

The Golan Heights or the Alsace-Lorraine of Syria

On 14 December 1981 Israel officially annexed the Golan Heights, which its army had occupied since 1967. This annexation was not recognised by the international community, who considers the Golan Heights occupied territory in the same way as the West Bank and Gaza. On 26 January 1999 the Israeli parliament passed a law reinforcing the Israeli character of the Golan Heights, and stated that it would henceforth require a two-thirds majority in the Knesset, or 65 per cent of the votes in a referendum, to restore the Golan Heights to Syria. This measure clearly complicated any negotiation with Syria, as the Golan Heights became, on Israeli constitutional grounds, more difficult to cede than the Palestinian occupied territories.

The Syrian population in the Golan Heights rejected the Israeli citizenship they had been offered and continued to demonstrate their attachment to Syria. Although mostly Druze, they persisted in refusing to integrate into the Jewish state, unlike the rest of the Druze community in Israel. The 5,000 Syrians that remained in the Golan Heights in 1967, in a population of approximately 80,000 people, increased to 22,000 by virtue of the demographic battle between the two parties. They are confined to five villages (excluding Ghajar) in the north of the plateau, while 95 per cent of the area of the Golan Heights is occupied by 20,000 Israeli settlers grouped in 34 settlements founded on the sites of destroyed Syrian villages. Unlike in the West Bank, colonisation levelled off because of the distance to the larger urban centres and fears over its return to Syria, although there has been an ambitious plan to bring in 200,000 Jewish settlers.

Israel presents the Golan Heights as indispensable to its security. On the one hand, this plateau overlooks the north of Israel and constitutes a natural barrier to any Syrian offensive; furthermore, Israeli surveillance stations monitor the south of Syria. On the other hand, the river basin of the Golan feeds the Sea of Galilee, from which Israel draws more than one-third of its water. In March of 2000 Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and the Syrian president, Hafez al-Assad, seemed close to reaching a peace agreement in exchange for the return of the Golan Heights to Syria based on the model of Egyptian Sinai. However, the negotiations failed, essentially over the question of the

delineation of ten metres of the border that would give Syria access to the Sea of Galilee. This detail about the status of the Sea of Galilee is crucial because it would mean that it is an international lake and, what is more, the greater part of its catchment area would be in Syrian territory. Israel would therefore need to officially negotiate with Syria on issues related to the utilisation of the water. In the north of the Golan Heights, the matter of whether the Shebaa Farms (25 sq km) and the village of Ghajar belong to Syria or to Lebanon is unresolved because it also raises the problem of the border demarcation between Israel and Lebanon (the Blue Line). After their retreat from southern Lebanon, the Israelis stayed in these two territories under the pretext that they were conquered from the Syrian army in 1967. However, according to a report by the United Nations in 2007, they in fact belong to Lebanon. This position is, of course, defended by Lebanon and provides Hezbollah with an argument to continue its military struggle against Israel, since it means that a part of Lebanese territory has yet to be liberated.

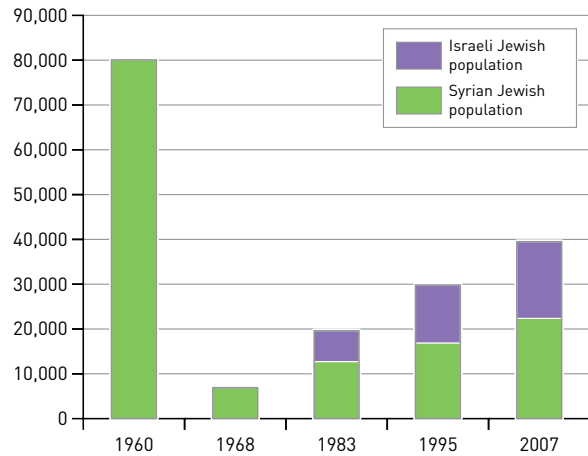
The aforementioned details show how difficult it was to demarcate the border between the French and British mandates in the region of the Sea of Galilee, precisely because of the Zionist claims to water resources. According to the Sykes-Picot Agreement the Sea of Galilee was shared by France and Great Britain, and the agreements of 1923 pushed the border 10 metres to the east of the lake, so that it was entirely within Palestine, leaving Syria only the right to fish in and navigate the Sea of Galilee. During the first Arab-Israeli war Syria conquered the eastern shore of the lake, which became the Armistice Line of 1949. The demilitarised zones were progressively reoccupied by the belligerents, but Syria kept the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee until the Israeli offensive of 4 June 1967 (the Six-Day War) that detached it from the Golan. They successfully recovered part of the plateau during the 1973 war; this part has since been under UN control.

The boundary claimed by Israel for its international borders is commonly called the "Line of June 4, 1967" because it preceded the Six-Day War. However, during the negotiations with Syria in 2000, Ehud Barak wished to negotiate only on the basis of the 1923 borders, which are more advantageous to Israel

SYRIAN AND ISRAELI JEWISH POPULATIONS IN THE OCCUPIED GOLAN

1960-2007

Number of persons

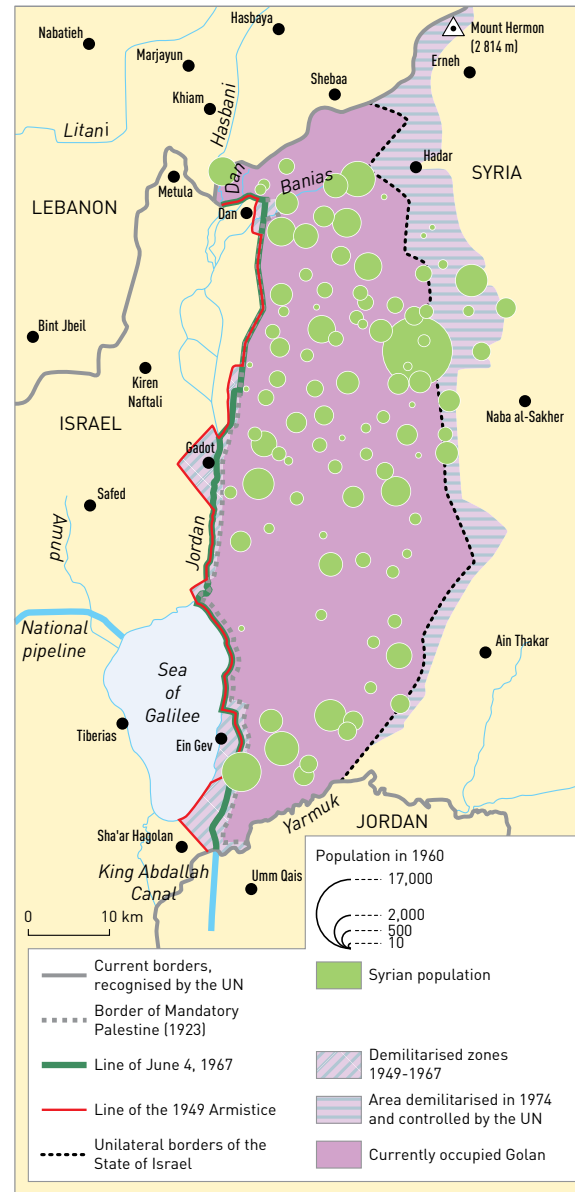


Source: 1960 Syrian census and Israeli censuses.

than the “Line of June 4, 1967” in the zone of Tiberias, much to the chagrin of Hafez al-Assad, who concluded that Israel was not sincere in its wish for peace. The distrust between Syria and Israel was such that the peace accords had little chance of succeeding in the short term, especially as both camps had very comfortably adapted to the status quo. The Israeli-Syrian border was calm after 1974. The Israelis preferred a cold confrontation to a hot peace.

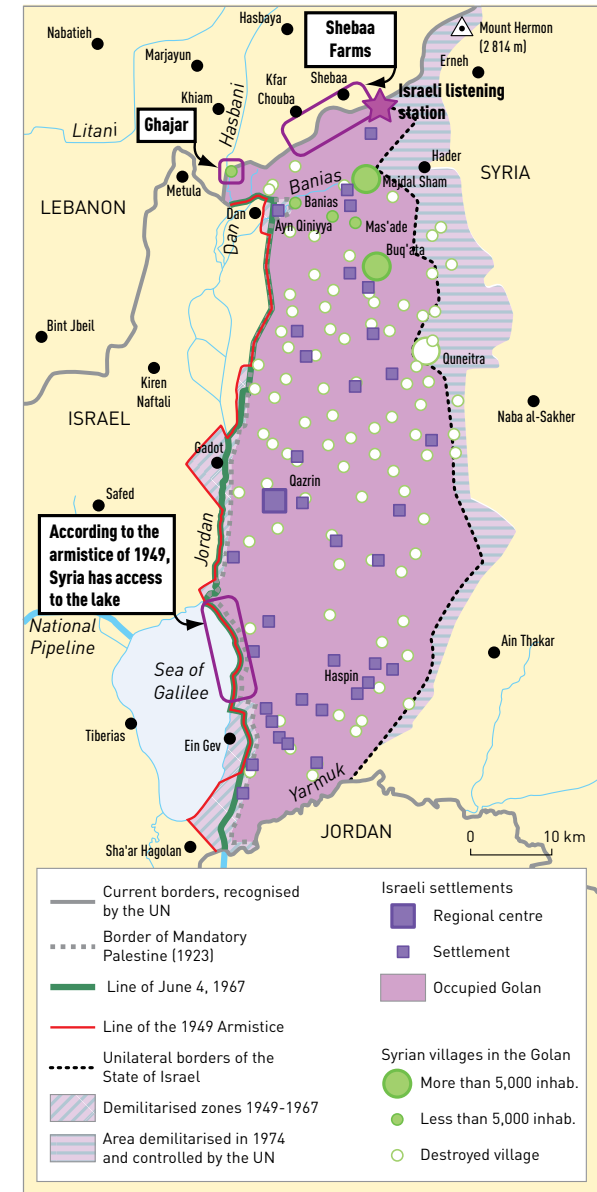
For Syria, the Golan Heights is what Alsace-Lorraine might have been for the French Third Republic: the Golan Heights are the equivalent of the French “Blue line of the Vosges,” cherished by all generations of Syrian school children since 1967. In October of 1973 the reconquest of part of the plateau, including the “martyr city of Quneitra,” was a victory for Syria and contributed to legitimising the regime of Hafez al-Assad in relation to the previous Ba’athists, which had lost the Golan Heights.

THE GOLAN HEIGHTS IN 1960



Source: general census of the Syrian population, 1960.

THE GOLAN HEIGHTS TODAY



Fabrice Balanche, 2011.

In May of 2011, Bashar al-Assad organised demonstrations over the issue of the Golan Heights in an attempt to rally the Syrian population behind his

threatened regime, but it did not bring about the expected burst of nationalism in Damascus.