

Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights: U.S. Recognition of Israel's Sovereignty Claim

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On March 25, 2019, [President Trump signed a proclamation](#) stating that the United States recognizes the Golan Heights (hereinafter, the Golan) to be part of the State of Israel, based on the rationale that any future peace agreement should address threats Israel encounters from Syria—including from Iran and the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah. The President did not specify the territorial bounds of Israeli sovereignty that the United States recognizes in the Golan. Israel gained control of [the Golan](#) from Syria during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and effectively annexed it unilaterally by [applying Israeli law to the region in 1981](#) (see **Figure 1** and textbox below for a map, synopsis, and timeline).

President Trump's proclamation changes long-standing U.S. policy on the Golan, and may have a number of effects (see "Outlook" below), including on [Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy](#) and the [security picture in and around Syria](#). Since 1967, successive U.S. Administrations supported the general international stance that the Golan is Syrian territory occupied by Israel, with its final status subject to negotiation (see "Background on U.S. Policy and International Involvement" below). In reaction to the proclamation and [the President's earlier Twitter statement](#), [others in the international community](#) have insisted that the Golan's status has not changed.

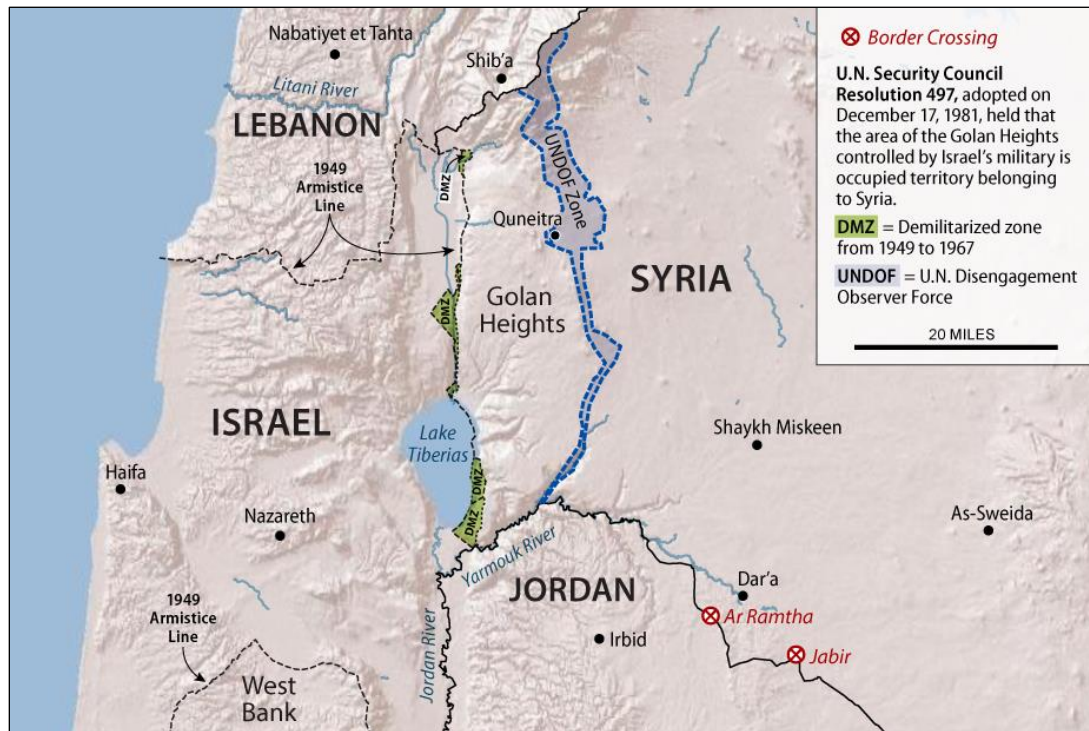
President Trump's action came during [a closely contested Israeli campaign](#)—with elections scheduled for April 9—while Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was visiting Washington, DC. During the campaign, [Netanyahu has called on the international community](#) to recognize Israeli sovereignty in the Golan, and his position is [widely popular in Israel](#). In Congress, [Senate](#) and [House](#) bills introduced in February 2019 support Israeli sovereignty claims, and would treat the Golan as part of Israel in any existing or future law "relating to appropriations or foreign commerce."

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Figure I. Map of the Golan Heights

Source: CRS, based on data from ArcGIS, U.S. State Department, ESRI, and United Nations.

Note: The DMZs could influence future border demarcation.

Golan Heights: Brief Synopsis and Timeline of Key Events

The area under Israel's control known as the Golan Heights is actually the [western two-thirds](#) of the geological Golan Heights—a plateau overlooking northern Israel. The eastern third remains under Syria's control, other than the zone monitored by the U.N. Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Israel's military has a [strategically important presence in the Golan](#), and the area it controls is known for its water resources and agriculture, and is home to [about 22,000 Israeli settlers](#) and [a similar number of Druze](#). Most of the Druze, who are concentrated in the northern part of the Golan, [retain Syrian citizenship](#) while having the option to apply for Israeli citizenship.

1949-1967 Sporadic Israel-Syria conflict takes place over disputed demilitarized zones at the margins of the Golan following an armistice agreement after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war

1967 Israel captures a portion of the geological Golan Heights during the June Arab-Israeli war; [approximately 100,000 Syrians and 13,000 Palestinian refugees](#) relocate to other areas of Syria; the U.N. Security Council adopts Resolution 242

1973 Israel ultimately retains its antebellum control of the Golan after an initial Syrian push during the Yom Kippur War

1974 [Israel-Syria disengagement agreement](#) creates a demilitarized zone between areas of Israeli and Syrian control to be monitored by UNDOF

1981 Israel effectively annexes the Golan unilaterally; the U.N. Security Council adopts Resolution 497

1991-2011 Various rounds of indirect Israel-Syria negotiation take place over the Golan

2011-Present Syrian civil war

Background on U.S. Policy and International Involvement

Previous U.S. Administrations consistently supported Israel's security interests in the Golan while maintaining the position that final borders were subject to Israel-Syria negotiation. A key example was a [1975 letter from President Gerald Ford](#) to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which stated that the United States supported a peace agreement with Syria that would assure Israel's security from attack from the Golan, and would give weight to Israel's position that such assurances might be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan. During the Reagan Administration, in December 1981 the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to adopt [Resolution 497](#) in response to Israel's de facto annexation of the Golan. The resolution stated that the annexation was "null and void and without international legal effect" and demanded that Israel rescind its action.

Since 1974, the [U.N. Disengagement Observer Force \(UNDOF\)](#) has patrolled an area of the Golan Heights between the regions controlled by Israel and Syria, with [about 880 troops from five countries](#) stationed there as of January 2019. During that time, Israel's forces in the Golan have not faced serious military resistance to their continued deployment, despite some security threats and diplomatic challenges. Periodic resolutions by the U.N. General Assembly (including [the latest in November 2018](#), which the United States opposed) have criticized Israel's occupation as hindering regional peace and Israel's settlement and de facto annexation of the Golan as illegal.

Outlook

The change in U.S. policy on the Golan Heights could have multiple effects. Some observers assert that, in response, [Arab states may be less willing](#) to encourage the Palestinians to consider future Trump Administration peace proposals. U.S. support for Israeli action against the "land for peace" principle set forth after the 1967 war in [U.N. Security Council Resolution 242](#) would contradict Arab states' position—articulated in [the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative](#)—that regional peace depends on the return of Arab lands

previously captured by Israel's military. [The Arab League](#) and [some of its member states](#) explicitly condemned the U.S. policy change and insisted that it did not change the Golan's status. [Some Palestinians reportedly fear](#) that U.S. support for Israeli claims in the Golan could be a "stepping stone" to acquiescing to an Israeli annexation of the West Bank.

For decades after 1967, various Israeli leaders, [reportedly including Prime Minister Netanyahu](#) as late as 2011, had entered into indirect talks with Syria aimed at returning some portion of the Golan as part of a lasting peace agreement. A number of factors may have influenced Netanyahu to shift focus from negotiating with Syria on a "land for peace" basis to obtaining international support for Israel's claims of sovereignty. These could include [Iran's increased presence in Syria](#), the effect Syria's civil war has had on its leadership and stability, and the Trump Administration's [2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital](#). In [March 20 remarks](#) justifying a permanent Israeli presence in the Golan, Netanyahu asserted that Israeli intelligence had uncovered efforts by Hezbollah to build a terror network in a nearby region of southern Syria.

Given the dramatic changes in Syria since its civil war began in 2011, the U.S. policy change also could affect regional security. Since 2018, [Israel and Iran have engaged in periodic conflict in Syria](#), including some cases of Iranian missiles targeting Israeli positions in the Golan. [The Syrian government](#) has denounced the U.S. policy change as an illegal violation of Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and insisted that Syria is more determined than ever to recover the Golan. Additionally, observers have argued that the policy change could unintentionally bolster [Syrian President Bashar al Asad](#) and [Iran](#) within Syria.

Note: Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Carmelina Palmer, previously an intern at CRS, provided valuable background research and analysis for this product.

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