

The Golan Heights

To Whom Do They Belong? Can Israel Survive Without Them?

In a transparent effort to improve his thuggish image, Syria's president Bashar Assad has proposed to meet with Israeli government officials to discuss the possibility of peace. There can be no question that "peace" is not on Mr. Assad's mind, but rather the recovery of the Golan Heights, from which Syria has launched three major wars against Israel.

What are the facts?

Historical Background—The Golan was always part of the Jewish homeland. The Syrian claim to the Golan is tenuous. Syria, as a political entity, did not exist at all until after the first World War. Until then it was just another province in the Ottoman empire, with ill-defined borders. In 1923, in an Anglo/French great power play, the border between Syria and Israel was established. The Golan Heights were ceded to Syria. Even before the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Syrians, having heavily fortified the area, subjected the villages in northern Israel to almost daily shelling, making normal life impossible. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Syria attacked Israel and was defeated. Israel occupied the Golan Heights and in 1981, for all practical purposes, annexed them.

Syria and its President—Syria is the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East. It is classified by the U.S. State Department as a narcotic-dealing and terrorist state. Its main fury is directed against Israel, which is perceived as a bulwark of Western influence and civilization, both of which Syria abhors and totally rejects.

Syria's former president, Hafez Assad, was a tyrant, every bit as ruthless and as cunning as his unlamented Iraqi counterpart Saddam Hussein. His son, the current president, is equally despotic, though not quite as smart as his father. Syria is a world center for terrorism. It still harbors Nazi bigwigs, who found welcome there after the World War. Few doubt that Hafez Assad was the mastermind behind the attack on the US Marines barracks in Beirut in which 241 Americans were killed. The Syrian government oversees one of the largest narcotics and counterfeiting operations in the world.

Syria has attacked Israel three times across the Golan. Given its implacable hostility, no responsible Israeli leader could possibly return the Golan to Syria. If it were to give up the high ground of the Golan and return to the "death trap" borders of 1967 or anything close to it, Israel, in order to survive, would have to rely on the good will of the Arab states, whose main policy objective is the destruction of Israel. Even though peace-for-peace would be the best solution, how about this: In order to assuage Arab pride, consider granting formal ownership of the Golan to Syria and having Israel—given the precedents of Guantánamo and Hong Kong—lease it back for a hundred-year period. An aggressor will attack only if confident of victory. With the Golan in Israeli hands, attacking Arab armies could be confident of defeat, and peace would be preserved. To hand back the Golan to Syria at this time would be a prescription for war and for Israel's destruction.

Military Security—The Golan is a small plateau of about 400 square miles. If it were a part of Syria it would be less than 1% of its territory. But it is of supreme strategic importance to Israel. Its high ground provides early-warning capability, without which Israel—just as in 1948, in 1967, and in 1973—would be subject to surprise attack by the Syrians. Its loss would obligate Israel to stay on constant alert and to maintain a state of readiness and mobilization that would be economically and socially untenable. The Golan, which ranges up to a height of 2300 ft., dominates the Jordan Valley, the lowest point on earth, about 700 ft. below sea level. On the Golan itself, there are only two natural terrain bottlenecks through which tanks can advance.

Those choke points are defensible and made possible the repulse of 1400 Syrian tanks that attacked Israel in the 1973 war. But with the Golan in Syrian hands, and without the radar installations that would give Israel warning of any military movements, thousands of tanks—backed up by missiles and airplanes—could overrun Israel in a matter of hours. It would be a strategically impossible situation, especially for a country as small as Israel—smaller than Lake Michigan, smaller by half than San Bernardino County in California. The Golan does not make for perfect defense, but it gives Israel a small, vitally important breathing space for mobilization.

The Golan is the source of over one-third of Israel's fresh water. In 1964, with the Golan in Syrian hands, Syria attempted to divert these headwaters and to cripple Israel's water supply. It is more than likely that, given another opportunity, Syria would once again attempt to destroy Israel's water supply.

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