

How Trump's Decision on the Golan Helps Assad, Iran, and Russia

by [Mohamed Maher \(/experts/mohamed-maher\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohamed Maher \(/experts/mohamed-maher\)](#)

Mohamed Maher is an Egyptian journalist and researcher based in the United States, and he is also an alumna of IVLP's exchange Program sponsored by State Department.



Brief Analysis

Former U.S. President George Bush Sr. acted prudently when he convinced Israel's leaders not to respond when Saddam Hussein's missiles rained down on Tel Aviv in January of 1991 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. At the time, Saddam was trying to draw the region into an Arab-Israeli confrontation. An Israeli response would have hindered international efforts to liberate Kuwait by force, and this lack of response shifted overall Arab public opinion towards supporting the effort to liberate Kuwait.

Saddam's final attempt to forcibly sway public opinion in the Arab world against the Arab leaders who supported liberating Kuwait was hardly the first time that the Arab-Israeli conflict was exploited for purposes of domestic propaganda, nor was it the last. The Israeli issue was and still remains a 'magic ingredient' in the messaging used by the leaders of Arab regimes—pioneered by the historic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser to stir up public opinion in the Arab world.

When U.S. President Donald Trump signed a presidential proclamation on March 25th recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights, the U.S. administration inadvertently provided the Assad regime in Damascus with a historic opportunity to repeat this familiar Nasserist rhetoric. With the Golan Heights occupied since 1967, the decision violated international consensus, law, and international treaties regarding this issue, including UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967), which called for Israel's withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967, and Resolution 479 (1981), which reaffirmed the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.

In fact, Trump's recent decision is symbolic, and should not be understood as representative of the entire U.S. government. As foreign policy from the executive branch, this announcement would still require a congressional vote to become enshrined in U.S. law—an unusual circumstance in U.S. foreign policy. The Obama administration's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) emphasizes this point: indeed, the JCPOA with Iran sparked much debate in congress, as well as the passage of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, which allowed for congressional review of the deal. But because the JCPOA was not a legal treaty—which is subject congressional oversight—Trump was able to reverse it when he came into office. This earlier example demonstrates that as long as Trump's announcement regarding Israeli sovereignty over the Golan is not adopted into legislation by congress, the decision can easily be reversed by a future administration.

What this announcement has changed, however, is Assad's ability to use the Golan as a marker of legitimacy. Over the past five decades, the Syrian regime has linked its legitimacy to the concept of "resistance," a philosophy often exploited by totalitarian regimes to thwart the public's legitimate demands for democracy and social justice. With Trump's announcement, the Syrian regime immediately denounced the decision and requested the UN Security Council to examine the matter.

The regime's statements should not be taken as an indication of its desire to regain the Golan or as an attempt to resist Washington's effort to recognize the Golan Heights as part of Israel, but rather as a propaganda tool through and through. In other words, the regime believes that it can stir up Arab sentiment against the U.S. decision and mobilize popular opinion for its own purposes. A continuation of this rhetoric may even create a semi-plausible excuse for keeping Iranian and Russian forces in Syria. One of the ironies of the situation is that the Syrian regime, which has never violated the 1974 ceasefire agreement with Israel, is now lecturing the Arab world about the sovereignty and rights of Syria and Syrians. This is, of course, the same regime that has dropped barrel bombs and has used chemical weapons against its own civilians without hesitation in order to extend its power and impose its rule over Syria by force. Here, the question is what Assad would do with the Golan if Israel hands it over to him—will the occupied plateau return to the Syrian people, or will Assad give it to his friends in Moscow as with Tartus or to his allies in Tehran, as is taking place in **Latakia (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/alarm-in-israel-as-iran-plans-takeover-of-key-latakia-port-7zt0jvcvt>)?**

The Syrian regime's historical treatment of the Golan is further proof that Damascus's current rhetoric concerning the region is mere posturing. Hafiz Al-Assad met all offers for peace in return for regaining control over the Golan with arrogant disdain. He refused to participate in the 1977 peace negotiations with Egypt and Israel, turned down the latter's offer to withdraw from most of the Golan with some modifications that would have benefitted both sides, and finally rejected a solution due to the "ten-meter strip" disagreement—the question of boundaries initially outlined in 1923. The Obama administration tried to revive peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, but the civil war put an end to this ambition while prompting Iran and Russia to tighten their grip over the country.

Unfortunately, the sectarian regime is currently in the process of consolidating its rule using Lebanese, Quds force, and Iraqi sectarian militias sponsored by Russia and Iran. Accordingly, Assad has been looking for a reason to justify the Iranian presence in Syria. The revival of Golan issue provides him with the perfect justification, especially since other challenges such as the Islamic State or the lack of internal stability become less pressing.

Given the already damaging message of the Trump administration, congress members should resist any efforts to translate the decision into legislation. Congress should not give the Syrian regime any excuse to reinforce its domestic legitimacy. Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan can be treated as a mere presidential decree that does not represent the official U.S. position on the issue. On their part, U.S. officials can work towards a balanced plan, such as the U.S. mediation between Israel and Syria in the event that foreign forces withdraw.

While the withdrawal of foreign forces is unlikely for the foreseeable future, such a congressional move could increase pressure on Assad, or at least help to undermine his false claim that the regime is a 'resistance' movement. Efforts to liberate the Golan peacefully will certainly not be easy for Syrians or Arabs, and could involve tough, years-long negotiations. But while the Golan issue must be dealt with at a later date, helping or hindering Assad's propaganda should be an immediate concern. ❖



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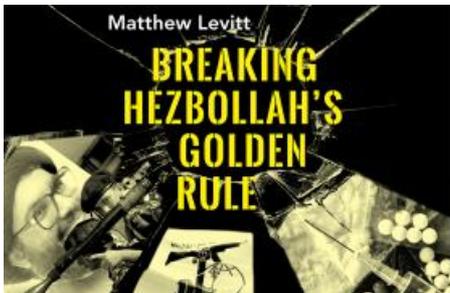
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