GA4 – Special Political and Decolonisation

The Question of the Syrian Golan Heights

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Introduction

The Golan Heights is a strategic plateau in the Middle East that is bordered by Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Geographically, the plateau itself has an average altitude of 1,000 metres and an area totalling 1,800 square kilometres (The World Factbook). When referring to the Golan Heights as a geopolitical region, we specifically talk about the western two-thirds, which has been occupied by and is administered by Israel. The area has played an essential part in the continuing Israeli-Syrian conflicts that have afflicted the Middle East since the creation of the State of Israel.

The Arab-Israeli conflict and its influence on the region should be understood. This conflict is based in the rise of both Zionism and Arab nationalism in the 19th and 20th century. Most large-scale military conflicts have ceased since the Yom-Kippur War and most of the focus is now on the localized Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the Syrian-Israeli conflict continues to be a serious problem in the Middle East.

Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights has continued since the Six-Day War. Many different parties have searched for solutions to the problem, including the United Nations. The United Nations have passed multiple resolutions on the issue, which have had both beneficial and adverse effects. Numerous third parties have also attempted to mediate the conflict, with some success. The key to what the United Nations General Assembly is able to do lies within acquiring the cooperation of all parties, considering the heavy military risks at hand. The region is generally tense considering the multiple wars that have happened in recent decades and the lasting effects of the Arab Spring in 2012. Both Israel and Syria have strong military power, with hundreds of thousands of military personnel at the disposal of each along with tanks, jets and more. Of course, each also have ties with different

superpowers. Therefore, it is crucial that all subsequent attempts for mediation by the United Nations are aware of the underlying implications of subsiding the conflict.

Definition of Key Terms

Buffer Zone

This term refers to an area that lies between two or more other areas (often, but not necessarily, countries), usually to segregate the two areas. This includes demilitarized zones, an area in which treaties or agreements between nations, military powers or contending groups forbid military installations, activities or personnel.

Ceasefire

This term pertains to an agreement, usually between two armies, to stop fighting in order to allow discussions about peace.

Six-Day War

Fought in 1967 between Israel and its neighbouring states of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Israel suffered light losses compared to the Arab belligerents, who lost around 20,000 soldiers. This was a decisive Israeli victory, and resulted in the territorial changes that cause the bulk of the conflict today. Mainly, Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula (which they now have withdrawn from) and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria (The History Guy).

Territorial Dispute

A disagreement over the possession/control of land between two or more territorial entities.

Yom-Kippur War

This was a war between a coalition of Arab states led by Syria and Egypt against Israel in 1973. Initially, the war was successful for both Egypt and Syria who pushed far in to their respective boundaries with Israel. However, Israel began to push back and was able to start shelling the outskirts of Damascus as well as move fighting with Egypt towards Suez. It

was at this point that the ceasefire was created, when the international community recognized the need to control the multiple wars that had broken out since Israel was formed.
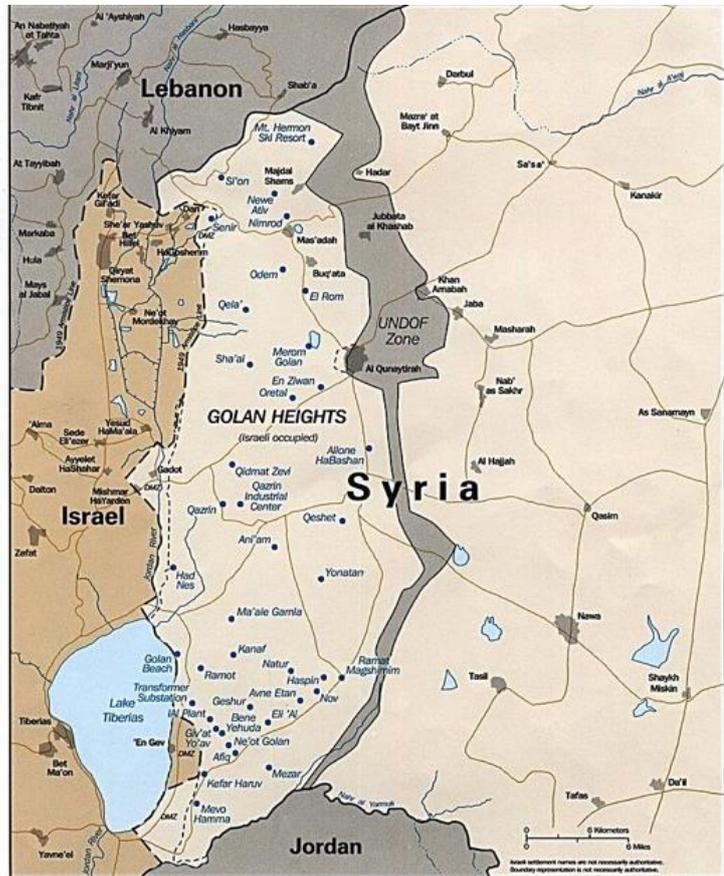
General Overview

The general overview of this research report will seek to establish historical context as well as provide and define the current key aspects of the Syrian Golan Heights.

UN Resolution 242

The UN Security Council adopted UN resolution 242 in the aftermath of the Six Day war of 1967. It was consulted for and accepted by the four of the belligerent states of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which include Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Syria conditionally accepted the resolution in 1972, and also formally accepted resolution 338 in 1973, which called for a ceasefire in order to adopt 242 (UN Security Council).

The resolution focused on five main points: withdrawal of Israeli forces, peace within secure and recognized boundaries, freedom of navigation, a just settlement of the refugee problem and security measures including demilitarized zones. There exists controversy regarding clause 1. (i)., which states "Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," because of a discrepancy between the English and French official documents. This discrepancy is interpreted by some to be an ambiguity on whether it was required of Israel to withdraw from all territories in the conflict. Regardless, most insist that the resolution called for Israel's withdrawal from the territories it captured. Since the portion of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel was taken over in 1967, the area falls under this description.

However, different interpretations still apply, especially considering the UN maintains the buffer zone itself. For example, Israel suggests that the occupation is fair under the clause, which calls for "safe and recognised boundaries free from threats or acts of force". The United States stated at the time that while they supported permanent borders, they didn't necessarily support territorial changes, more in line with the hardline interpretation of clause 1. The UK ambassador to the UN who sponsored the resolution suggested that the occupation was in clear defiance of the resolution.

Purple line

It is important to know where the ceasefire line known as the purple line is and how it got to be there. The purple line was the ceasefire line between Israel and Syria after the 1967 Six Day War. During this war, Israel managed to capture the entire length of the Golan Heights along with its main city Quneitra. During the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Syrian forces attempted to cross the line with a massive military push but were eventually pushed back over and then even further from the line. By the time a ceasefire agreement was reached, Israel had conquered territory further in from the line that they ever had before the war started. Israel and Syria then mutually agreed to pull their forces back to the purple line as part of the ceasefire agreements.

UNDOF buffer zone

The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) buffer zone was created by the United Nations after the Yom Kippur war, resulting from UN resolution 338/339 which established the ceasefire in the zone, which straddles the purple line. The zone is currently still upheld by the United Nations with cooperation from both Israel and Syria. The UNDOF mandate currently includes supervision of both sides, intervention in case of unpermitted entry, and inspection of military locations in the area of limitation.

Part of the controversy surrounding the UNDOF is related to the reluctance of member states to keep troops there. The zone had been relatively peaceful until the Syrian Civil War, the main reason for members of the observer force to reconsider their mission. As the situation in Syria continues to be an issue, the zone itself is at a higher risk of conflict.

Many world leaders feel that the safety of the peacekeeping troops has become too uncertain. Today, about a thousand troops are provided by Fiji, India, Ireland, Nepal,

and Netherlands, with assistance from troops of the members of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO). Delegates that wish to continue the current implementation of UNDOF might additionally want to find ways to guarantee better safety for these peacekeepers.

However, it must be noted that both parties have been fully cooperative with the UNDOF arrangement and its mandate.

Quneitra Clashes/Offensive and the Syrian Civil War

The more modern issue related to the Golan Heights has to do with the Syrian Civil War and how it has inadvertently affected the UNDOF buffer zone and the Golan Heights from the Syrian front.

Starting in 2012, the Syrian army started to engage rebels who were positioned in the Quneitra governorate. Quneitra is the capital city, located in south-west Syria in the Golan Heights which was previously occupied by Israel after the Six-Day war but then returned to Syria in in 1974 after being destroyed. The city is mostly abandoned because of this. The fighting became intensified and spilled over in to the UNDOF zone. The fighting continued within the Quneitra governorate from 2012-2014, resulting in the casualties of Syrian Army and Syrian rebel forces only. Due to (assumed stray) fire on Israeli military outposts in 2012, Israel began returning warning fire intermittently, subsequently causing the first direct cross-border incident since the Yom Kippur War. In 2013, Syrian rebels in the neutral zone took hostage 21 Filipino personnel. While they were later released due to mediation from Jordan, the newfound international attention to the area escalated the situation and the UN's job to keep peace in the area (21 UN Peacekeepers). At the end of the clashes in August of 2014, the Nusra Front captured Fijian troops and Filipino troops came under fire and had to escape. Later, the Fijian troops were released across the border, a considered success of the United Nations (Beirut). It must be noted that both the Syrian government were fully against the conflicts with the peacekeepers and shouldn't be held accountable for the actions of terrorist militants.

The capturing of the Fijian troops was part of the latter conflict in the area known as the Quneitra offensive. Multiple different rebel groups with different alliances were involved in the conflict. It occurred at the Quneitra border crossing, with the close calls regarding the UN troops and multiple casualties between the rebel forces and the Syrian Army. Delegates should understand that something should be done to control the situation around the UNDOF

zone, since although the conflict remains internal to Syria further problems at the border may incite conflict between Israel and Syria. As of May 2017, the clashes are still a relevant problem.

Major Parties Involved

Syrian Arab Republic

Although Syria has respected the agreement, they want to secure the return of the Golan Heights, potentially as a part of any peace deal. A lot of the problem revolves around the Syrian Civil War. The fighting surrounding the Golan Heights has complicated the situation in recent times. Delegates should know Syria's stakes and claims in the civil war itself, considering that it directly affects the situation in the Golan Heights. Talks between the governments have been on and off in recent years, changing with different government administrations. For example, in 2003, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad said he was ready to bring back peace talks with Israel. In 2009, however, after Netanyahu was elected (who is known for a tougher stance on the issue), the Syrian leader said there was no associate for talks on the Israeli side (Golan Heights Profile).

Israel

Israel has been willing in multiple past peace talks to relinquish nearly all of the Golan Heights back to Syria. For example, in 1999, then prime minister of Israel promised to return most of the land back to Syria. However, Syria wants a full return of the pre-1967 land to them, while Israel wants to retain control of the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (identified as Lake Tiberias in the map above). Furthermore, in April 2016, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that "The Golan Heights will remain in Israel's hands forever" (Israel to Hold). This was in reference to a possibility that the Golan heights may be included in a peace deal to end the Syrian Civil War.

Iran

Israel has recently stated concern regarding the "increased concentration of Iranian and Hezbollah forces on the Golan Heights". As stated earlier, the spillover concerning the Quneitra clashes has strained Iran-Israel relations. The Iran-supported Syrian Arab Army have become an increased point of discrepancy for Israel, who do not see a reason for Iran to be involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, Iran does have a place in the conflict now as they have increasing tensions with Israel, in part due to the Golan Heights (along with Hezbollah).

United States of America

As with the situation regarding Israel and Palestine, the USA have been a strong mediating force as tensions have risen in previous years. This included USA mediated peace talks in 1999-2000. Currently, the USA tends to side with Israel in the conflict but has had many criticisms of the way Israel has dealt with the situations and various peace talks in the past.

Turkey

Turkey has also attempted to play a mediatory role in the past. In 2008, Syria and Israel attempted to build peace talks once again under Turkey's auspices (Wires). Clearly, Turkey, along with many other member states in the region, are eager to solve the issue as the situation certainly has spillover effects on them. These effects include the lack of stability in the region brought on by displaced persons and the danger posed by military exchanges.

Russian Federation

Although Russia's role in the conflict has been a more indirect one, the obvious alliances of Russia with Syria and Syrian-related troops in the civil war has had a direct impact on the situation in the Golan Heights. Russia's backing of Syria is important because it provides them with the support of an important nation when most nations choose not to support Syria in the conflict.

Timeline of Key Events

Timeline of events in chronological order.

Date	Description of Event
June 5-10 1967	Israel seizes the Golan Heights from Syria in the end stages of the 1967 Six-Day War.
November 22, 1967	UN resolution 242 is unanimously adopted after the Six-Day War.
October 6-25 1973	Syria tries to reclaim the Golan Heights during the 1973 Yom Kippur war, but is eventually pushed further back. The ceasefire is enacted in resolution 338/339 shortly thereafter.
	UNDOF is implemented.

1974	
December 1981	Israel annexes the Golan Heights and brings its laws to the area. This was not internationally recognized.
1999-2000	US-brokered peace talks almost solve the issue but fall through.
2011	Syrian Civil War breaks out as part of the Arab Spring.
2012-2014	Quneitra Governorate Clashes and the Quneitra Offensive break out between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Opposition, causing tension within the Golan Heights between Syria and Israel as the fighting spills over in to the ceasefire zone

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, 22 November 1967 **(S/RES/242)**

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 338, 22 October 1973 **(S/RES/338)**

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

First of all, there were the relevant UN treaties, namely UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. 242 was created in the aftermath of the Six-Day War to establish sovereignty in the region and called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops. 338 called for the ceasefire which ended the Yom-Kippur War. The most notable previous attempt to resolve the issue was the previously mentioned USA-brokered talks between Israel and Syria in 1999-2000. The negotiations were in their final stages for a deal that would result in the withdrawal of Israel and a comprehensive peace structure, full normalization of relations and recognition. However, a line discrepancy of about less than 100 meters led to the deal falling through. This was because Syria wanted Israel to withdraw to the pre-1967 border, while Israel wanted to withdraw to the 1948 border. The main difference is that Israel wished to keep control of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias), where it receives 60% of its water along with the West Bank's mountain aquifers (Asser).

Furthermore, talks later in the decade came back, and there were multiple mediators. Again, the talks were unsuccessful. However, it must be noted that the wishes of both parties are clear at this point. Both would like a comprehensive peace agreement. Israel would like Syria to cut their ties with Iran forces and Iran-affiliated militants, and Syria would like Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights.

Possible Solutions

There are many solutions that delegates could pursue. The best solution for the current situation is many at once, given the complexity of the situation. First of all, delegates may choose to focus on stabilizing the situation for the UNDOF troops. Many observer forces are faced with difficult decisions because the situation has become too dangerous for the peacekeepers. By making sure the UNDOF is secure, the UN will be sure to have a strong foothold on the situation and be able to continue to implement resolution 338.

Secondly, delegates could take another approach at brokering peace talks between the two parties. Although this has been attempted many times, there is always room for change as circumstances change throughout the years. As the Syrian Civil War is now ongoing, there is an entire new dynamic to the situation. Not only is Syria in contention with Israel, but they are also fighting a war in their own country. Clauses that try to limit the impact of the civil war on the situation in the Golan Heights are therefore also an option.

Delegates can also choose how they want to choose a position and structure solutions around this position. After all, there are varying viewpoints from both sides. Delegates must be wary that a compromise that suits both parties equally well is always more implementable and preferable.

Appendices

Appendix A

Selected UN documents concerning the Golan Heights.

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