneitra that were destroyed in the 1967 war. The prime minister also inaugurated a new hospital in Quneitra. The inhabitants of Quneitra, estimated at 50,000 people, were forced to flee during the 1967 war when the town was destroyed by Israeli forces. Although Syria regained control of the area in 1974, until recently the government had made little effort to rebuild Quneitra, keeping the ruins as a memento of the Israeli incursion and ongoing occupation of the remaining Golan Heights (Syria Today, March 2005; IHT, 23 October 2004). With regard to possible return, more than 100 people have approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with legal claims to ownership of land and buildings in Quneitra (ICRC, 21 March 2005).

Living conditions of the internally displaced

There is little available information on the living conditions of the internally displaced in Syria. They are apparently well treated by the Syrian government, and according to an American journalist who interviewed some of them in 2000 in 'new Bteha' – a village mirroring the old Bteha in the Golan – the displaced are given priority for public service jobs and university places by the government (Fecci, June 2000, Khawaja, M 2002). However, the country has been under a general “state of emergency” since 1963, under which there have been widespread restrictions of civil and political rights (HRW, 13 January 2005; AI, 8 March 2004).

An ongoing pressing human rights issue for the displaced is separation from their families. It continues to be almost impossible for most of Golan’s IDPs to exercise their right to respect for family life. Family visits were authorised by the Israeli authorities until 1992. Since then, contact between tens of thousands of Syrians living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members is strictly restricted. There have been a few exceptions, including students, religious pilgrims and brides who were able to cross the separation line, under the auspices of the ICRC (ICRC, 21 March 2005 and 28 June 2004; Syria Today, 1 January 2005; UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, Sect. B).

International response

The UN, and specifically the UN Commission on Human Rights, has regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced to return to their former homes and repossess their properties. In 2004, for example, the Commission adopted a resolution emphasising that the displaced population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties. It also reaffirmed the illegality of Israel’s annexation of the territory in 1981 and called on Israel to refrain from “changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan” (UNCHR, 15 April 2004).

The UN General Assembly has also established a “Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories” (UNGA Resolution 2443 (XXIII) 1968). The mandate of the Committee includes reporting to the Human Rights Commission on the human rights of Golan’s IDPs, or “persons normally resident in the areas under occupation but who had left those areas because of hostilities” (See e.g. UNGA 59/33, 31 January 2005 and UNGA 59/125, 25 January 2005). However, since its establishment, the Committee has been denied access to the Golan, as well as cooperation from the Israeli government (UN Special Committee, 25 May 2004).

No UN agency has adopted a role in monitoring or providing assistance to the displaced in Syria. A number of UN agencies are present in Syria, mainly operating under a development framework adopted in 2001. The UN Development Assistance Framework notes the need for UN support in the event of the reintegration of the occupied areas (UN, 2001; UN Syria Office of the Resident Coordinator, December

2000). However, given the lack of a peace agreement, plans to support the return of the displaced population and rehabilitation of the Golan Heights have not been developed.

The ICRC is the only international organisation assisting the displaced, though in many cases it is only able to do so minimally. It has operated in Syria since 1967, to restore family links that have been broken by Israel's occupation (ICRC, 28 June 2004; Arabic News, 14 November 2002; ICRC, 19 June 2003).

(Updated April 2005)

CAUSES AND BACKGROUND

General

Israeli and Syrian views on events leading to internal displacement in Syria in 1967

- The Israeli point of view is that prior to 1967 Syria used fortifications on the Golan Heights to shell civilians and to launch terrorist attacks
- The Syrian government sees these accusations as excuses for Israel to build up forces against its Arab neighbours
- The Jerusalem Post describes the new Syrian government in 1966 as adopting extreme anti-Israeli policies
- The Syrian government points out that Israel started the war just moments after designating a new Minister of Defence

"The Golan Heights became part of the French mandate of Syria following World War I (1914-1918), and the region was later passed to independent Syria. After the founding of Israel in 1948, Israelis started a number of *kibbutzim*, or farming cooperatives, in northern Israel near the Syrian border. Syrians fired on the settlements from fortified posts on the western ridge of the Golan. The dispute that ensued over the strategically important region was one of the factors that precipitated the Six-Day War of 1967." (Encarta 2000)

Points of view reflecting the Israeli position

National Council for the Golan (Israeli organization): "After the War of Independence (1948), the Syrians built extensive fortifications on the [Golan] Heights. They used these to systematically shell civilian targets in Israel and to launch terrorist attacks; 140 Israelis were killed and many more injured as a result of these actions between 1948 and 1967." (National Council for the Golan December 1997, "History")

The Jewish Student Online Research Center (American organization): "From 1948-67, when Syria controlled the Golan Heights, it used the area as a military stronghold from which its troops randomly sniped at Israeli civilians in the Huleh Valleh below, forcing children living in kibbutzim to sleep in bomb shelters. In addition, many roads in northern Israel could be crossed only after probing by mine-detection vehicles." (Bard 2001)

The Jerusalem Post: "Despite Syria standing aside initially in the Six Day War and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Shara's revisionism notwithstanding, many historians agree that Syria more than any other actor was responsible for the chain of events that dragged the region into the Six Day War. Indeed, shortly after the secular, ostensibly socialist Ba'ath party took power in March 1963, Damascus began urging the Arab world to make war over Israel's project to divert Jordan River water to the south of the country, correctly realizing that this project would have a major effect on the young Jewish state's viability.

A February 1966 coup engineered by Hafez Assad and others brought to power a new Ba'ath regime in Damascus which adopted 'the most extreme anti-Israel policy since the beginning of the Syrian-Israeli conflict,' writes Hebrew University expert Moshe Maoz, in his book *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking*. 'This regime had the narrowest socio-political base and the most tenuous public legitimacy in modern Syrian history,' Maoz writes, and warmongering against Israel was one way to mask its domestic instability.

The new regime called for a 'people's war of liberation' to take the form of terror attacks against Israel; 'when in response to the people's war of liberation, Israel will be forced to begin a conventional war.' According to the Syrian leadership's strategy quoted by Maoz, the Arab armies would join the 'defensive' struggle for Israel's liquidation. As June 1967 approached, things seemed to be going according to plan. Between February 1966 and May 1967, the Syrian regime initiated 177 border skirmishes and 75 Palestinian terror attacks within Israel, actions painstakingly detailed in recently declassified documents of the British and American governments. The main theater of impending war, however, had by April 1967 shifted to the Egyptian front. When Israel downed six Syrian MiGs, Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser refused to abide by a 1966 mutual defense treaty to send military support to Damascus. His position changed a month later in response to baseless Syrian and Russian reports that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border for an apparently offensive attack. His anti-Israel credentials under fire in the Arab world, on May 14, Nasser began moving troops into the Sinai desert. Days later he demanded the removal of United Nations peacekeeping troops and closed the Straits of Tiran to Israel-bound shipping, effectively blockading the port of Eilat. Jordan and Iraq joined the mutual defense pacts. An Arab-Israeli war had now become inevitable. " (Arnold 1 February 2000)

According to the Syrian National Information Center website dedicated to the Golan

"Up to 1967, the Israeli military forces have been steadily building up huge forces to aggressively strike against its Arab neighbours. For it aimed at weakening the military and economic structures of its Arab neighbours, and to eventually occupy the Arab territories. By this it will have achieved the Zionist 'greedily' aims. It found different excuses for achieving these aims including; the increasing 'Fidauyee' [Fedayeen] operations against Israel on the borders, and the exploiting of the head waters of the Jordan river. [...]

Israel escalated its provocative actions against Syria by shelling the means and equipment working in the Arab project of transferring the Jordan River tributaries. Attacking the Syrian farmers and increasing the impact of challenges against the Syrian Forces led to more vehement clashes that reached their peak by the air battle of April 7, 1967. News were spreading of Israeli military arrangements; particularly its deploying a force of 11-13 brigades along the Syrian Borders. Motivated by such news, Egypt met its obligations under the Syrian-Egyptian Common Defense Accord signed on November 4, 1966, and delegated its Chief-of-Staff, Lt. General Mohammed Fozi, to Damascus to study the matter on the ground and coordinate the cooperation. When he returned to Cairo, Egypt declared utmost mobilization, and the Egyptian Forces were paraded on May 15, 1967 in a military march through Cairo streets heading for Sinai. On May 16, 1967 the Egyptian Command-in-Chief requested the UNDOF [sic] [in fact, UNEF, United Nations Disengagement Observer Force] Commander-in-Chief in Sinai to withdraw his forces. After hasty consultations, the UN Secretary General, U. Thant, decided to meet Egypt's request and ordered such forces withdrawal on May 19, 1967. President Nasser announced on May 23, 1967 the blocking of the Straits of Tiras [Straits of Tiran] in the face of Israeli navigation, removing thereby the last trace of the 1956-Triple Aggression against Egypt. The blocking of the Traits [sic] was considered by Israel as a declaration of war. It expedited the arrangements to launch the aggression taking for granted the USA support to its plan. The UN Secretary General exerted efforts in Cairo and Tel Aviv to limit the deterioration. It was clear that the ghost of war was dominant. Syrian and Egyptian Forces began heading for the battle fronts. On the other side Israel was taking many measures that revealed the intentions of the Zionist leaders to wage aggression. The Cabinet was re-shuffled and General Moshe Dayan was brought in to as War Minister. It was only a few hours later that the Israeli forces initiated the war." (Syrian National Information Center 2001)

Displacement of majority of inhabitants of Golan Heights by the end of Six-Day war in June 1967

- Armed conflict between Israel and the Arab states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria ended with Israel's conquest of the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights
- According to the Jerusalem Post, Israel did not plan the conquest of the Golan Heights, but acted mostly in reaction to Syrian attacks against upper Galilee residents

- Most of the population of the Golan was displaced by the end of the war and the town of Kuneitra became a ghost town

"In 1967 Israel occupied much of the Jawlan district of the country, commonly if somewhat misleadingly referred to as the 'Golan heights', displacing almost all the population, including the inhabitants of the large town of Quneitra." (Dammers 1998, p.189)

"Except for some Druze villagers who stayed behind, most of the Syrian population of the Golan Heights fled in 1967." (USCR 2000, p.204)

"1967 May: Mobilizing of forces on both Arab and Israeli sides of the borders.

June 5: Israel attacks Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Great victories for Israel are achieved immediately. Egyptian aircrafts are wiped out after effective bombing of air strips.

June 7: The strategically important Egyptian Sharm el Sheikh is captured.

— Jordan surrenders to Israel, after having lost East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

June 8: The entire Sinai comes under Israeli control. Later that evening, Israeli fighting on the Egyptian front ceased.

June 10: Syria surrenders, after seeing Golan Heights come under Israeli control." (Encyclopaedia of the Orient 2001)

According to the Jerusalem Post:

"Anyone familiar with Syria's shelling of Israeli civilians below the Golan Heights in the years before the Six Day War might assume that conquering the commanding plateau was a prime Israeli objective when war broke out in June 1967.

In fact, but for a startling change of heart toward the end of the war by defense minister Moshe Dayan - who feared Soviet involvement if he attacked but may have feared even more the judgment of history if he didn't - Israel would have ended the war with Syria still in control of the strategic plateau, leaving the Golan over Israelis' heads as a 'curse for generations to come.'

One of the factors influencing the Israel government decision to take the heights was an unprecedented appeal by a delegation of Upper Galilee residents directly to prime minister Levi Eshkol's war cabinet. [...] Eshkol responded that the delegation's appeal would weigh heavily in the government's decision to take on the Syrians.

[...]

When war began on June 5, the heavy initial fighting was in the Sinai and, when Jordan ignored Israeli pleas to stay out of the conflict, on the eastern front. The Syrian front was relatively quiet. Syrian planes attempted to bomb the Haifa Oil Refineries and targets in Galilee; massive Israeli retaliation destroyed the bulk of the Syrian air force on the ground. Damascus Radio, nonetheless, announced stunning military successes, such as the downing of 54 Israeli planes and the conquest of several Israeli settlements. Meanwhile, by the end of the first day of fighting, Ba'ath leaders were receiving reports of the devastating blows being suffered by Egyptian and Jordanian forces. The Syrians began the morning of June 6 with an intense barrage on Israeli settlements at the foot of the Golan, and before 8 a.m. had invaded and attacked both She'ar Yashuv and Tel Dan. In both cases they were repulsed by local paramilitary forces, but Elazar believed that the Syrians, aware of Israel's purely defensive posture in the north, were sending out probes before a much larger attack. Instead, Syrian gunners kept up a heavy artillery barrage on the settlements that continued almost unabated through June 8. With the IDF pursuing the war with great efficiency on its other fronts, pressure began building on the Israeli leadership to storm the Golan Heights. [...] Dayan's order concerning the Syrian front was quite explicit: do not get involved in a war with the Syrian Army. [...] While the rest of the country could begin celebrating after the first day or two of the war, residents of the northern settlements remained in their bunkers under the constant artillery barrage. A lobbying campaign by settlement residents, humorously dubbed the 'Galilee Rebellion,' now began in an attempt to sway Dayan, Eshkol and chief of General Staff Yitzhak Rabin to counterattack. [...] Much of the cabinet

supported an attack to drive the Syrians back from the Golan, [...]. Pockets of resistance remained, including National Religious Party ministers who feared world reaction. [...] A cabinet meeting of June 7 ended with orders for no attack on the Golan, but gave Dayan and Eshkol the power to change course if circumstances warranted. By the morning of June 8 it was clear that the Jordanian and Egyptian armies had been routed. Israeli tanks began to rumble north from Samaria toward the Golan. [...]

No one knows precisely what happened between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. the following day to make Dayan change his mind and order Northern Command to take the Golan Heights. Dayan himself gives several factors. At about 3 a.m., Nasser suddenly expressed his willingness to accept a cease-fire, and urged the Syrians to do the same. Shortly after that, military intelligence reported that Kuneitra, the major Syrian city on the Golan, had been abandoned. At 4:45 a.m., the commander of the southern front cabled Dayan with the information that IDF forces were deployed on the Suez Canal and Red Sea. Not only was there no need for the IDF to fight simultaneously on northern and southern fronts, Dayan realized, but the window of opportunity to confront Syria was closing fast. [...] By 11:30 a.m., after Israeli planes had softened up Syrian defenses and Israeli engineers had cleared a path through the mine fields, IDF tanks were making their way up the steep escarpment. The battle then became a race against time, as the Syrian defenses folded quickly and the UN Security Council sought to impose a cease-fire deadline.

The Israelis - whose lack of forethought about conquering the heights is illustrated by the fact that much of their battle plan was improvised on the fly - meanwhile sought a line on top of the heights that would be defensible. With the Soviet Union issuing grave threats through the Americans, Dayan ordered land operations to cease by 8 a.m. on June 10. That morning, however, Radio Damascus issued the false report that Kuneitra had fallen to Israeli forces, perhaps a desperate bid to force an intervention by the Soviets, who might have feared for the safety of Damascus. In any case, the report prompted Syrian forces to flee in panic back toward Damascus, leaving Kuneitra indeed open for the Israelis. Dayan ordered the army to push on and take Kuneitra, with the final cease-fire taking effect at 6:30 p.m." (Arnold 1 February 2000)

According to the Syrian National Information Center website dedicated to the Golan

"Between 5-8 June, the Israeli forces started attacking. The main attack was launched against the Egyptian Front, and the secondary attack against the Jordanian Front. It then turned its attention to depending itself on the Syrian Front, and was at the same time launching artillery plane attack against the Syrian army posted in the Golan, all the time.

And in the early hours of 8 June, the Israeli leadership rearranged its forces, and intensified its effort against the Syrian front. It mobilized a fighting group consisting of three backing legions. Yet the Israeli forces were really backed by its air forces who fully controlled the sky.

At 12.00 on 9 June, the Enemy forces turned to attack on the Syrian front. Starting off with intensive air fighting, it focused its attack on the Northern Sector of the Syrian front, especially towards : Kafar Salet, and Tal Al- Kilau, and launching backing attacks towards the mid and Southern Sectors of the Front. The Enemy moved quite slowly, and by 9 June had not achieved much. It had penetrated 4-5 km deep and around 2km toward Al-Darbashia, Hadar . This was due to the strong resistance sought out by the Syrian Arab Army who bravely fought despite the difficult circumstances they were going through; especially the full sky control that the enemy had. Very often, the Enemy's Force would withdraw from in front of the Syrian resisting defense, and would turn toward destroying the defending post of the planes and then would move forward once more. [...]

More than once, the Enemy would order its army to cease air sheltering against our courageous detachment. Eventually, the enemy occupied this momentum post and was therefore able to expand the Sector penetrating 10-12 km long, and 5 km deep.

Israel continued attacking on 10 June, despite the UN's ceasefire resolution. New reserved troops moved in from the Jordanian Front, to enter a new round of battle. [...]

The Enemy kept using all kinds of fighting groups and in all directions, and was able on 10 June to reach Al-Talal, North and south of Al-Qunitra city, and Al-Rafied." (Syrian National Information Center 2001)

See also the UN General Assembly Resolution No. 13240 of 29 November 1974 condemning the destruction by Israel of the destruction of the Syrian town of Quneitra [Internet]

Syria regained some of the lost territory in 1974

- In November 1970 Hafez al-Assad, leader of the military wing of the Ba'ath Party, overthrew the President
- Syria and Egypt went to war with Israel on 6 October 1973 to regain the Sinai and the Golan Heights
- Syria and Israel signed a disengagement agreement in May 1974, which enabled Syria to regain the city of Kuneitra in the Golan

"The defeat of the Syrians and Egyptians in the June 1967 war with Israel weakened the radical socialist regime established by the 1966 coup. Conflict developed between a moderate military wing and a more extremist civilian wing of the Ba'ath Party. The 1970 retreat of Syrian forces sent to aid the PLO during the "Black September" hostilities with Jordan reflected this political disagreement within the ruling Ba'ath leadership. On November 13, 1970, Minister of Defense Hafiz al-Asad effected a bloodless military coup, ousting the civilian party leadership and assuming the role of prime minister. (U.S. DOS April 1999, "History")

"1971 March - Assad is elected president for a seven-year term in a plebiscite." (BBC News 19 March 2002)

"The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. [...].

The path leading up to the Yom Kippur war had two major factors. First, there was a failure to resolve territorial disputes arising from the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. These disputes involved the return of the Sinai to Egypt and the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. UN Resolution 242 and Egyptian President Sadat's peace initiative failed to bring peace. Sadat wanted to sign an agreement with Israel provided the Israelis returned all the occupied territories, but Israel refused to withdraw to the pre-1967 armistice lines. Since no progress was being made toward peace, Sadat was convinced that to change things and gain legitimacy at home, he must initiate a war with limited objectives.

The second factor leading up to the war was the assurance Israel's general staff felt that Israel was safe from Arab attack for the indefinite future. Therefore, Israel felt no reason to trade territory for peace. Israel felt this way because of the Israel Defense Force's strength, the disarray of the Arab world, and the large buffer zone around Israel formed by the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. Thus in spite of Sadat's threats of war throughout 1972 and much of 1973, Israel's commanders were unprepared for the October attack of Egypt and Syria. They misinterpreted the buildup of armed forces along the canal as military exercises instead of an attack.

The surprise attack on two fronts from Egypt and Syria began on October 6, 1973, which was Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for the Jewish people. Egypt's forces swiftly crossed the Suez Canal and overran the Bar-Lev line. Syria moved into the Golan Heights and nearly reached the 1967 border with Israel (overlooking the Hula Basin). [...]

The tide of the war began to turn on October 10. The Syrians were pushed back and Israel advanced into Syria proper. The Soviet Union responded by sending airlifts to Damascus and Cairo, which were answered on October 12 and 13 by massive US airlifts to Israel. Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal and surrounded the Egyptian Third Army on October 21.

The war started an international crisis when the Soviet Union responded to a plea from Egypt to save its Third Army by threatening to send troops to assist Egypt. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, went to Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire. The result was UN Resolution 338, an immediate cease-fire that reinstated Resolution 242, which 'aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East'. This cease-fire was broken and again the Soviets threatened to intervene. However, the US pressured Israel into accepting a second cease-fire on October 25, 1973. The war was over, and both Israel and Egypt claimed victory." (North Park University 27 April 1999)

"As a result of the mediation efforts of then U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Syria and Israel achieved a disengagement agreement in May 1974, enabling Syria to recover territory lost in the October war and part of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel since 1967, including Quneitra. The two sides have effectively implemented the agreement." (U.S. DOS April 1999, "Arab-Israeli Relations")

"1975 February - Assad says he's prepared to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel in return for an Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab land." (BBC News 19 March 2002)

For more information on the different UN Resolutions following the 1967 and 1973 events, please check [\[Internal Link\]](#)

14 years after the Six-day War, extension of Israeli law to the Golan Heights (December 1981)

- The Israeli Parliament voted to extend Israeli law to the occupied Golan Heights in 1981
- Prime Minister Begin presented the law by citing Syria's hostility to Israel

"[T]he Israeli Knesset voted to extend Israeli law to the part of the Golan Heights over which Israel retained control. The United Nations Security Council subsequently passed a resolution calling on Israel to rescind this measure." (U.S. DOS April 1999 "Arab-Israeli Relations")

"In presenting the law [to the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset], Prime Minister Begin stated that the time had come to implement the government's policy regarding the Golan Heights citing Syria's implacable hostility to Israel, and the recent deployment of Syrian missiles on Lebanese soil – a provocation of crisis proportions. He reminded the ministers that the Syrian president had recently rejected any ties with Israel, even if the PLO would recognize Israel." (Ariga 2001, "Golan")

Text of the Golan Heights Law of December 14, 1981

"1. The Law, jurisdiction and administration of the state shall apply to the Golan Heights, as described in the Appendix.

2. This Law shall become valid on the day of its passage in the Knesset.

3. The Minister of the Interior shall be charged with the implementation of this Law, and he is entitled, in consultation with the Minister of Justice, to enact regulations for its implementation and to formulate in regulations transitional provisions concerning the continued application of regulations, orders, administrative orders, rights and duties which were in force on the Golan Heights prior to the application of this Law." (Ariga 2001, "Golan")

The population of the Golan now includes Druze, Israeli and Alawite inhabitants (2000)

- Some 18,000 Druze and Alawite people who did not flee in 1967 live in the Golan today
- About 17,000 Israelis have settled in the Golan since 1967

"Today the Golan has a population of about 30,500 (1994 estimate). This number includes about 15,000 Druze, 14,000 Israelis, and 1,500 Alawites. The Druze live in a number of towns and villages, particularly in Majdal Shams, the largest non-Jewish town in the Golan Heights. Much of the Druze and Alawite population is engaged in orchard agriculture, cattle grazing, and wage labor in Israeli communities. The Israelis live in approximately 32 agricultural communities in the southern Golan Heights. Many Israeli army officers stationed at military bases in the Golan Heights have settled their families in the government-planned town of Katzrin." (Encarta 2000)

"This mountainous stretch of land [...] has become home to some 17,000 Israeli settlers and offers Israel a natural strategic buffer to Syria." (BBC 4 January 2000)

There were about 17,000 Druze inhabitants in the Golan Heights as of 1995. (Ben-Dor 1 June 1995)

For a history of the Druze people and beliefs, you can refer to ReligiousTolerance.org [[External link](#)]

No perspective of return for the displaced while Israeli-Syrian negotiations on the Golan are deadlocked (2000)

- Talks between Syria and Israel on the future of the Golan Heights started in December 1999 in the USA but were indefinitely postponed in January 2000
- Syria would only discuss security arrangements after Israel agreed unconditionally to withdraw from the Golan Heights and Israel wanted those arrangements addressed before agreeing to withdraw
- After deadlock in peace talks with Syria, Israel lifted restriction on building in the occupied Golan (2000)

"On December 8, 1999, President Clinton announced that Prime Minister Barak and President al-Asad had agreed to resume Israel-Syria negotiations from the point that they were suspended in January 1996. The talks commenced at a meeting on December 15, 1999, between President Clinton, Prime Minister Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara, followed by talks in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, on January 3-11, 2000.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on January 17 [2000]: 'At the end of the last round, it was agreed that the Israeli-Syrian talks would resume on January 19. Both sides have since been reviewing the status of the talks and the draft working document. Presently, their approaches to the next round differ, and as a result, there is going to be a delay. In the meantime, each side has agreed to send experts to Washington to meet us and provide their comments on the draft.'

There were no breakthroughs at the March 26 meeting between Clinton and Asad in Geneva and it appeared that from the American side at least none were expected." (HRW December 2000, "International Community")

"[N]egotiations remained deadlocked at year's end: Syria maintained that it would only discuss security arrangements and other issues after Israel agreed unconditionally to withdraw from the Golan Heights:

Israel said it would agree to relinquish the Golan only if it could first be satisfied that a peace deal would adequately provide for security and address other issues, such as access to water." (USCR 2000, p.203)

"Three different lines marked the boundary between Syria and Israel before the Six Day War: the international border from the Mandate period, the armistice line, and the deployment of forces line on 4 June 1967, from which the Six Day War opened. The Israeli politicians who talk about a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights such as ministers Shimon Peres, Yossi Sarid, and Shulamit Aloni are proposing a withdrawal to the international border, the easternmost of the three lines, and the best for Israel. The armistice line is the westernmost, and the most comfortable for the Syrians; the June 4 line passes between them, and leaves in Syrian hands areas they seized control of by force during the 1950's." (Ben-Nahum 19 Dec 1995)

Syrian government's reasons for breaking third round of negotiations

"Interviews with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faruq Al-Shara, in the Lebanese daily Al-Safir on January 19 [...] gave detailed accounts of the Syrian reasons for breaking the third round of negotiations in the U.S. and presented Syrian complaints against Israel and the U.S.: [...]

'We were waiting for the Americans to inform us that the Israeli side was ready to enter into negotiations on... [Israeli] acceptance of the principle of withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 line,' Foreign Minister Al-Shara stated. 'Without this commitment, our return to the talks would be in vain. We are not fans of negotiating for the sake of negotiating. We bore Barak's procrastination and were patient with his unending attempts to delay convening the Borders Committee and the discussion of the withdrawal for a long time. The American host hinted to us that we must give him more time and that we must understand his sensitive domestic situation.'

'[However], the Israeli side did not show up for the first meeting of the Borders Committee. When they [finally] showed up, on the last day of the talks, it became totally clear to us that they came to polemicize and evade the heart of the matter. We informed the Americans very clearly... that we might not return [to the US to resume the negotiations] if we did not sense a serious Israeli intention to enter into the central issue: The withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 line. There will be no resumption of the negotiations without an Israeli confirmation of the principle of withdrawal. We assumed that the Americans had received such a commitment...' (MEMRI 23 January 2000)

Note: "[U]nlike the 1923 Anglo-French international border, which is 10 meters back from the northeast shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, the 1967 line touches the water." (Gold 7 January 2000)

Amoz Oz, Prominent Peace Camp Israeli Intellectual's position (reported by Israeli paper Ha'Aretz, March 2000)

"Israel must insist on two conditions. First, the basis for the agreement will be the international [1923] border. My rejection of the June 4 [1967] line is based on international law which deems illegal the acquisition of territory by force. For us to agree to the June 4 line would mean to accept that Syria will take lands it acquired by force [in 1948] in contravention of international law. It is an absurdity that cries to the heavens that the Syrians demand that international law must apply against Israel but not to Syria. I object to the Syrians annexing a single meter of non-Syrian territory...'

'[The second demand is that] Israel's withdrawal to the international border will only occur if there is a genuine expression of change in Syria's attitude toward Israel. To this end I demand from Syria not just demilitarization arrangements, security and diplomatic relations but also to call a meeting of the Arab League and pass a resolution declaring that with the signing of a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement, the armed conflict between the Arabs and Israel is over...that remaining disagreements, for example over Jerusalem, the Palestine issue and the refugees, will be settled by peaceful means." (MEMRI 24 March 2000)

No improvement of relations between Syria and Israel as of mid-2002

- Early 2001 new Syrian President affirmed that the Syrian position on the Golan Heights was the same as his father's
- In May 2001, Pope John Paul II visited the remains of the town of Kuneitra
- In 2002, reports say that Syria is maintaining pressure on Israel through the Lebanese guerrilla movement Hezbollah

"**2000** June - Assad dies and is succeeded by his son, Bashar, soon afterwards." (BBC News 19 March 2002)

In an interview given by Syrian President Bashar Assad, to the London daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, President "Bashar clear stated that the Syrian position on the Golan Heights is the same as his father's: 'I have not taken anything out nor have I not added anything. President Hafez Assad did not give in, and neither shall we; neither today nor in the future.' President Bashar made the same demands his father made: Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 line, including the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, as a prerequisite for discussions on any other issue - such as water. Peace with Israel, Bashar stressed, must be 'comprehensive,' thereby ruling out any possibility for peaceful relations between Syria and Israel before the Palestinian problem is solved." (MEMRI 16 February 2001)

2001 May- "Pope John Paul II, visiting the war-ravaged remains of this Golan Heights ghost town [ie Kuneitra], called today for a 'conversion of heart' among all parties in the Middle East conflict to bring peace to a region so frequently beset by war." (Schneider 8 May 2001)

2002- "Fears are growing of a new military front opening in the Middle East, across Israel's northern border with Lebanon.

Such a development would turn the conflict into a more dangerous regional war, probably drawing in both Lebanon and Syria, and perhaps other nations.

In recent days, guerrillas of the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah movement have increased their sporadic attacks on Israeli positions across a disputed area of the border.[...]

Most Lebanese, including their own government, desperately want to avoid their country being sucked into the conflict.

However, Lebanon is effectively controlled by its larger neighbour Syria, which along with Iran sponsors Hezbollah.

Damascus is frustrated with Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza, and also yearns for Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights - a vast Syrian mountain plateau occupied since 1967.

Syria has long allowed Hezbollah to launch small cross-border attacks to maintain "military pressure".

However, analysts believe the ferocity of the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians in recent weeks has prompted Syria to let Hezbollah off the leash.[...]

Syria is under international pressure to rein in Hezbollah.

Since January, Syria has held a two-year seat on the 15-member UN Security Council, and this is being used as a channel to apply diplomatic pressure.

Moderate Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan will also use their influence to try and curb Hezbollah's attacks." (BBC News 3 April 2002)

Syria excluded from Middle East peace processes (2003)

- Syria has questioned its exclusion from peace negotiations given that a comprehensive path to peace in the Middle East is desired

"Since the signing of the Oslo accord in 1993, Syria has had no practical presence and has not even touched the Palestinian path in the peace process. Its absence from the Sharm Al-Sheikh summit, therefore, was only natural. The question is not whether there is [a Syrian] interest [in participating in the summit], but whether or not [Syria] is connected to the issue [that was raised at the summit]."

"We have declared that we agree to what the Palestinians agree to. The truth is that since the 'road map' was proposed, and particularly in the last few days, we have heard Palestinian opposition to the 'road map,' not from organizations, but from citizens who spoke to the press. We have much to say about the 'road map,' as well as about Oslo and all other [political] initiatives."

"The question of our participation in the summit was not raised. We heard about it only in the press. The Americans did not ask us to participate or not participate. They did not require Syria's presence, because Syria is irrelevant to the issue and because we do not agree to the proposals..."

"The decisions were reported to us, and we learned that some [of the Arab leaders] raised the issue of the Golan... but the issue is not on the American agenda. I do not know why... Everyone knows that there cannot be peace without Syria, and that raises another question: Why didn't the 'road map' include the Syrian path, if a comprehensive path is desired? The American and European proposal over the last year is based on a comprehensive peace, and they supported the Arab initiative, which promotes all the issues together. The 'road map' was proposed before the war in Iraq with no mention of comprehensive peace or major issues such as refugees, Jerusalem, the borders, or the Arab initiative – which was supported by the international community."

"There are questions about the 'road map' that relate to the [upcoming] elections [in the U.S.] or [the American attempt] to win over the Arab public. Perhaps, bringing Syria and Lebanon into the initiative is meant to give it a comprehensive character that enables it to pass. [But] Syria and Lebanon have no connection to the second and third stages."

"When we adopt the [Palestinian] problem, we do it in accordance with the desire of the Palestinian citizen, whose problem it is. We cannot agree to anything that contradicts it, even if we believe in it, and we cannot oppose anything the Palestinian citizen believes in."

"When we entered the peace process in 1990, we thought there would be one Arab path - Syrian/Lebanese/Palestinian. Oslo separated [the Palestinian path] from the others. Without getting into details, it appeared at the time that Syria [took a stand] against the interests of the Palestinian people. After the start of the *Intifada*, the situation changed, and Syria became an observer. Many Palestinians saw it was not true that [Syria opposes Palestinian interests] and that Syria was right – Oslo gave nothing to the Palestinian citizen. We support the Palestinian citizen, but today his voice is stronger than in the past, because he has discovered that many issues raised in the past can no longer deceive him." (MEMRI, 22 June 2003)

Calls for resumption of peace talks fall flat (2003-2004)

- Both Israeli and Syrian leaders called for resumption of talks during 2003 however peace negotiations did not re-open
- Israel demands that Syria stop funding “terrorist” organisations
- Negotiations broke down in 2000 when then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered a withdrawal to the international border,
- Syria insists on a return to the pre-1967 situation, in which Syria controlled land slightly beyond the international border and reached a part of the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee
- Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is tied in numerous ways to resolution of the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese disputes
- The key issues to be resolved by Israel and Syria in the context of a peace treaty involve the boundary, water, security and normalisation of bilateral relations

“Last month, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called for a resumption of talks on the issue. An early round of discussions broke down three years ago, after Israeli had offered to return part of the Golan to Syria.

[...]

The Israeli Army is urging the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to heed Syria's call to resume peace negotiations. The influential Finance Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, says it's in Israel's interest to take advantage of the opportunity.

[...]

The Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert says that if Syria wants peace it must show it with deeds, not just words.

‘First, stop terrorist operations from Damascus and Syria. Damascus is hosting all of the most brutal terrorist organisations.

‘Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and others, are daily engaged in the most brutal terrorist attempts made on Israeli citizens.

[...]

With Saddam Hussein finished as a force in the region and Damascus under US pressure, the Israelis feel they may be in the position to get the sort of deal they want.” (BBC, 11 January 2004)

“In an interview with The New York Times on 1 December 2003, Bashar called for a resumption of peace negotiations with Israel. [1] This was read by some as a signal of new flexibility resulting from new concern and triggered speculation about his motives and how Israel should respond. Whereas some in Israel – including Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, the head of military intelligence and many in the defence establishment – argued that Israel should explore the offer and respond positively if he was sincere, [2] Prime Minister Sharon was far more sceptical.

The intense Israeli speculation regarding the Syrian President’s motives is hard to comprehend. First, Syria for some time has made clear it is prepared to reach peace with Israel, so long as its core demand on withdrawal to the 1967 lines is met. There is, in other words, nothing groundbreaking in Bashar’s remarks. Secondly, Bashar considers a deal will be hard if not impossible so long as Sharon is in power. Thirdly, he believes he has nothing to lose and, under increased international pressure, potentially something to gain by reasserting his willingness to make peace, thus shifting the burden to Israel and the U.S. and buying himself some time. [3] Whether Bashar is sincere is the wrong question: he is prepared to make peace if Israel is willing to satisfy Syria on the Golan but he does not expect Israel will take up his offer. There is nothing to suggest a radical change on Syria’s part.

In short, and for now, there appears to be more noise than substance. For the Syrian leadership, the target audience was not Jerusalem but Washington, and the primary goal was to deflect U.S. pressure. Israel may feel compelled to respond, but it is hard to see the Sharon government agreeing to full withdrawal from the Golan. [4] From Sharon’s view, there is little incentive to engage with Syria before seeing how far

Washington's more aggressive posture toward Damascus may go. [5] The U.S. reaction to Bashar's offer was telling. According to an Israeli official, Washington told Jerusalem. "It's up to you. We're not pushing. If you go forward, we will support you. If you do not, we will support you as well".

In time, however, the Israeli-Syrian conflict will have to be addressed. Otherwise, Damascus will not take the decisive steps on radical Palestinian groups or Hizbollah that are a central priority for both Washington and Jerusalem. Bashar's suggestions should be seized as an opportunity to re-engage and explore ways to resolve the conflict. [6] The U.S. will need to play the central role since Syria probably will resist any bilateral negotiations without a U.S. presence. A Track II initiative negotiated by non-officials – akin to what recently produced the private Geneva Accord between Israelis and Palestinians could generate some momentum fairly quickly since the conflict itself is comparatively straightforward. Syria should thus seriously consider encouraging such an initiative. However, while not dismissing it out of hand, Syrian officials interviewed by ICG reacted coolly. "It's not our style", an adviser to the government put it simply." [7] (ICG, 11 February 2004, pp. 10-11)

"The Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, says that he is ready to reopen peace negotiations with Syria. The move comes three years after talks broke down over the Israeli-occupied Golan heights, and Mr Sharon says that the new talks will be held "without preconditions". Speaking in a taped interview shown on Israeli television, Mr Sharon said: "I am ready to hold negotiations with any Arab nation, including Syria, without preconditions. "The Syrians will, of course, have demands on us, and we will have, for sure, demands on them. We are ready to sit and discuss these issues." Syria has insisted that any negotiations should be based on the outcome of previous peace efforts and UN resolutions. Those terms were rejected by Israel. Previous talks collapsed in January 2000 over the future of the Golan Heights, which was seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war." (The Guardian 8 May 2003)

"Syrian President Bashar Assad told a United Nations diplomat he was ready to renew peace talks with Israel after a three-year standoff, an Israeli newspaper reported today.

The Ma'ariv daily said Mr Assad made the offer during a meeting with UN Middle East envoy Terje Roed-Larsen last week in Damascus.

[...]

But Israel's foreign minister reacted coolly to the report, saying Syria's conditions for the talks were not acceptable.

[...]

A Syrian newspaper that reflects government views said on Saturday that Syria was ready to revive peace talks.

Negotiations broke down three years ago as then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was offering a withdrawal to the international border, returning to Syria the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed in 1981. Syria insisted on a return to the pre-1967 situation, in which Syria controlled land slightly beyond the international border and reached a part of the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, a lake at the foot of the heights. Israel insisted on retaining the entire shore, and talks broke down." (The Guardian 17 July 2003)

ICG suggests Treaty of Peace and outlines key issues for discussion

"Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is tied in numerous ways to resolution of the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese disputes, the other two outstanding conflicts between the Arab world and Israel. Left unresolved, these disputes threaten to destabilise the region as a whole. Cross-border attacks by the Lebanese Hezbollah, supported and influenced by Damascus, risk provoking large-scale Israeli retaliation and, in the event of miscalculation on either side, a possible escalation toward outright warfare. Syria also harbours several radical Palestinian organizations and provides assistance to similar Palestinian groups based in refugee camps in Lebanon and involved in violent attacks against Israelis. The presence of several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees whom Lebanon adamantly refuses to permanently resettle adds

another source of tension. Perpetuation of the Israeli-Syrian conflict means continuation of the alliance between Tehran and Damascus, raising genuine concerns in Israel.

In contrast, a peace agreement with Syria would greatly enhance Israel's strategic posture vis-à-vis countries like Iran and Iraq.

Finally, the prospect of normalisation with the Arab world is a key element in persuading the Israeli public to accept the compromises necessary to reach a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians. But without an Israeli-Syrian settlement, it is hard to imagine that there can be broad Arab reconciliation with Israel, no matter what happens on the Palestinian front. In order for there to be comprehensive reconciliation with the Arab world, in other words, it is a reasonable assumption that there will need to be comprehensive peace deals. In sum, an international initiative on the Middle East holds the greatest chance of success if it tackles the conflict in all of its dimensions – Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese.

(...)

“Of all the conflicts between Israel and her Arab neighbours,” writes Itamar Rabinovich, Israel's former chief negotiator with Syria, “the Syrian-Israeli dispute has traditionally been regarded as the most bitter.”

(...)

“The key issues to be resolved by Israel and Syria in the context of a peace treaty involve the boundary, water, security and normalisation of bilateral relations.” (ICG, 16 July 2002)

Footnotes

[1] In a subsequent meeting with a U.S. congressional delegation, he reportedly went further, stating that it would be a waste of time to start from scratch and ignore all that had been achieved in the past “but if that's what the Israelis want, all right.” Haaretz, 13 January 2004. That position – a sharp departure from Syria's traditional posture – was also stated to ICG by a senior Syrian official in July 2003. However, Suleiman Haddad, chairman of the foreign relations committee in the Syrian parliament later denied any such change of stance: “It's impossible that the Syrian president said the he was ready to negotiate from scratch . . . Syria's only condition is to start from the point that [the talks] stopped at because we had reached major agreements through very intensive negotiations in past years.” Associated Press, 13 January 2004.

[2] Some defence sources believe that “Assad has made a strategic change,” as a result of the transformed regional environment; others argue that “even if it is a tactical move by the Syrian president, Israel must corner him with positive signals”. Quoted in Haaretz, 8 January 2004.

[3] The Foreign Ministry spokeswoman confirmed that there were plans afoot to improve Syria's image in the U.S. “We should have a public relations campaign. But we are not good at this, we have our shortcomings”. ICG interview, Damascus, 1 December 2003. Ratib Salah, head of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, remarked “Syrian officials and non-officials alike often assume that their views do not need any explanation”. ICG interview, 1 December 2003.

[4] An Israeli official explained: “[The Americans] think [Assad] is trying to evade their demands. Any renewal of peace negotiations would grant Syria immunity from American pressure at its most difficult moment.” Ibid.

[5] ICG interview, January 2004. Contradictory statements issued by Israeli government officials in the wake of Bashar's interview concerning a possible plan to double settlements in the Golan in the coming three years hardly signalled an Israeli intention to move positively on the Syrian front. See Yedioth Ahronot, 2 January 2004. Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz explained: “The aim is that Assad will see the thriving and flourishing Israeli Golan from the window of his house”. Yedioth Ahronot, 31 December 2003. Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert countered Katz's statement by saying the government had “no such approved program”. Cited by BBC, 2 January 2004.

[6] Although ICG strongly believes in the merits of a comprehensive approach including the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian tracks, see ICG Middle East Report N°2, Endgame I, Getting to a Comprehensive Arab-Israeli Peace, 16 July 2002, Syrian officials maintain that “the Palestinians have ignored us ever since Oslo. It would look bad [if Syria made a deal before the Palestinians] but if Israel agrees on a clear withdrawal, we will have a deal anyway”. ICG interview with adviser to President Bashar, Damascus, 1 December 2003.

[7] ICG interview, Damascus, December 2003. An advisor to Bashar added: "It would make us look weak. Besides, there is nothing to negotiate. Our demands are clear. We want our rights and so the only thing that should happen is for Israel to withdraw from the Golan". ICG interview, Damascus, December 2003.

Israel announces further expansion of its settlements in the Golan Heights (2004)

- There are around 40 settlements housing 15,700-20,000 Israelis
- Syrian Arabs maintain control over only about six per cent of the original territory under occupation (2004)
- The Israeli Ministerial Committee on Settlement Affairs decided to double its investment in the Golan in 2004
- In 2004, 354 dunums of village land were confiscated and the construction of 9 new settlements and housing units were planned

"According to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Israeli policy of settlement and expropriation of lands continued during the period under review. The population of 44 Jewish settlements, which currently had 20,000 inhabitants, was expected to further increase by 15,000 settlers over the next three years, following a decision by the Israeli authorities on 1 January 2004. The authorization already had been granted for nine new settlements and to extend the existing ones, which implied the expropriation of 350 dunums of land in Mas'adah village, which had been declared a military zone, and the uprooting of 1,800 apple and cherry trees." (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.91)

"Expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights continues unabated. Access to natural resources and social services, in particular schooling, higher education and medical facilities, remains inadequate for the Arab population in the Syrian Golan Heights.

"Israel now maintains some 40 settlements on the Golan Heights, housing 15,700 Israelis.[121]

Israeli authorities have appropriated most of the Syrian Golan land for military use and settlement. According to local sources, the remaining 18,000 indigenous Syrian Arabs maintain control over only about 6 per cent of the original territory under occupation.[122]

In 2004, Israel's Ministerial Committee on Settlement Affairs decided to double the Israeli Government's investment in the Golan, in addition to long-standing funding from various organizations.[123] In 2004, Israeli occupation forces confiscated 354 dunums of village land, and announced the construction of 9 new settlements, and 900 settler-housing units, and the intention of doubling Israel's settler population.[124]

Golan is primarily an agricultural region. However, Syrians are unable to cultivate their land to capacity while Israel prohibits them from building needed water infrastructure and levies heavy taxes on their water use, land and transportation.¹²⁵ Israeli forces incrementally confiscate land and uproot trees, as attested, for example, by the March 2004 uprooting of 50 apples trees in Arab villages by the 'Israel Land Circle'.^[126] (UN ECSC, 7 June 2004)

"On 14 December 1981 Israel annexed the occupied Golan territory and imposed on the population Israeli identity cards and Israeli laws, but the Security Council adopted resolution 497 (1981) which declared this annexation null and void. The occupation forces also used villages and agricultural land to establish 44 settlements since 1967, and are expanding the settlements to accommodate 4,500 new Jewish immigrant families over the next 10 years." (UN HCR, 19 October 2004, p.3)

"Minister of Tourism Yitzhak Levy (Mafdal – National Religious Party) conducted a visit to the Golan Heights, during which he noted the great tourist potential of the area. Levy announced that his office

intends to invest approximately NIS 14 million in developing the Golan Heights in the coming years, in addition to the NIS 25 million which the office already invested there from 1997-2001. In addition to improving the infrastructure of tourist sites, the Ministry of Tourism attributes great importance to developing various educational exhibits. It will, for example, invest NIS 500,000 in a Talmudic exhibit in the Katzrin Park and emphasise the Jewish settlement in the Golan. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Tourism noted that in addition to development plans, the office invested NIS 245,000 in 2002 in support of events in the Golan and an additional NIS 400,000 to encourage visits by Israelis to the Golan.” (Arutz 7, 11 December 2002)

See also HR Commission DRAFT resolution which reaffirms the illegality of Israeli settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan and calls on Israel to halt the building and expansion of such settlements (15 March 2005)[See link below]

“War of words over Golan” and “Golan settlement plan under fire”, BBC, 31 December 2003[Internet]

Footnotes

[121] FMEP, "Settlement database" ...

[122] Jawlan Development Organization, "Facts and figures" (Arabic), available from <http://www.jawlan.org/golan/facts.htm>.

[123] Ha'aretz, 3 April 2004.

[124] Ayman Abu Jabal, "Syria Asks the Security Council to Stop Assaults", al-Safir (20 March 2004)

[125] ILO contribution to report, 16 February 2004.

[126] Ibid.

Mounting international pressure on Syria but Golan forgotten (2005)

- The Syrian government has come under increasing pressure since mid-2004, including economic sanctions imposed by the US under the pretext that Syria supports militant groups in Lebanon and Iraq
- The US and France co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004 which demands that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon
- In 2003, Syria remained generally calm despite the proximity of hostilities in neighbouring Iraq and increased tension with Israel after it carried out its first air strike inside Syrian territory in more than three decades

“In May 2004, following U.S. Congressional passage of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act, President Bush banned exports of goods to Syria and Syrian commercial flights to the United States, and froze assets of ‘certain Syrian individuals and government entities.’ The law, in authorizing such sanctions, cited Syria’s hosting of Palestinian militant groups, its support for Lebanon’s Hizballah organization, its military presence in Lebanon, its purported efforts to develop chemical and biological weapons, and its alleged support for anti-U.S. forces in Iraq.

[...]The European Commission and Syria initialed an Association Agreement in October 2004 which will be signed in early 2005 and then sent to the parliaments of all European Union member states and the European Parliament for ratification. The text stipulates that Syria must implement all international non-proliferation accords and that ‘respect for human rights and democratic principles’ constitutes ‘an essential element of the agreement.’ No E.U. member state appeared at this writing to have called attention to the discrepancy between Syria’s practices and the human rights provision of the agreement.

In September 2004, France joined the U.S. to co-sponsor U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which demands that ‘outside powers’—i.e., Syria—withdraw their military forces from Lebanon.” (HRW, 13 January 2005)

“In 2003, Syria remained generally calm despite the proximity of hostilities in neighbouring Iraq and increased tension with Israel after it carried out its first air strike inside Syrian territory in more than three decades.

Syrian armed forces were placed on a heightened state of alert in October after the Israeli attack, which targeted what Syria said was a civilian site and not a training camp for Palestinian militants as claimed by Israel.

The bombing came amid mounting threats of political and economic sanctions against Syria by the United States, which accused the country of harbouring alleged terrorist groups and developing weapons of mass destruction. Syria strongly denied the charges.

Prospects for an early resumption of Israeli-Syrian peace talks on the issue of Israel’s continuing occupation of parts of the Syrian Golan overrun by its forces in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and annexed by Israel in 1981, remained uncertain. The talks collapsed in early 2000 and both sides have so far failed to agree on a starting point from which they might resume. Iraqi refugees and third-country nationals were registered in border refugee and transit camps set up by the Syrian authorities and international humanitarian organizations prior to the conflict.”(ICRC, 28 June 2004)

POPULATION PROFILE AND FIGURES

Global figures

305,661 persons estimated to be internally displaced according to official sources (as of October 2004)

"The displaced persons of the Syrian Arab occupied territory (Golan) since the invasion of 1967 are estimated to 305'661 persons" (UN Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 October 2004)

Estimates of IDPs in 1967 varied between 75,000 to 155,000 (1997-2004)

- Non official Israeli sources estimate that 70,000 to 75,000 people were displaced in 1967 from the Golan
- Government Syrian sources numbers vary between 130,000 and 170,000
- According to USCR's 2002 report, Syria claims that those displaced and their descendants number nearly half a million
- According to USCR's 2004 report, the Syrian government estimates 150,000-170,000 IDPs, more than twice the estimate of the Israeli government

"In 1967 Israel occupied much of the Jawlan district of the country, commonly if somewhat misleadingly referred to as the 'Golan heights', displacing almost all the population, including the inhabitants of the large town of Quneitra. The number of those displaced have always been disputed, varying from Israeli estimates of 75,000 to Syrian figures of 155,000. Syria claims that those displaced and their descendants now number nearly half a million. A more realistic figure may be 200,000. About 150,000 Syrians, mainly Druze villagers, have remained under Israeli occupation; most have resisted the offer of Israeli citizenship." (Dammers 1998, p.189)

"Except for some Druze villagers who stayed behind, most of the Syrian population of the Golan Heights fled in 1967. Estimates of their original numbers vary. While Israel says that about 70,000 left, Syria puts the original number at 153,000 and asserts that the number has grown to almost 500,000, 34 years later." (USCR 2002)

"The Syrian government estimated the number of internally displaced persons to be between 150,000 and 170,000, more than twice the estimate of the Israeli government. The displaced Syrians are all from the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967." (USCR, 24 May 2004)

According to the Syrian government:

"Through its settlement occupation, Israel razed to earth more than 244 villages and private property of the Golan. Only five Syrian villages have been left. The Syrian population also dwindled to almost twenty thousands out of about 150 thousands before occupation in June 1967 [...]." (Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN 1997)

"According to the 1995 statistics, the population of the Qunaytra district was 450,000 people representing 3.2% of the total population of Syria. Density was 240 persons per square kilometer. However, after the

Zionist aggression of 1967, the greater part of the Golan population which was 152000, were kicked out of their homes [...]." (Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Information 2001 "The Golan")

"[A]ccording to Madhat Saleh Al-Saleh, member of [the Syrian] parliament, there were 249 Arab villages there [in the Golan]. After the Israelis occupied the area, 244 of those villages were destroyed and the 147,000 inhabitants forced to leave." (Fecci June 2000)

No clear estimate of number of inhabitants of the Golan Heights before 1967 (1989-2001)

- Inhabitants of the Golan prior to 1967 were Sunni and Christians, Beduins, Cherkeshians, Turks, Druz and Alawites and numbered about 75,000 according to a 1958 survey
- Encarta Encyclopedia reports approximately 100,000 Syrians in the Golan before 1967
- The Syrian government reports that there were 152,000 people in the Golan prior to 1967

According to a 1958 Syrian survey quoted by an Israeli author, Mike Livne:

"Southern Golan – 17,000 mainly Sunni and some Christians

Bteha (Sea of Galilee) – 8000 Beduins

Northern Golan; 13,356 Cherkeshians

12650 Old Turks

1040 New Turks

7000 Druz

4400 Alawite

Other Beduins"

(Livne 1989)

According to Encarta Encyclopedia, "Prior to 1967 the Golan Heights was home to approximately 100,000 Syrians, many of whom were of Druze or Circassian ethnicity. The principal religions of the Golan were the Druze religion and the Sunni and Alawite sects of Islam. Much of the population was involved in supporting Syrian-army bases located in the region. When Israel drove the Syrian army from the Golan in the Six-Day War, most of the local population fled into Syria. Several thousand members of the Druze community remained, however, as well as a small number of Alawites." (Encarta 2000)

According to the Syrian government, "after the Zionist aggression of 1967, the greater part of the Golan population which was 152000, were kicked out of their homes. [...] Qunaytra was the main Population center in the Golan Before 1967. Its inhabitants were 53'000 [...]." (Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Information 2001)

Only 5 villages and 25,000 Syrians left in the Golan (2004)

- Five per cent of the population of the Syrian population of the Golan remain in five villages (Mossadah, Bakaaba, Ein Qenieh, Ghagar and S'heita)

"The balanced demographic distribution was disturbed by the Israeli occupation of Syrian territory in 1967, forcing the displacement of over 150,000 persons. With natural growth, the number of displaced persons has reached 305,661 in 2004. Five per cent of the population of remote villages of Golan remained in the villages of Mossaadah, Bakaaba, Ein Qenieh, Ghagar (gypsy) and S'heita, with a total of 25,000 inhabitants in 2003." (UN HRC, 19 October 2004, p.3)

“A Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, commenting on the situation in the occupied Golan, said when the Golan had been invaded by Israel, there had been about 250 villages and farms and 160,000 Syrian inhabitants. Now there were five remaining villages inhabited only by 25,000 Syrians. Israeli forces had destroyed all the other villages and farms and expelled the Syrian population and built more than 40 civil and military settlements, the Representative charged, and by these and other actions had rendered the life of the Syrian inhabitants intolerable.” (CHR, 31 March 2003)

See also the UN General Assembly Resolution No. 13240 of 29 November 1974 condemning the destruction by Israel of the destruction of the Syrian town of Quneitra [Internet]

PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

General

Different accounts on whether Golan inhabitants were forcefully expelled or whether they fled (1997-2002)

- According to the Syrian government, many inhabitants of the Golan were expelled by Israeli forces
- According to the Israelis, the inhabitants of Kuneitra fled before the Israeli army arrived to that city
- USCR reports that the inhabitants fled but also that the Israelis leveled the city of Kuneitra with bulldozers and dynamite before giving it back to Syria in 1974

"Only five Syrian villages still remain in the part of Golan that Israel occupies. These villages, in the mountainous north of Golan, were spared because U.N. forces arrived before they could be destroyed." (Fecci June 2000)

According to the Syrian Government

"Through its settlement occupation, Israel razed to earth more than 244 villages and private property of the Golan. Only five Syrian villages have been left." (Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations 11 March 1997)

"Since 1948, the Syrian Arab Republic [...] has been subjected, like other neighbouring Arab States, to a real threat of war by Israel and, on many occasions, this threat of war has culminated in actual aggression against the territory [...], particularly in 1967 when Israel seized part of the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, which it is still occupying, and expelled a large proportion of its population." (UN Human Rights Committee 25 August 2000, para.49)

According to the Israeli National Council for the Golan

In the 1967 Six Day War, in response to Syrian attacks, the IDF captured the Golan Heights in just over 24 hours of hard fighting on June 9-10. Nearly all of the Golan's Arab inhabitants fled as a result of the war; four Druze villages remain, three on the slopes of Mt. Hermon and one in the northern Golan. There is also a small Sunni Muslim village at Wassif." (National Council for the Golan December 1997, "History")

According to the Jerusalem Post

"That morning [10 June 1967], however, Radio Damascus issued the false report that Kuneitra had fallen to Israeli forces, perhaps a desperate bid to force an intervention by the Soviets, who might have feared for the safety of Damascus. In any case, the report prompted Syrian forces to flee in panic back toward Damascus, leaving Kuneitra indeed open for the Israelis. Dayan ordered the army to push on and take Kuneitra, with the final cease-fire taking effect at 6:30 p.m." (Arnold 1 February 2000)

According to USCR

"Except for some Druze villagers who stayed behind, most of the Syrian population of the Golan Heights fled in 1967. [...] After the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Israel agreed to return a slice of territory along the eastern edge of the Golan Heights, extending to Kuneitra, the one-time capital of Golan Province, in return for a repatriation of Israeli POWs [Prisoners of War]. Before leaving, however, the Israelis leveled the city

with bulldozers and dynamite. Although its 53,000 displaced residents had been expected to return, President Assad said that the city was uninhabitable, and it remained empty." (USCR 2002)

Syrian survey reports that half of the displaced from Kuneitra now live in Damascus area (2002)

"Qunitra accounts for almost three percent of those living in Damascus Mohafaza [governorates or provinces], and Homs one percent - and these are the largest contributors to the current make up of this Mohafaza.[...]

The outflow rates from the Qunitra and the Capital are particularly large. In the case of Qunitra, war-related displacement is evident, and less than 40 percent of those originating from Qunitra are living there. The rest are scattered among many Mohafazas, but the largest concentration is in the Damascus Mohafaza, amounting to about 38 percent. In fact, about half of those originating from Qunitra live in the Damascus City and its Mohafaza.[...]

In the 1960s, "Qunitra accounted for a fifth of all out-migrants, owing to the special circumstances of the war." (Khawaja 2002,pp28,31,46)

PHYSICAL SECURITY & FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

General

State of emergency still in effect: overview of the human rights situation (2005)

- A state of emergency imposed in 1963 remains in effect
- There are reports of ongoing human rights violations including harassment and imprisonment of human rights defenders, limited freedom of expression, association and assembly, discrimination against women
- Positive developments include the release of long-time political prisoners in 2004
- The UN Special Committee reported the persistent deterioration of the human rights situation in the occupied Syrian Golan

“Emergency rule imposed in 1963 remains in effect, and the authorities continue to harass and imprison human rights defenders and other non-violent critics of government policies. The government strictly limits freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and treats ethnic minority Kurds as second-class citizens. Women face legal as well as societal discrimination and have little means for redress when they become victims of rape or domestic violence.

In a positive development, the government released more than one hundred long-time political prisoners in 2004, bringing to more than seven hundred the number of such prisoners freed by President Bashar al-Asad since he came to power in June 2000. Thousands of political prisoners, however, reportedly still languish in Syria’s prisons.” (HRW, 13 Jan. 2005)

“Syria has been suffocating for the past 41 years as a result of the State of Emergency and Martial Laws which were imposed on the 8th of March 1963 following the coup de tat which brought the Ba’th Party to power. Pursuant to the state of emergency many oppressive and arbitrary laws were included and other courts, both special and exceptional, have been held. Under the pretext of the state of emergency and martial laws, prison cells have been filled and thousands from the Syrian political, social and ethnic spectrum have been detained because of their beliefs or affiliations, they were inhumanely tortured, massacres have tolled the lives of tens of thousands of innocent citizens. However, the ruling regime in Syria has been insisting to pursue a repressive and despotic style despite all appeals and calls that have been made by Human Rights Organisations.” (SHRC, 8 March 2004)

In the occupied Syrian Golan:

“Consultations held with government officials, including the Governor of Quneitra, and seven witnesses allowed the Special Committee to assess the persistent deterioration of the human rights situation in the occupied Syrian Golan.” (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004)

For more information on the human rights situation in Syria, see the full report, [HRW 2005 World Report \[Internet\]](#)

See also the website of the [Syrian Human Rights Committee \[Internet\]](#)

For information about the human rights situation in the occupied Golan, see the [report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories, 23 September 2004, paras. 87-103 \[Internet\]](#)

Landmines in the Golan Heights (2004)

- Information about the size and number of mine fields in Syria is not available
- Mines continue to pose a threat to civilians in the occupied Golan
- Some sources report that the Israeli authorities laid mines in the Quneitra area along the Golan border strip

“The Golan, in southwest Syria, is divided into three areas: Syrian-controlled, Israeli-controlled, and a buffer zone monitored by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Each contains mined areas. Information about the size and number of mine fields in Syria is not available. Golan is an area rich in water resources in a country suffering from desertification. Minefields hinder agricultural development; however, no studies regarding the impact of landmines on agriculture in this region are available. Due to the age of the mines and their deteriorating explosives, the mines continue to pose a significant danger.[...]

A June 2004 UN report states, “Mines continued to pose a threat...this threat has in fact increased.”[...] In some of the Syrian-controlled areas, minefields are not well marked or fenced and civilian casualties occur on a regular basis.[...] Civilians sometimes take markers and fences for their own use. The Syrian Army has had to re-fence and re-mark fields several times.” (ICBL, October 2004)

“As vestiges of previous wars, landmines with no military purpose today remain a hazard for the local population that occasionally claims life and limb. [127] Of the victims, 50 per cent have been under age 17. [128] Landmines are a life-threatening feature in 19 agriculture and grazing areas in the occupied Golan.[129] Whereas landmine clearance was a priority two years ago, other security concerns have intervened, prolonging the risks to the Syrian population in the Golan. [130] On 22 February 2003, heavy rains caused the erosion of a minefield in the town of Majdal Shams, where landmines slid downhill to the back of houses, forcing inhabitants to seek refuge elsewhere.[131]” (UNESCO, 7 June 2004, p.15)

“In the area of operation, especially in the area of separation, mines continued to pose a threat to UNDOF personnel and local inhabitants. Owing to the age of the mines and their deteriorating explosives, this threat has increased. UNDOF also supported UNICEF in activities to promote mine awareness among the civilian population.” (UNSG, 7 December 2004, para.4)

“The laying of anti-personnel landmines had continued. The Israeli authorities laid mines in 1,000 dunums of land in the Quneitra area along the Golan border strip and fenced them in with barbed wire, preventing farmers from cultivating their lands, as well as in the Harmon area, where trees had been uprooted.” (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.94)

Footnotes

[127] "Mine laying in the Israel Defense Forces", Israeli State Comptroller's Report No. 50 A, for the year 1999 (Jerusalem, Israel Government Printing Office, 1999).

[128] *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 20-26 April 2000
2000/478/re7.htm.

[129] According to al-Haq: Law in the Service of Man, cited in *Landmine Monitor Report: Israel* (2003).

[130] Interview with *Maavarim* President Ben Steinberg and staffer Dror Schimmel, Jerusalem, 5 January 2003, in *Landmine Monitor Report: Israel* (2003).

lm/2003/israel.html - fn4899.

[131] "Israel", *Landmine Monitor* (2003).

Druze pilgrims of Golan visit Syria (2003)

“A source at the International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC in Damascus said that 208 Druz Sheikhs of the villages of the occupied Golan heights, occupied by Israel, yesterday crossed to Syria through al-Quneitra border to visit the holy sites for the Druz sect.

The source explained that Israel "permitted the Druz pilgrims, most of them are elderly to visit Syria only for 24 hours."

The pilgrims visited a shrine in al-Zabadanbi, 45 Km to the west of Damascus. The source added that the Israeli authorities used to permit the Druz pilgrims to visit Syria for three years since these authorities started to permit them to visit their holy shrines in Syria in 1998.

Sheikh Munir Qasem alo-Shaeir, from Majdal Shams, the largest town of the Golan (54 year old) said in a telephone statement that this "visit is precious, during which we can visit our homeland and people." (ArabicNews.com, 2 September 2003)

UNDOF reports shooting incident in Golan (2003)

“United Nations military observers in the Golan Heights have said that 'Israeli Defence Forces' (IDF) killed one Syrian and reportedly 'captured' another yesterday just north of the intersection of the Jordanian, Israeli and Syrian borders. According to preliminary information from the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), the incident occurred in the southernmost portion of the mission's area of operation. The two Syrians were apparently on foot, west of the line separating Israeli occupied Golan and Syria, but east of the technical fence, which does follow the separation line in this particular spot. The mission, which has been monitoring a ceasefire between Israel and Syria since 1974, said it is investigating the incident and will provide further details as they become available. The mission is also negotiating with the IDF to recover the body of the known casualty and to obtain the release of the apprehended Syrian.” (The Palestine Chronicle, 10 January 2003)

SUBSISTENCE NEEDS

Shelter

Internally displaced persons camps set up around Syria (2000-2002)

- The displaced were resettled into 10 new villages close to the Golan and into housing projects in the suburbs of Damascus, Dara, and Homs
- The Syrian government defines the dwelling of the displaced as temporary camps
- In the town of "new Bteha", the displaced were reported to be given priority for public service jobs and places in university

"The Syrian government did rebuild 10 villages in the territory adjacent to the Golan returned to Syria in 1973, where it resettled about 60,000 displaced Golan residents. The remaining Syrian displaced and their progeny, as many as 400,000 people in 2001, lived in government housing projects in the suburbs of Damascus, Dara, and Homs." (USCR 2002)

[The displaced persons] "are now living in temporal [sic] camps around Damascus and other Syrian cities." (Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Information 2001, "The Golan")

"The displaced Golanis and their families now number about 500,000, most still living together in the places where their Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps were set up around Syria." (Fecci June 2000)

Remembering the Golan, life in the camp of 'Bteha':

"Three men excitedly hunch over a map of the Golan in Sati al-Ahmad's office. They are marking the place where their village used to be – just near the eastern bank of Lake Tiberius [or sea of Galilee].

For over 30 years these men have been temporary residents of what started out as an IDP camp near Damascus. They gave their camp the name of Bteha, which was the name of their village. The streets, too, are named after those of Bteha. The village itself was destroyed in 1967. [...]

The government has tried to ameliorate the conditions of the Golan refugees. They were given priority for public service jobs and places in university. While their children were able to adapt, the older generation has remained set in the traditional ways of the fellah [farmer].

When they were first displaced, the 'new' Bteha was a refugee camp. Over the years the government built permanent dwellings for the residents. However, according to Antoine Chamoun, 'the people refused to live in apartments. They wanted to reconstruct and live as they had been, in small villages of 10 families. But building a village costs more than building an apartment block.

The original simple single-family houses the government eventually built have been expanded by residents as their family size grew. Now there are 22,000 people living in 'new' Bteha." (Fecci June 2000)

ISSUES OF FAMILY UNITY, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

General

Crossing the demarcation line: testimonies of the displaced (2005)

- After coming under Israeli occupation after the June 1967 war, roughly one-third of the Golan Heights - some 600 square kilometres - was returned to Syria in 1973
- Families that once lived in the same villages were divided between the Israeli-occupied and Syrian sides of the region which has challenged family ties, national and local identity
- A number of families have also lost touch with the area's agrarian ways
- The internet age has made communication across the border easier, though it expensive
- Relatives within families are marrying across the divide as a means of keeping their culture alive
- There are some groups of people who have exceptionally been allowed to cross between the Israeli occupied Golan and the Syrian side, with the aid of the ICRC: students, religious pilgrims and sometimes brides

“In September last year, 27-year-old Mae Abu Ziad finally received word. She would, after all, be permitted to cross the 200-metre corridor between the Syrian side of the Golan Heights and the Israeli-occupied area, the home of her fiancée, Riad. When the permission came, she had been waiting nearly two years for it - and then had just 48-hours notice to prepare for what was to be her wedding day.

Dressed in her bridal robes and holding a bouquet of white roses, Mae walked down the short, fenced-in narrow road that links the two parts of the Golan together. Accompanied by two other brides and 10 of her closest relatives, she left Bravo gate - the Syrian gate - and met Riad at Charlie gate, held by the United Nations. For one hour, both sides of the family celebrated - and then said their good-byes. Then, Riad, Mae and Riad's family continued their walk to Alpha gate, the Israeli post 50 meters away. On that day, Mae began her new life in Majda al-Shams, a Syrian village situated in the Israeli-occupied Golan.

It was a place Mae had never lived in before. She met Riad, her cousin, when he came from Majda al-Shams to study at Damascus University . Now though, Mae, an agricultural engineer and the mother of a three-month-old girl, is not allowed to come back to Syria . The only way she can see her parents is if both sides plan a meeting in Jordan or Egypt .

After coming under Israeli occupation following the June 1967 war, roughly one-third of the Golan Heights - some 600 square kilometres - was returned to Syria in 1973. Now, families that once lived in the same villages are divided between the Israeli-occupied and Syrian sides of the region.

With the help of their parents, youth on both sides are struggling to keep family ties and their national and local identity alive. Unlike their parents, many have never met their relatives living on the other side of the divide. Many did not experience the 1967 and the 1973 wars. As families have been uprooted from their homes in the Syrian side of the Golan and moved to Syrian cities, they have also lost touch with the area's agrarian ways.

But a Syrian resolve, nonetheless, remains. The internet age has made communication across the border easier, though it remains expensive. Relatives within families are marrying across the divide as a means of

keeping their culture alive. Despite the lures of city life, ties to culture and family remain relatively strong and a new generation has remained committed to the Golan.

MOVING OVER THE LINE: There are four groups of people who are allowed to cross between the Israeli occupied Golan and the Syrian side, with the aid of the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC).

In 1977, then President Hafez al-Assad offered students in the occupied Golan enrolment in any department of their choosing in Syria 's universities – free of charge.

As a result, approximately 120 students study at Damascus University annually. Those studying there are allowed to return to their homes in the occupied area once a year for summer vacation.

Pilgrims, or religious figures, are also allowed 24-hour visits to Syria . Brides too are allowed to cross from the Syrian side to the occupied side, but the time required for Israeli permission is sporadic. Exceptional medical cases are also occasionally allowed to cross the UN line.

Methat Saleh, a former member of the Syrian parliament who spent 12 years in Israeli prisons for fighting its control over the Golan, calls the Golan students ‘Syrian ambassadors’ between two worlds. They help people in Syria understand life under occupation and, in turn, they learn more about their country, get to know relatives and return to the occupied Golan with pictures, videos and stories from relatives.

Iad Johari, 29, has come from Majda al-Shams to study medicine at Damascus University . Some students choose to stay in Syria when they are done. But both Abu-Saleh and Johari are planning to return to their village.

‘Instead of having a doctor who is Israeli, we can have a Syrian doctor,’ said Johari. ‘I am studying here so that I can go back there and help my people.’

Bride crossings are more sporadic. They usually take place in the spring or at the end of the summer and the number of brides allowed to cross yearly depends on the response from the Israeli government. In some years, no brides have been allowed to go over. Other years, up to 10 brides have crossed.

Restrictions on visits have not always been so limited.

Over the years, the time allotted for family visits has been slowly whittled down, according to Hala Hibrawi, Tracing Assistant with the ICRC in Damascus . Hibrawi says families were at one time allowed to visit for up to one month at a time. Slowly, the time was decreased to two weeks, then one week, then three days and then 24 hours. In 1989, family visits from both sides were completely halted.

Currently, Hibrawi says the Red Cross has been pushing the Israeli government to allow family meetings to take place at the UN Charlie gate for a few hours every couple of weeks. Hibrawi said that if nothing comes of the family meetings by the end of 2004, they will return to working on having the Israeli government allow family visits.” (Syria Today, 2005)

Displaced denied right to family life (2004)

- Occupation of the Syrian Golan has resulted in the break up of families from the Golan
- Israeli authorities frequently rejected the requests of Syrians living in the occupied Golan to meet with displaced family members living in Syria
- Many family members have not been able to meet since 1981 when family meetings were discontinued following Israel's annexation of the Golan

“[D]irect contact between the more than 19,000 Syrian residents of the Israeli-occupied Golan and family members among the estimated half a million Golanese living in Syria proper remained restricted, except in certain specific cases facilitated by the ICRC.

[...]

These family meetings were discontinued in 1981 when Israel annexed the part of the Golan that it first occupied in 1967 and have not taken place since then.

As in past years, the ICRC supervised operations that enabled Syrian students and pilgrims in the occupied Golan to travel to Syria proper for study and religious purposes. It also enabled future marriage partners living on opposite sides of the United Nations-controlled demarcation line between the occupied Golan and Syria proper to meet and be married in the separation zone, and arranged for the exchange of official documents between the two locations.” (ICRC, 28 June 2004)

“As has been the case for the occupation of Palestinian territory, occupation of the Syrian Golan has resulted in the dismemberment of families in the Golan. Young Syrian graduates from the Golan and from Syrian universities have only limited access to job opportunities back home. If they visit their families once a year in the Syrian Golan during their studies, Israel refuses them re-entry.[132]” (UNESCO, 7 June 2004, p.15)

“Women also endured the tragedy of family separation, and young people studying in Syria or other relatives had to communicate through barbed-wire fences, such as in the occupied village of Majdal Shams. When visiting their relatives in prison, women underwent invasive personal searches or had to stand outside the prison for long hours before being allowed in. Visitors could not have direct contact with prisoners. The Syrian witnesses testifying before the Special Committee confirmed the precarious health conditions of their relatives, the numerous rejections by Israeli authorities of requests by their relatives in the occupied Golan to visit their families in Syria, the harshness of conditions of detention and ill-treatment inflicted on prisoners, the difficulties encountered by students trying to visit their families in the occupied Golan during their holidays, and the weekly police inspections they had to undergo when staying with their families.” (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.99)

Footnotes

[132] Note by the Secretary-General of 22 August 2003 transmitting the report of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories (A/58/311), para. 83.

ICRC restores family links between those living in occupied Golan and displaced family members living in Syria (2004)

- The ICRC has been present in Syria since 1967 to restore family links broken due to the Israeli occupation of the Golan
- Since 1967, it has worked to preserve a minimal level of contact between the more than 19,000 Syrian inhabitants living in occupied Golan and their displaced family members
- With the assistance of the ICRC, particular groups have been allowed to cross the UN demarcation line, including students, religious pilgrims and some individuals wishing to marry

“In 2003, the ICRC pursued its mandate to monitor compliance with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention applicable to the Syrian civilian population living in the part of the Golan occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

[...]

A major effort was made to preserve at least a minimum level of contact between the more than 19,000 Syrian inhabitants of the Israeli-occupied Golan and their families who fled or were expelled from the region after it was overrun by Israeli forces in 1967. In particular, the ICRC pursued efforts to bring about resumption of regular family meetings between members of this community and their relatives in Syria proper.

The ICRC supervised operations that enabled students in the occupied Golan to travel to Syria proper to attend university, and to return home during academic holidays or upon completion of their studies. Similarly, pilgrims from the occupied Golan travelled to Syria proper under ICRC auspices to visit holy sites and perform their religious duties. The ICRC also enabled future marriage partners living on opposite sides of the United Nations-controlled demarcation line to meet and be married, and arranged for people requiring emergency medical attention to be transferred from the occupied Golan to Syria proper.” (ICRC, 28 June 2004)

“The International Committee of the Red Cross began its operations in Syria in 1967 to restore family links that were broken because of Israel's occupation of the Golan,” said Rolin Wavre, ICRC head of delegation in Damascus in a statement yesterday in Damascus. He said that the ICRC delegation activities in Syria were extended to include: facilitating the crossing of hundreds of students from the occupied Golan and organizing their return after the completion of their higher studies, organizing the passage of religious men to perform their religious duties and visit their relatives whom they have not met for years, and arranging the crossing of brides to the Occupied Golan where their future husbands live. He continued that with these weddings, the ICRC gives families the opportunity to come together after years of separation, where tears are mixed with cries of joys; people are happy to see their relatives but sad to be separated again.

He explained that in September, 2002, the ICRC has facilitated the crossing of 144 pilgrims from the occupied Golan to Damascus and to the holy places in Syria. The visit of the pilgrims lasted for three days. In October, 2002, he added "we had during four days a crossing of 375 students to Syria, either to start or to continue their studies." He said that a wedding took place on October 1st, noting that the crossing of the bride, meeting of the families at the Quneitra Checkpoint, meeting of the split families to celebrate the wedding is part of the aim to start a process of family meetings for the Syrian people in the Golan, and that the ICRC is waiting for a final green light from the Israeli side to this effect. This process, he said, has been going on for many years. He commented that it remains important for separated families to have these contacts. The students, the weddings, knowing this is temporary until the situation is settled.

On other main activities conducted by the ICRC in Syria, Wavre indicated that the ICRC is visiting Syrian prisoners among others in Israel. Citing his experience on that he said " I have been serving in Gaza for one and a half years, visiting Palestinian and Syrian prisoners among others there held by Israel." Of no less activity performed by the ICRC is the travel document over which Wavre explained that people who do not have passport, ICRC provides them document enabling them to travel from one country to another, noting " the ICRC for 50 years has been providing people without documents that are accepted by the UNHCR. "It is a pattern we often approach people on the wrong side of life." Another important function conducted by the ICRC is the Red Cross Message RCM. A service replacing the postal service when it does not exist or functioning.” (Arabic News, 14 November 2002)

“The ICRC pursued efforts to bring about the resumption of meetings between the more than 19,000 Syrian nationals living in the Golan occupied by Israel and their families who fled the region when it was overrun by Israeli forces in 1967 and who were now among the approximately half million Golanese living in other parts of Syria. In May, after years of intensive ICRC efforts, both sides agreed to a mutually acceptable location in which to hold family meetings. However, by the end of 2002 no meetings had taken place as discussions continued on details such as their frequency and duration. Family meetings were discontinued after Israel annexed part of the Golan in 1981 and had still not resumed.

As in past years, the ICRC supervised operations that enabled 516 Golanese students to travel to Syria to study there. Golanese students in Syria were also able to rejoin their families in the occupied Golan, under

ICRC auspices, after completion of their studies in Syria and during university breaks, or for humanitarian reasons. Similarly, 114 pilgrims from the occupied Golan were able to visit holy sites and perform their religious duties in Syria. The ICRC, in cooperation with the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), furthermore enabled three engaged couples separated by the UN-controlled demarcation line to meet and be married in the separation zone.

Syrian nationals in the occupied Golan and in Syria continued to rely on ICRC services to exchange official papers such as power-of-attorney documents and marriage, death and birth certificates." (ICRC, 19 June 2003)

Little hope for the displaced to recover property in the Golan Heights (2000-2002)

- The UN Commission on Human Rights urges Israel to let the displaced recover their property in the Golan
- The fact that about 17,000 Israelis have resettled in the Golan since 1967 and that most of the villages of the displaced have been destroyed may complicate property issues
- Israeli efforts to develop infrastructure in the Golan continue, as negotiations between Israel and Syria are deadlocked

The Commission on Human Rights:

"Also calls upon Israel to desist from changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan, and emphasizes that the displaced persons of the population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties" (CHR 28 March 2002)

"This mountainous stretch of land [...] has become home to some 17,000 Israeli settlers [...]" (BBC 4 January 2000)

The Israelis live in approximately 32 agricultural communities in the southern Golan Heights. Many Israeli army officers stationed at military bases in the Golan Heights have settled their families in the government-planned town of Katzrin." (Encarta 2000)

"Through its settlement occupation, Israel razed to earth more than 244 villages and private property of the Golan. Only five Syrian villages have been left." (Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations 11 March 1997)

Following breakdown of negotiations, lifting of restriction to build on the Golan

"The Israeli government has lifted all restrictions on developments on the occupied Golan Heights following the deadlock in peace talks on returning the strategic area to Syria.

A senior adviser to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Yossi Kucik, told a settlers' council that all building programmes which had been suspended due to the peace talks could now proceed. These include the construction of roads, sewage systems and the expansion of facilities at two resorts." (BBC News 13 April 2000)

PATTERNS OF RETURN AND RESETTLEMENT

Return prospects

Signs of reconstruction in area regained in 1974 by Syria (2005)

- In March 2005, the Syrian Prime Minister lay down the foundation stones for the rebuilding of two villages around Quneitra: Adnaiyeh and Asheh
- The Prime Minister also inaugurated a hospital in Quneitra
- A part of the city of Quneitra remains in the area occupied by Israel
- The city remained in ruins for over 30 years, held as a symbol of Israel's incursion by the Syrian government

Syria regained a small part of the Golan in 1974, for brief background, see ["Syria regained some of the lost territory in 1974"](#) [Internal link]

“Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri laying the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two of the villages around Quneitra that were destroyed in the war between Syria and Israel.

The villages are being rebuilt in the hope people will return to the area. Otri also inaugurated the new 200-bed Martyr Mamdouh Abaza hospital in Quneitra.” (Syria Today, March 2005)

“For the past 30 years, the Syrians have used this flattened provincial capital as an open-air monument to Israeli perfidy, hauling virtually every visiting foreign dignitary through the ruins to hear their time-honored lament about how the Zionists leveled the city when they withdrew under the 1974 cease-fire terms.

But now there is talk of rebuilding Quneitra, of transforming it into a tangible symbol that Syria no longer believes its claim to the occupied Golan Heights will be settled through war.

Former residents have been carting plastic shopping bags crammed with property deeds and even circa-1967 electricity bills to a special office in Damascus to prove they used to live here. The registration period ends Oct. 31.

Once armed with statistics about the number of former residents and their descendants expecting to claim property, the Syrian government will develop a reconstruction plan and probably seek foreign aid for the daunting project of creating a city for tens of thousands of people, according to several Syrian officials and Quneitra natives.

‘In general, it is a good faith measure, especially since we are rebuilding a city while some of our territory remains under occupation,’ said Medhat al-Saleh, a former member of Syria's Parliament who spent 12 years in Israeli jails for fighting its control over the Golan. ‘It is a way of showing that we are being honest when we say that peace is our strategic option, but at the same time we will not abandon one inch of the Golan.’

Analysts in Syria view this as a potentially significant shift in the last major front of the Arab-Israel dispute.

They consider it a means for the young president, Bashar al-Assad, to signal that he is not slavishly following the intransigence of his late father, without abandoning the near-sacred policy that all of the Golan, conquered by Israel in the 1967 war, must revert to Syria.

'For 30 years it has been the status quo, nothing happened,' said a senior UN official, talking about the sensitive issue of Quneitra. 'It was a way of keeping the present problem alive, a way of educating each new generation about what the Israelis had done.'

Assad has taken several steps to signal Syria's desire to resume peace talks. The Israeli government has dismissed the gestures, saying that he is simply responding to pressure from the United States, which has imposed economic sanctions and accused Syria of allowing Islamic militants to flow into Iraq.

'The only way the Syrians would be amenable to any sort of arrangement with Israel is because they are under growing international pressure,' Zalman Shoval, an adviser to the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, said from Jerusalem.

Others have noted that, given the domestic tension over the Gaza withdrawal plan, no Israeli move toward Syria could be expected soon.

Quneitra, a city straddling the cease-fire line from the October 1973 war, its main arteries interrupted by tangles of barbed wire, has been left largely untouched since the Israelis withdrew. Syria says the Israelis dynamited the town as they went; Israel's explanation is that warfare destroyed the place.

Israel has long suggested that Syria make some public gesture to indicate acceptance of its presence.

Analysts expect Syria might be banking on rebuilding Quneitra as that gesture, although Syrians reject any suggestion that it is being done at Israel's behest.

This being Syria, with official decisions shrouded in secrecy, the government-controlled press has not breathed a word about Quneitra.

Officials deny anything extraordinary is happening.

The few people wandering around the town say officials tell a different tale in private.

Since 1991, Sattouf Al-Halaby has run a restaurant that takes in the sweep of vineyards and hilltops bristling with military antennae on the other side. Barbed wire encircles the restaurant on three sides - some 20 percent of Quneitra sits across the fence.

'The governor recently slapped me on the back and said I could expect a real bonanza,' said Halaby, grinning.

The city consists mostly of cement houses flattened like pancakes amidst stands of eucalyptus and pine trees. Officials expect the more important relics - the hospital, a couple of mosques, the Orthodox cathedral and the movie theater - will be preserved.

How the United Nations will police the cease-fire line with an entire city rising nearby remains unclear. Several villages have been rebuilt previously, but on a much smaller scale, and officials said there have been incidents as late as last year of the Israeli military killing two Syrian soldiers who came within 90 meters, or about 300 feet, of the fence.

Dr. Cheref Abaza, who represents Quneitra in Parliament, said initial estimates indicated that up to 22,000 housing units will be needed. He was a 27-year-old math teacher when he fled with only the clothes on his back.

'We thought we would go back in a few days after everything calmed down,' said the now gray-haired doctor, who visits the ruins frequently. 'It was June 5, 1967, and I saw airplanes bombing the streets. The war ended a long time ago, but we have never moved back.' (IHT, 23 October 2004)

“Just 70 kilometres outside of Damascus , the levelled settlement of Quneitra stands as a monument to Israeli destruction. Hours before a declared 1974 cease-fire, Israeli forces systematically demolished the village.

Today, Zuhdi Shekay and his wife are Quneitra's only remaining inhabitants.

Since its demolition, the Syrian government has made efforts to help the Quneitra residents and those of the surrounding villages by building block cement homes in the area.

But a shortage of jobs and a new generation of Syrians no longer tied to the land has left many migrating from the Golan to the cities for work. According to Mohamad Khneifes Ali, the public relations director for the governorate of Quneitra, some 400,000 people now live as exiles in the surrounding regions of Daraa, Damascus , Homs and elsewhere. Shekay estimates the number of former Golan residents living in Damascus to be around 150,000.

Janbulat Shekay, Zuhdi's son, who now lives in Damascus and works as a correspondent for the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai al-'Am, calls the area a place for 'retired people'.

Recently, talk has surfaced on the possibility of rebuilding Quneitra. But according to Ali, such talk surfaces every 10 years. He does however say that studies are currently being done to see if former inhabitants would be interested in returning to the village.

Yet, Shekay and others are looking for more action.

'There has been more than one generation that has been born in Damascus and that is a problem,' says Shekay. 'I want them to rebuild the settlement as quickly as possible.' (Syria Today, 2005)

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

National response

National investment increases in area bordering occupied-Golan to encourage return (2005)

The Syrian government has regularly presented its concerns regarding the ongoing occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and the return of Golan's displaced before the UN Commission on Human Rights and other UN bodies. Syria's displaced have integrated into the general population and enjoy the same rights as other citizens. The government has made some efforts to help those displaced from the areas bordering the occupied Golan, including by building some homes in the area (USCR 2000; IHT 23 October 2004). Recently national authorities have undertaken initiatives which indicate more concerted reconstruction efforts in the areas bordering the occupied Golan. In March 2005, Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri lay the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two of the villages around Quneitra. The Prime Minister also inaugurated a new 200-bed hospital (Martyr Mamdouh Abaza hospital) in Quneitra. The inhabitants of Quneitra, estimated at 50,000 people, were forced to flee during the 1967 war when the town was destroyed and occupied by Israeli forces. Until recently, the government had made minimal efforts to reconstruct Quneitra, keeping the ruins as a memento of the Israeli incursion and ongoing occupation of the remaining Golan Heights (Syria Today, 2005; Fecci June 2000; IHT, 23 October 2004; Syria Today, March 2005).

International response

UN emphasises right of displaced to return and reclaim their properties (2005)

The international response to the situation of the Golan and right of the displaced to return has been largely political, in addition the UN monitors the ceasefire in the Golan area. Special assistance and protection on behalf of international community has for the most part not been necessary, as Golan's displaced do not have needs beyond those of the general population. Furthermore, creating appropriate conditions for return have pended on the identification of a political solution.

A number of United Nations agencies are present in Syria (UNDP, UNFPA, UNRWA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and FAO), mainly operating under a development framework adopted in 2001. The UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) has a number of objectives including improving living standards by reducing socio-economic and regional disparities, strengthening institutional capacities and meeting development challenges. Both agreements address the need for UN support in the event of the reintegration of the occupied areas (UNDAF, 2001; CCA, December 2000). However, given the lack of a peace agreement, plans to support the return of the displaced population and rehabilitation of the Golan Heights have not been developed. No UN agency has adopted a role in monitoring or providing assistance to the displaced in Syria. *[See the [website of the UN in Syria](#)]*

Over the years, the UN has reaffirmed the right of the internally displaced Syrians to return to the Golan Heights, as well as the right of the Golan displaced to property. In 2004, the **UN Commission on Human Rights** once again adopted a resolution emphasising that the displaced persons of the population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties. The

Commission also reaffirmed the illegality of Israel's annexation of the territory in 1981 and called on Israel to refrain from "... changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan" (UNCHR Resolution 2004/8).

The **UN Security Council** and **General Assembly** have also adopted resolutions calling for a number of measures, including the withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces from the Syrian Golan and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of every State of the occupied territories; a cease-fire and negotiations; demanded that Israel refrain from changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan. It has also declared Israel's decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights null and void and without international legal effect (See UNSC Resolution 242 (1967); UNSC Resolution 338 (1973); and UNSC Resolution 497 (1981).

UN General Assembly resolution 2443 (XXIII), adopted on 19 December 1968, established a "**Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories**". The mandate of the Special Committee includes "... all civilian population living in the territories under Israeli occupation... including the Syrian Arab Golan, as well as persons normally resident in the areas under occupation but who had left those areas because of hostilities". It reports its findings in the form regular reports to the Secretary-General, which are usually considered during the annual Human Rights Commission (See e.g. UNGA 59/33, 31 January 2005 and UNGA 59/125, 25 January 2005; Permanent Mission of Palestine to the UN, March 2000) *[For further documents relating to the Special Committee see [UNHCHR](#)]*

However, since its establishment, the Committee has been denied access to the occupied territories, as well as cooperation from the Israeli government (UN Special Committee, 25 May 2004)

See also [UN General Assembly Resolution No. 13240 of 29 November 1974 condemning the destruction by Israel of the destruction of the Syrian town of Qnaytra](#), see [\[External Link\]](#)

To view past UN resolutions condemning the Israeli occupation of the Golan and the need for Israel to allow displaced persons of the population of the occupied Syrian Golan to return to their homes and to recover their property: "Documents on mandate entrusted to the Secretary-General on Human Rights in the Occupied Syrian Golan" [\[External Link\]](#)

The **UN Security Council** also set up the **UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)** (UN Security Council Resolution 350 (1974)). *[See [website of UNDOF](#) and the full text of [UN SC Resolution 350 \(31 May 1974\)](#), which set up UNDOF*, established to maintain the ceasefire between Syria and Israel. The UN observer force was part of the conditions of the ceasefire agreement ("Agreement on Disengagement (S/11302/Add.1, annexes I and II) signed between Israeli and Syrian forces following the diplomatic intervention of the United States in March 1974. The Agreement on Disengagement provides for an area of separation and for two equal zones of limited forces and armaments on both sides of the area, to be monitored by a UN Force. Despite the lack of major incidents, the UN Secretary General has renewed the mandate of UNDOF every six months given that no "comprehensive settlement covering all aspects of the Middle East problem" has been reached (UNSC Resolution 338 (1974)). *[See reports of the Secretary General]* In 2004, the UN Security Council once again extended this mandate, calling on the parties to begin negotiations (UNSC 1578 (2004)). In addition to patrolling the area, UNDOF also helps facilitate the passage of persons, mainly students and pilgrims, through the areas of separation (UN 2001; UNSC 15 December 2004; UNSG, 21 June 2004).

No international organisation works directly with Golan's displaced, with the exception of the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** *[See "[The ICRC in Syria](#)"]*. The ICRC began its operations in Syria in 1967 and has acted as a "neutral intermediary in humanitarian matters" for the Syrian inhabitants of the part of the Golan that is occupied by Israel, protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention. For example the ICRC has worked to restore family links between displaced Golanese and family members

still living in the occupied Golan Heights. It has also facilitated the passage of Syrian nationals, primarily students and pilgrims, who have to cross the area of separation for professional or religious reasons. The ICRC has continued in its attempts to facilitate the meeting of displaced families, who fled the Golan in 1967 and their family members who are Syrian nationals living in the Golan occupied by Israel. The ICRC has also assisted Golanese students in Syria to rejoin their families in the occupied Golan, after completion of their studies in Syria and during university breaks, or for humanitarian reasons. The ICRC, in cooperation with UNDOF, has also enabled a few engaged couples separated by the UN-controlled demarcation line to meet and be married in the separation zone” (ICRC, 28 June 2004)

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CHR	United Commission on Human Rights
IDF	Israel Defense Force
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
UN	United Nations
UNDOF	United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UN GA	United Nations General Assembly
UN SC	United Nations Security Council

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