

A Big Step for a Greater Israel. Trump's New Position on Syria's Golan Heights

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Hardly anyone noticed. The Trump administration quietly changed America's long-held position on Syria's strategic Golan Heights while attention was focused on the raucous political carnival in Washington. Though barely noticed, the policy change had enormous importance and will lead the United States into a lot of future Mideast misery.

The Golan Heights is a volcanic plateau that abuts Syria, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon. The plateau rises abruptly from the plain of Galilee, providing dominance of the entire region. To the north, Mt Hermon rises to over 9,000 feet (2,814 meters); the plateau slopes down at its southern extremity.

Golan provides the headwaters of the Jordan River and 15-20% of Israel's water from its snow-capped north. Israeli artillery atop Golan can hit Damascus and its airport. Electronic intelligence systems on Golan look down onto southern Syria, intercepting all communications and detecting troop movements.

The plateau is quite fascinating. I have walked most of the Israeli-held side, observing dug-in tanks, artillery and small forts surrounded by anti-tank ditches. Burned out wrecks of Syrian tanks and armor litter the countryside. I've also walked the Syrian side and explored the wrecked Syrian town of Kuneitra that was leveled by the Israelis in 1967.

Israel seized Golan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and annexed the plateau in 1981. Almost all of Golan's Arab population was driven out by the Israelis. The UN and US demanded that Israel return Golan to its rightful owner, Syria. After 1981, Israel moved over 20,000 settlers onto Golan to cement its control of the strategic heights and its water sources.

During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Syrian forces came close to pushing Israeli forces off Golan. Both sides suffered heavy casualties. For still unknown reasons, the Syrian armored offensive abruptly halted just as it reached the western edge of the plateau overlooking northern Israel.

My understanding is that Soviet recon satellites saw Israel deploying its nuclear bombs and missiles from their cave shelters. Moscow warned ally Syria that it risked nuclear attack by Israel unless its forces halted their advance so the Syrian offensive stopped on the verge of tactical success. This allowed Israel to concentrate enough reserve armored divisions to successfully counter-attack and drive Syria from the heights.

Since 1973, America's policy has been to demand Israel relinquish Golan while quietly allowing US tax deductible funds to expand Jewish settlements on the plateau. Israel even

reportedly offered to return Golan in exchange for a peace deal with Syria, but the secret terms of the deal were too onerous for Damascus.

The Trump administration abruptly changed US Mideast policy. First, it announced the US Embassy would move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, meaning that it rejected the idea of a Palestinian state with its capital in the old city of Jerusalem. Now, the White House has quietly accepted permanent Israeli control of Golan, though it violates international law and past US policy.

It's clear that US Mideast policy is firmly under the control of the neocons aligned to Israel's expansionist far right parties. In fact, it is impossible to see any difference between the policies of Israel's hard rightwing leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, and President Donald Trump. They are joined at the hip. A coterie of pro-Israel lawyers and property developers from New York City have completely taken control of Mideast policy.

More important, what the change in US Golan policy means is that Trump & Co are giving a green light to further Israeli territorial expansion. Now that Washington, which decries Russia's much more justified annexation of Crimea, has approved the illegal annexation of Golan, what could be next? Likely further chunks of southern Syria, an invasion of Lebanon and annexation of its water resources.

Saudi Arabia and its little ally, the United Arab Emirates, have already been given a green light by Washington to carve out strongholds in Yemen and along the strategic Red Sea coast. This is the Mideast 'peace' settlement that candidate Trump promised; an increasingly close alliance with the Mideast's most reactionary states, notably the murderous Saudi regime. This bodes ill for the United States.

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