

For Syrians, the Golan Question Is a Deferred Issue

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Brief Analysis

Following Trump's [announcement \(https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1108772952814899200\)](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1108772952814899200) that Washington would acknowledge Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, the question of this area, occupied since 1967, has reemerged and captured the attention of the Syrian public. However, the Golan question is far from a new issue among Syrian circles. But while numerous Syrians—both pro-regime and opposition—have denounced the American decision in a kind of consensus response to the announcement, and though this decision has finalized in the eyes of many that the United States will not play a role in Syrian reconstruction, actual sustained protest against the announcement has been quite limited. In fact, the myriad of challenges currently facing Syrians has meant that the Golan issue is essentially on pause in the face of the daunting process of negotiating reconstruction.

In prior decades, the Golan had actually played a central role in the regime's claim to power. The Syrian regime had long perpetuated the notion that it needed to remain in control because it was the bedrock of the resistance against Israel both in Syria and the Arab world. Once the Syrian revolution began, this longstanding argument no longer held water. When the Syrian regime used its army against the popular uprising, Syrians argued that the regime had built its army and security forces solely to oppress Syrians; resisting Israel was merely a pretext to justify suppression of all opposition to the regime.

The regime's true motives became particularly transparent in recent years due to the many Israeli attacks on the Syrian [regime \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-strikes/israel-strikes-in-syria-in-more-open-assault-on-iran-idUSKCN1PE0Y2\)](#) and [Hezbollah \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/20/world/middleeast/israel-attack-syria-iran.html\)](#) (which entered the conflict on the side of the regime) that received no response from the regime or its allies. Rather, the regime instead responded with the common narrative that it had the right to respond to Israeli attacks "at the appropriate place and time."

Publicly, all political sides immediately denounced Trump's declaration. The regime's official media—the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)—quoted an [official source \(https://www.france24.com/ar/20190325--ترامب-سوريا-الجولان\)](https://www.france24.com/ar/20190325--ترامب-سوريا-الجولان) from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as saying that "a blatant assault on the sovereignty and unity of the lands of the Syrian Arab Republic, and that the US president has recognized the occupied Syrian Golan as part of the occupying Zionist entity." The anti-regime National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces also issued a [statement \(http://www.etilaf.org/press/الائتلاف-يحذر-من-مغبة-المساس-بالسيادة-السورية-على-الجولان\)](http://www.etilaf.org/press/الائتلاف-يحذر-من-مغبة-المساس-بالسيادة-السورية-على-الجولان): "The violation of the rights and sovereignty of the Syrian people over their territory is a condemnable act. Such a move opens the door to conflict in the region, directly contravenes international law and decision-making, and violates the principles that the United Nations was founded upon, especially regarding the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force."

Separately, a group of Kurdish parties, including the Kurdish Progressive Democratic Party and the Kurdish Unity Party, also issued statements rejecting the American decision. Similarly, the Syrian Communist Party (Unified) released a [statement \(https://shamra.sy/news/article/731348bceb89856338e8b9060984da56?amp=1\)](https://shamra.sy/news/article/731348bceb89856338e8b9060984da56?amp=1) arguing that the decision was contrary to the

UN Charter and the Security Council, and calling on different sides of the Syrian conflict to come together in the face of what it called “the American aggressor and the Zionist and Turkish occupation of Syrian lands.” The People’s Will party, an offshoot of the Syrian Communist Party under the leadership of Qadri Jamil, also issued a [statement \(http://kassioun.org/en/statements-documents/item/29115-golan-is-syrian-against-the-will-of-the-united-states\)](http://kassioun.org/en/statements-documents/item/29115-golan-is-syrian-against-the-will-of-the-united-states) against the American decision, stating that American support for Israel could cause America to lose its position as a mediator in the Syrian situation, and called for a rejection of any role for Washington in this political process.

Perhaps most direct is the Popular Committee for the Liberation of the Golan’s response. In addition to condemnations in the media, the organization is also currently in discussions with high-level officials regarding the idea of activating its military wing. The committee’s president [Ibrahim Al-Ali \(https://www.independentarabia.com/node/15061/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B6%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A8\)](https://www.independentarabia.com/node/15061/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B6%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A8) announced that the committee would examine all options for liberating the Golan, whether through seeking rights through international organizations or by any other means, including armed resistance.

Yet while pro-regime and opposition organizations alike have unanimously rejected the American decision, the difference lies in how pointed their stances have been towards the United States. The Syrian regime and those parties close to it have been [more severe \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/syria-condemns-trump-occupied-golan-heights-move-190322085625746.html\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/syria-condemns-trump-occupied-golan-heights-move-190322085625746.html) in their stance towards the United States compared to Syrian opposition group. The latter have claimed in its previous media statements that the Syrian regime was partly responsible for many of the problems in the Golan, which had begun under the previous Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, and even he before assumed office.

Aside from official party responses, there has also been a clear popular rejection of the decision that affirming Israel’s hold on the Golan Heights. However, the coverage of the issue in both traditional and Syrian social media indicates that many Syrians see the decision as just another setback in a series of disasters over the past eight years since the Syrian revolution. A considerable number of Syrians across the political spectrum are likely aware that they are not currently in a position to actually reject this decision. The most that can be done is that political groups can issue statements, or that citizens can symbolically demonstrate their opposition to the decision. However, even these steps have not been fully realized. There have not been major gatherings rejecting the decision in either regime-controlled or opposition-controlled areas except for a few assemblies of political parties and frameworks. This is the opposite of occurred previously during similar flare-ups of concern over the Golan.

Today, many see the Golan as a territory that the Syrian regime had already abandoned during Hafez al-Assad’s rule. Some Syrians have even compared the situation in the Golan to other areas such as Idlib, Jarabulus, and Afrin, which are under the control of the Turkish army. Still others have compared Damascus itself with the Golan, suggesting that the capital has languished under what these Syrians call the Iranian-Russian occupation.

At the same time, trust in the role of the United States in Syria has been shaken. This is far from the first time that Syrians have struggled with American policy. Syrians struggled to understand the confusing positions of the United States during the first years of the war regarding direct intervention on the side of the Syrian opposition, which ultimately added up to a series of threats and ultimatums without tangible steps on the ground. This early lack of clarity led to a loss of confidence in the United States among Syrians and gave Iran easier access as it spread into Syria.

Nevertheless, this most recent decision has had a particularly drastic effect in eliminating in the minds of many Syrians any possibility for future American involvement in solving Syria’s challenges. While Syrians had been waiting for American action in the political sphere, the recent decision regarding Israeli sovereignty over the Golan appears timed just after the United States declared its success in the war against ISIS. Many Syrians view this latest decision as one component of an unspoken international deal whereby the Golan becomes Israeli and Bashar al-Assad remains president of Syria.

Thus, the issue of the Golan for Syrians in general, and for the Syrian opposition in particular, is currently an issue to be tackled at a later date. For now, the focus is overwhelmingly on rebuilding a Syrian state, as well as continued efforts to remove the Syrian regime and terrorist organizations alike from Syria. What Trump’s recent decision has accomplished is to erode the confidence of

Syrians in Washington's role in finding a solution to the Syrian issue.

This new perspective may prompt a number of prominent Syrian opposition members to turn to [Russia](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-golan-russia/russia-to-deploy-military-police-on-golan-heights-idUSKBN1KN1CD) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-golan-russia/russia-to-deploy-military-police-on-golan-heights-idUSKBN1KN1CD>) for solutions instead, despite a previous reluctance to do so. Opposition members are now looking to Moscow to propose a compromise based on national priorities that does not deny the rights of the Syrian opposition to participate fully in politics as well as a diplomatic position that supports Syria's sovereignty over the Golan area.

Perhaps the former president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition Moaz al-Khatib's [proposal](https://syrianobserver.com/EN/features/49492/moaz-al-khatib-a-quiet-dialogue-with-syrias-pharaoh.html) (<https://syrianobserver.com/EN/features/49492/moaz-al-khatib-a-quiet-dialogue-with-syrias-pharaoh.html>) for an initiative including Syrian-Syrian dialogue under Russian auspices attests to the likelihood that Syrian opposition will increasingly turn towards Russia instead of the United States. Furthermore, the fact that Turkey's [official statement](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-israel-usa-cost-of-ankaras-anger-over-golan-heights.html) (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-israel-usa-cost-of-ankaras-anger-over-golan-heights.html>) on the Golan issue closely alligns with the Syrian and Russian position may drive the Syrian opposition to intensify efforts to follow the Russian path. Whether or not these efforts are successful, what is clear is that Trump's announcement done much to reduce U.S. influence in efforts to resolve the situation in Syria, and that the interests of other international players will be amplified by this move. ❖

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