The Golan's Druze Wonder What Is Best

by Seth Wikas **(/experts/seth-wikas)**

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When, earlier this month, the Israeli daily Haaretz uncovered the details of secret, unofficial Syrian-Israeli peace talks, it revived a familiar menu of questions and concerns whenever Syria and Israel negotiate: Would Israel give back to Syria all of the Golan Heights? How would its water resources be shared? Can either side trust the other as a true partner?

And what about the people who actually live on the Golan? Not the 20,000 Jewish settlers who have built 24 settlements there since 1967, or the 2,000 Alawites who live in the divided village of Ghajar along the Lebanese border. Rather, what will happen to the 20,000 Arabs living in four villages -- Majdal Shams, Ain Qinya, Masaade and Buqaata -- in the northeastern section of the plateau? The fate of the Golan's Arabs, who are Druze, illustrates the human side of future land-for-peace deals. It also highlights the emptiness of Syrian rhetoric about its "occupied Golan brethren," inasmuch as Druze villagers have been given little economic incentive to return to a Syria where they can expect to be poorer.

Yet economic incentives aren't everything. The Druze of the Golan went through turbulent days in the early 1980s, when they held strikes to protest against the Israeli government's attempts to force citizenship upon them. Hundreds were arrested, and some continue to languish in Israel jails. Less than 10 percent of the Druze took Israeli citizenship, resulting in their social ostracism. The Druze continue to talk about the 40-year-old Israeli occupation, travel restrictions, political prisoners and the continued presence of unmarked land mines on their lands.

Refusing citizenship, however, has not changed the life of the Druze in their villages or placed them at a significant disadvantage outside. Irrespective of their legal status, all residents have access to Israeli schools (which teach Torah and Hebrew), pay taxes and enjoy municipal services such as water and electricity. Once a year, the Druze clergy visit their counterparts in Syria, and high school graduates are allowed to study any subject of their choosing at Damascus University, for free, irrespective of their high school grades and test performances. In 1986, when the Israeli government gave up its efforts to "Israelify" the population, it neglected the area and allowed the villages a large degree of autonomy. All mayors must be Israeli citizens and are selected by the Israeli Interior Ministry. However, three of the villages don't have a mayor. Still, there is little crime and the villages function well enough.

Most worrisome to Golan residents when it comes to a future return to Syria are economic issues. While not as rich as the bon vivants of Tel Aviv, the inhabitants have a standard of living vastly surpassing that of their counterparts on the Syrian side of the border. "Life is all about the shekels," one resident of the largest village, Majdal Shams, told me on a recent visit. The locals work hard -- whether in agriculture, construction, or services -- and have little regard for

Syrians who, in many Golanis' minds, "drink tea and sleep all day." In Syria, working hard rarely ever translates into making more money -- unless you have government connections.

Nearly every day, the Syrian media talk about their oppressed brothers in the occupied Golan. Yet few Syrians have the slightest idea of daily life there. Just ask any student from the annual crop of 300-400 Golanis who travel to Damascus to attend university. Their university peers there are largely ignorant of Golan affairs. The students from the Golan -- a younger generation that may not have been born during the political turbulence of the 1980s -- understand that they are linked to Syria by blood and to Israel by economics; however, they have found that their identity, as time has passed, is tied mainly to their small parcel of land located between Israel and Syria. They feel stuck: a part of both states, yet a part of neither. While most identify themselves as Syrian and take Syria with both its grandeur and its faults, once in Damascus these students can see how the Golan has become a rhetorical tool that has not trickled down into Syrian public consciousness. This and the fact that they can earn more in Israel are why many young Druze, as well as their parents, fear a return to Syria.

Peace between Syria and Israel will allow the people of the Golan Heights to be reunited with their families, a paramount concern on both sides of the border. However, without domestic reforms in Syria that allow people to profit from their hard work, the return of the Golan to Syria will hardly alleviate the concern the Druze have for what might come afterward.

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He wrote this commentary for the Daily Star. ❖

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