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SYRIAN-ISRAELI PEACE IN THE GOLAN:  
NO WALK IN THE PARK

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## INTRODUCTION

Negotiations over the Golan Heights are critical to a lasting Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. The Golan Heights is a strip of land, which is vital to the military, economic, and nationalist interests of both countries. As an adequate agreement concerning the Golan Heights is vital to any future peace agreement between Israel and Syria, this research paper will explore a possible peace agreement between the two parties. This paper specifically aims to explore the feasibility of a Golan Heights Peace Park—a proposal put forth by government officials and political analysts alike as a possible means to accommodate Syrian and Israeli concerns.<sup>1</sup> In order to determine the viability of this plan, this paper will begin by exploring a brief history of the Syrian-Israeli peace process. Then it will analyze existing literature and the opinions of various diplomatic experts on this topic and describe why previous peace talks have failed. Then this paper will offer a description of the status quo in the Golan Heights today and will describe the main interests the Syrians and Israelis have in the Golan as they relate to security, geography, and legitimacy. This paper will then present the key empirical research that was gathered from qualitative interviews with dozens of Syrian Druze and Israeli settlers in the Golan, in addition to interviews with Syrian diplomatic experts, and it will analyze the level of support on the ground for a peace plan, particularly the idea of a peace park. Ultimately this paper will argue that a peace park is not a viable solution to the conflict. Finally, this paper will further propose initial

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Hof's article entitled "Mapping Peace between Syria and Israel" argues that Israel and Syria have deep ties to the Golan and that there are specific issues that can be compromised on between the Syrians and Israelis. These include: boundary, water, and frontier security regime issues. He suggests the idea of a Golan Heights Environmental Preserve. Under this agreement, the Golan would fall back under the sovereignty of Syria, while Syria would allow Israel to maintain access to its key water sources in the Sea of Galilee. Under this plan, a "Peace Park" would be created, such that a portion of the Golan would be shared by Israelis and Syrians, to promote bilateral cooperation.

conditions that must be met in negotiations in order to achieve lasting peace between Israel and Syria. In order to understand the terms needed to satisfy the Syrians and Israelis in any peace agreement, it is necessary to understand the history and importance of the Golan Heights region to both sides.

## LAND IN QUESTION

The Israeli portion of the Golan Heights is inhabited by approximately 40,000 people. Around 20,000 of these inhabitants are Israeli Jews while about 17,000 are Syrian Druze and 3,000 are Alawites.<sup>2</sup> The Israelis reside in towns and kibbutzes throughout the Golan while the Syrian Druze are concentrated in 4 villages in the east and the Alawites on the northern border. This paper will focus on the 2 largest groups—the Jews and the Druze. The Golan Heights is a hilly area of about 444 square miles. Its geographical boundaries extend from the Yarmouk River in the south, the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee in the west, Mount Hermon in the north, and Wadi al-Ruqqad in the east.<sup>3</sup>

The Golan's political boundaries, however, are much less clear. In the last century alone, portions of it have been ruled by Great Britain, France, Israel, and Syria. After World War I, France and Britain drew an international boundary, which allocated the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and a portion of the Yarmouk River to British-Mandated Palestine, leaving the majority of the Heights in French-Mandated Syria. While the boundary did grant Palestine valuable water resources, a mere 10 meter strip of land to the east of the Jordan River and a 50 to 400 meter strip to the northeast of the Galilee did not facilitate their defense.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Syrian forces succeeded in crossing the Jordan River and reaching the shore of the

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2 Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland, "Defensible Borders on the Golan Heights," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (2009).

3 "Golan Heights," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2009 18 April 2010 <<http://www.search.eb.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/eb/article-9037209>>.

4 Frederic C. Hof, "Line of Battle, Border of Peace? The Line of June 4, 1967," *Middle East Insight*, (1999).

Galilee. Following the war, Israel sought to recover the lost land while Syria insisted that the international boundary should be based on the military status quo. Nevertheless, under UN auspices, the two parties were able to reach a compromise: Syrian forces would withdraw to their previous positions while Israeli forces would stay out of the newly-evacuated areas, allowing for a demilitarized zone. While this new armistice line matched the 1923 boundary in some areas, it nevertheless created three significant enclaves of demilitarized land within Palestine. Over the next several years, tens of thousands of complaints of armistice violations abounded from both sides. Armed clashes ensued and this “game of inches” continued up to the June war of 1967.<sup>5</sup> During this six-day war, Israel overcame Syrian forces and took most of the Golan Heights. The Knesset extended Israeli law over the area in 1981, effectively annexing the land. Today Israel controls two-thirds of the Golan Heights.<sup>6</sup>

#### HISTORY OF THE PEACE TALKS BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL

In order to assess the conditions needed for a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty, it is necessary to scrutinize the relationship between the two countries, including the history of the peace process and why the talks have failed in the past. Israel was established in 1948 and has been embroiled in conflict with its Syrian neighbor since then. They have fought in three major wars, including the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in addition to the 1982 Lebanese-Israeli War, and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The most consequential of these was the 1967 Six-Day War. As a result of the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel acquired the Golan Heights from Syria and 300,000 Syrians were driven from the Golan.<sup>7</sup> Syria tried to gain back the Golan in the 1973 War but failed. The land was officially annexed by Israel in 1981.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the issue of the Golan Heights has been central to peace talks between

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5 Hof, “Line of Battle, Border of Peace? The Line of June 4, 1967.”

6 Eiland.

7 Stephen Zunes, “Israeli-Syrian Peace: the Long Road Ahead.” Middle East Policy 2 (1993).

8 “Timeline: Israel and Syria – Conflict and Negotiation.” See: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/05/21/>

Israel and Syria.

In 1991, peace negotiations were initiated in Madrid and continued until 1996 when Shimon Peres, the Israeli Prime Minister, cut off the peace talks because of Palestinian suicide bombings.<sup>9</sup> In 2000, Israel offered a withdrawal from the Golan but Syria refused because Syria wanted all of the land “that it captured in 1967, including the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.”<sup>10</sup> Because Israel obtains the majority of its water from the Sea of Galilee, it did not agree to these terms. Finally, in February 2008, Syria and Israel held peace talks indirectly through Turkey, but these talks were unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> Since 1967 all of the negotiations have failed because of a lack of compromise over the Golan Heights.

Many experts have written historical analyses postulating why previous talks have failed. In addition, the authors had a chance to interview people living in the Golan Heights and various diplomats in the United States. By evaluating these sources, this section identifies four main reasons for which these talks have not been successful and offers suggestions regarding what should be avoided in future negotiations.

## LEADERSHIP

Most of the existing literature on this topic blames the failure of the talks on leadership. Dennis Ross’ memoir argues that leadership and timing was one of the main reasons the peace talks failed. For example, he argues that when Israeli Prime Ministers Rabin and Peres were ready in the 1990s to make peace, Syrian President Assad was not, and when Assad finally was ready in 2000, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was not.<sup>12</sup> Patrick Seale also contends previous

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world/middleeast/20080521\_MIDEAST\_PRIMER.html

9 “Timeline: Israel and Syria – Conflict and Negotiation.”

10 “Rivals Israel, Syria Confirm Holding Peace Talks: Turkish Mediators Assist in First Contacts Since Failed Negotiations in 2000.” May 21, 2008. See: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24751629>

11 Timeline: Israel and Syria – Conflict and Negotiation.”

12 Dennis Ross, The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) 760.

talks failed due to a lack of genuine commitment from Rabin, as well as the fact that his offer was weak and the timing was off.<sup>13</sup> Ross maintains that a future peace will depend on both populations, as the “Arabs must accept compromise, (and) the Israelis must be willing to give up control.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout all Syrian-Israeli peace talks since 1991, each side has displayed extreme reluctance in taking the first step. For example, Syria has generally demanded that Israel completely withdraw from the Golan before it would completely normalize relations with Syria. In a similar manner, Israel has generally insisted that Syria completely normalize relations with Israel before it would consent to withdraw. With each side possessing such strong bottom lines, this diplomatic game of chicken has consistently resulted in a stalemate. Israel’s growing concerns regarding Syria’s ties to Iran and Hezbollah has only increased the intractability. Whereas up until 2000, negotiations had mostly been about “land for peace,” today the phrase “land for strategic reorientation” better captures the dilemma. In light of both parties’ hesitance to make the first move, the authors had postulated that a peace park plan could be a potential solution as it would require Israel and Syria would to simultaneously take the step together in order to establish a shared park.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

Domestic politics play an important role in a government’s ability to make a peace agreement. Israeli politicians have often found themselves frozen to inaction due to public opinion. Some have posited, for example, that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s concern with Israeli public opinion polls in 2000 contributed to the failure of those talks.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Israeli politicians have to concern themselves with maintaining often frail coalitions that can collapse at any moment. Current Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, finds himself

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13 Patrick Seale, “The Syria-Israel Negotiations: Who Is Telling the Truth?” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:2 (Winter 2000): 65-77.

14 Ross 762.

15 Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs 1948-2003* (Princeton University Press, 2004) 133.

with a weak coalition. A step in the wrong direction could bring his government to a swift end. Additionally, Ross argues that the political environment in Israel is competitive and relentless, and rival Israeli parties challenged peace, while at the same time Arab leaders lacked legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> The Syrian Ambassador to the United States also postulated that the complexity of internal Israeli politics and the relative power that Israeli settlers wield could have been an impediment to the peace process.<sup>17</sup>

A proper understanding of the domestic issues at play must certainly play a part in any potential peace agreement. While obviously neither side can change the nature of its political system, both sides can work to build confidence not only between each other but also among their publics. In the context of Shepherdstown, for example, Syria could have engaged in more public diplomacy to help Barak sell the deal to his public.<sup>18</sup> On numerous occasions, Assad's failure to condemn terrorist acts in Israel served to poison Israeli public opinion against a peace deal. In a similar manner, Israel could have avoided declaring the necessity of a public referendum on returning the Golan—a move deeply offensive to Syria which had damaging effects on the peace process. The authors postulated that a peace park plan could have tempered the blow for Israel to return the Golan to Syria because Israel would be allowed to retain access to water and nature reserves.

## ISRAEL-PALESTINE

The progress of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement directly affects the peace agreement between Syria and Israel. Seale describes how Rabin played the Syrians and Palestinians off each other and was never fully committed to a Syrian-Israeli peace.<sup>19</sup> Furthering this point, Bill Clinton's memoir describes his close relationship with President Assad and how much Clinton

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16 Ross 760.

17 Imad Moustapha, Syrian Ambassador to the United States, personal interview, April 23, 2010.

18 Rabinovich 134.

19 Seale, "The Syria-Israel Negotiations: Who Is Telling the Truth?"

valued Syria as he believed that “no peace in the region would be complete without Syria.”<sup>20</sup> Clinton attributes the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace talks to several reasons, one of them being the failure of the Palestinian-Israeli Peace talks between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak, which halted any hope for peace in the rest of the Middle East. After those talks halted, Clinton lamented that “there may be no peace while he was in office.”<sup>21</sup> Syrian embassy officials also noted that the Palestinian-Israeli peace process could have an effect on negotiations between Syria and Israel, noting that with the process between Israelis and Palestinians being intractable at the moment, an agreement between Syria and Israel is a more reasonable possibility.<sup>22</sup> A meaningful Syrian-Israeli agreement could set the precedent for any potential Palestinian-Israeli agreement in terms of returning land. As the Syrian Ambassador pointed out, if Syria entered into a peace agreement with Israel without having the Golan Heights returned to Syria, then the possibility of the Palestinians having their land returned would diminish.<sup>23</sup>

## HEZBOLLAH AND IRAN

The issue of Hezbollah is another reason that talks have failed in the past. Through support from Iran, Syria funds and arms Hezbollah, which is a primary threat to Israel. The issue of Hezbollah and Iran has been on the table in recent talks and even today, it remains a sticking point for peace. A Syrian embassy official noted that Syria is continually frustrated when cutting ties with Hezbollah is listed as a necessary pre-condition to talks.<sup>24</sup> It is evident from the existing literature and experts that the failure to create peace between Syria and Israel focuses on the mistakes of leaders and the pitfalls of the political environment in which they operate.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

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20 Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes*, (Simon & Schuster, 2009) 171.

21 Ibid 596.

22 Moustapha interview.

23 Ibid.

24 Personal interview with Syrian Embassy officials, April 23, 2010.

Any decision to return the Golan Heights to Syria will have to be sold to politicians and publics alike. Therefore, understanding the significance of the Golan for Israel and Syria provides a clearer picture of what sort of compromise must be made.

## HISTORY

While the Golan does not hold the same historical and religious significance for Israel as the West Bank, it nevertheless holds an important place in the Israeli psyche. Certainly there is a historical element to Israel's attachment to the land. The Jews began establishing communities in the area around 23 BCE. Remnants of these communities have been preserved in and around Katzrin—Israel's capital in the Golan.<sup>25</sup> Archeological sites containing ruins of ancient synagogues and other Jewish buildings are popular attractions in Katzrin, Gamla, and Umm al Kanatir, just to name a few.

Syria also has strong historical ties to the Golan Heights, with Syrians having inhabited the area for centuries. The Syrian ambassador to the United States noted the history of Syrians having lived in the Golan, and that Syria would not want to abandon the Syrians who currently live there.<sup>26</sup> The Golan has for years been a prized location for Syrians to live, thus adding to the psychological ties to the area. In addition, Syria has recent memories of colonial meddling. Alluding to Syria's past colonial history, the Syrian ambassador refers to the Sykes-Picot agreement, in which a secret agreement annexed part of Syria's land.<sup>27</sup> For him, this colonial history only makes it harder for Syria to bear the current annexation of the Golan Heights by Israel. With history abounding for both Israelis and Syrians in the Golan Heights, a peace park plan could potentially allow both Syria and Israel to showcase the rich traditions of the area.

## MILITARY/GEO-STRATEGIC

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<sup>25</sup> Eiland.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview with Syrian Embassy officials.

<sup>27</sup> Moustapha interview.

Understanding the geography of the Golan Heights and its geo-strategic and military importance to both Israel and Syria is critical to understanding the dispute over the land and to formulating an effective peace deal. The location, geography, and unique topography of the Golan Heights are paramount to the conflict between Syria and Israel. The Golan Heights acts as a buffer between Syria and Israel should a potential armed conflict erupt. It is apparent that for both Syria and Israel the military and strategic possibilities of the Golan Heights are paramount and cannot be discounted. Although there might exist some support for a peace agreement among both Syrian and Israeli populations, it is the Golan Heights that is a sticking point for both, as Frederic C. Hof notes in his article “Mapping Peace between Syria and Israel”:

While most Israelis want peace with Syria, very few favor returning the Golan Heights, which was seized from Syria in June 1967... While Most Syrians welcome the prospect of a just and honorable peace with Israel, very few would disagree that the price of peace is the return to Syria of all land seized from it in 1967.<sup>28</sup>

Thus both sides have arrived at an impasse. Both Israel and Syria might contemplate a peace agreement. However, neither one would consider returning the Golan Heights because of its military importance as well as its symbolic and psychological importance.

For Israel, the Jewish historical tie has never been the Golan's primary appeal. Indeed, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan once proclaimed that the Golan Heights “is not part of our ancestors' land.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, since its acquisition in 1967, this relatively narrow and high strip of land has primarily been viewed as the key to keeping Israel secure. Before 1967, Israel felt exposed to Syrian forces on the grounds above them. The pro-annexation movement slogan “Let's not lose the North” captures the sense that a loss of the Golan would equate a loss of

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28 Frederic C. Hof, “Mapping Peace Between Syria and Israel,” Special report No. 219, US Institute of Peace Mar. 2009.

29 Yael Yishai, “Israel's Annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights: Factors and Processes,” Middle Eastern Studies 21.1 (1985): 45-60.

reason and direction.<sup>30</sup> Since Israel has occupied the Golan Heights, it has used the land to further its military strategy, as Robert I. Friedman writes in this article, “Ceding the High Ground”:

Mount Hermon [in the Golan Heights] was captured by Israel at the end of the Six-Day War. Today, Israeli troops here possess some of the world’s most sophisticated eavesdropping devices. On a clear day they not only can see the Cham Palace Hotel (Damascus’s tallest building) but can also listen in on phone calls as far away as western Iraq. For Syria, Israeli troops on the Golan represent an intolerable violation of sovereignty. For Israelis, who vividly recall Syria gunners shelling Galilee farmers before the Six-Day War, the return of Syrian troops to the Golan would be unthinkable... Ironically, in an era when an F-15 can cross the Golan in five seconds, both sides share an almost primal fear of a ground invasion. Either side could inflict grave damage on the other without the Golan: Syria with its Scud-C missiles (range 370 miles), Israeli with its Jericho-IIs (880 miles). But the importance of the Golan lies in its usefulness as a staging area for invasion. And neither side will trust any nation-except the U.S.-to keep the two armies apart in the event of war.<sup>31</sup>

As can be elicited from Friedman’s observations, the Golan Heights is central to overall military strategy of both nations. The topography of the region and its relative mountainous areas provide an ideal area from which to launch attacks and conduct clandestine eavesdropping and surveillance activities.

Furthering the argument that control of the Golan is vital to both nations’ national security interests, a retired Israeli Defense Forces Major General has also recently argued that the Golan has retained its strategic value despite the advancement of modern weapons. He argues that although Israel’s military advantages have continued to increase over the years, Syria has developed three capabilities which offset the advantage: improved infantry capabilities—particularly in anti-tank weaponry, increased surface-to-surface missile capabilities, and the

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30 Yishai.

31 Robert Friedman, “Ceding the High Ground,” *Harper’s Magazine* (April 1995): 67-69.

extent of its chemical weapons arsenal.<sup>32</sup> While an analysis of these military capabilities is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless significant to note that there are high-ranking Israeli military officials who would strongly view a withdrawal from the Golan as a reckless and irresponsible act.

In order to gain additional insight into the importance of the Golan, the authors interviewed numerous Syrians and Israelis who reside there. While not intended to be a comprehensive and definitive poll on public opinion in the Golan, these interviews nevertheless aim to give a sense of some common viewpoints in the area. At this point in time, there seems to be no consensus among Israelis in the Golan about whether or not Israel should make peace with Syria. Some claim that their departure from the Golan would be worth making peace with Syria. Moreover, some Jews felt that peace was so close by 2000 that they began looking at properties outside the Golan. Others proudly assert, however, that they would be the first ones to fight for their land. Many Israelis in this camp are satisfied that Israel's military victory in 1967 validates their right to be in the Golan. Some point out that Syria is already several times larger than Israel and cannot possibly need the land more than Israel does. Additionally, the belief that the Syrians would not care for the land as well as the Israelis is also quite common.<sup>33</sup> However, a peace park plan could potentially ease some of these concerns, as it would require a working relationship between Israel and Syria and the focus of such a plan would be peace.

Expanding on interviews with the Golan's Israeli residents, both camps nevertheless recognize that there is a divergence of opinion, some estimating that public opinion is nearly split in half. Surprisingly, however, this does not seem to be an overly contentious issue. In other words, those in one camp do not seem to harbor particularly harsh feelings for those in the other

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32 Eiland.

33 Personal interviews with Israelis in the Golan Heights, March 13-15, 2010.

camp. Indeed, there appears to be an almost unstated understanding that both sides of the argument have merit. This mutual acceptance is likely due to pervading security concerns. While it would be inaccurate to characterize these Israelis as fearful, there is nevertheless an undertone of insecurity in the manner in which they discuss their lives. While some are generally more concerned about the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran than the possibility of rockets from Hezbollah falling on their homes, the connection between these issues is not altogether lost. Many were quick to point out that the Golan is vital to Israel's security—much more so than other territories acquired by Israel. In fact, one interviewee referred to the Golan as “the eyes of Israel”<sup>34</sup>—Israel's means to stand watch and protect itself from its enemies. Above all else, most expressed their desire to live in peace. Unfortunately, however, the belief that the Arabs are the ones who do not want peace is quite common.<sup>35</sup> This deflection of blame—whether real or merely perceived—is certainly an impediment to garnering public support for a peace plan. However, when asked if Syria wanted peace, the Syrian ambassador asserted that Syria does want peace, otherwise they would have entered into talks in the past. Although security concerns are a major issue for both countries, there must exist a real desire for peace on both sides.

## WATER

The Golan is also a very significant source of water to a mostly arid Israel. Indeed, access to this valuable resource also plays into Israel's strategic argument for holding on to the Golan. Israel obtains one third of its water supply from Golan Heights.<sup>36</sup> While desalinization is used somewhat, there are limits to its viability. Because Israel depends on natural gas and coal from Egypt, the large amount of energy required to run desalinization plants is a major concern.

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34 Personal interview with Israelis in the Golan Heights.

35 Ibid.

36 “Regions and Territories: The Golan Heights.” See: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/country\\_profiles/3393813.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/3393813.stm)

Furthermore, Israel's relatively small coastline is already quite developed—additional desalinization plants could prove to be quite harmful. Importing water may theoretically be an option, but it would be a very tough political sell in a country that finds itself in a region surrounded by so many enemies. Thus, a peace park plan would address this issue as it would grant Israel access to water, which is significant as Israel views its independence regarding access to fresh water with the utmost importance.<sup>37</sup>

## QUALITY OF LIFE

For most average Israelis today, the Golan represents an ideal quality of life. In an otherwise small and somewhat cramped country, the Golan Heights' wide-open spaces and natural beauty are of psychological importance to Israelis.<sup>38</sup> The tourism slogan—“Golan: open up to life”—markets the area to Israeli and foreign tourists alike as a place where one can escape the pressures and confines of city life and enjoy the natural beauties Israel has to offer. Many Israelis residing outside the Golan speak fondly of the land and express a longing for their next vacation there.<sup>39</sup>

While there are certainly a number of conservatively religious Jews residing in the Golan, particularly on some of the kibbutzes, they are not generally militantly religious. Indeed, many conservative Jews who claim they would fight to defend their land say they would not do so for religious reasons, but rather to protect their own way of life.<sup>40</sup> This psychological attachment to the land will certainly only add to the challenge of selling a peace deal to the Israeli public. A peace park plan could allow Israelis to still visit a land which they find so beautiful. However,

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37 Arielle Farber, John Jabbour, Claudine Roshanian, and Angela Simaan, “Israeli-Syrian Hydropolitics: The Golan, Water, and Prospects for Peace,” The Institute for Middle East Studies, 2009.

38 Frederic C. Hof, “Mapping Peace Between Syria and Israel.”

39 Personal interviews with Israelis in the Golan Heights.

40 Ibid.

nearly all of the Israelis interviewed felt that any sort of land-sharing scheme would not work. These Israelis emphasized a lack of trust on both sides.

## LEGITIMACY

For Syria, the significance of the Golan Heights is not merely one of quality of life and access to water. It is one of legitimacy and national importance. As the Syrian Ambassador mentions, thousands of Syrians are still living in the Golan Heights.<sup>41</sup> However, since Israel has annexed this portion of land, Syrians who live on the Israeli side of the Golan Heights are unable to see their families, due to border restrictions. Syrians will not easily forget their compatriots who have been in the Golan since 1967. Retrieving the Golan Heights and allowing those residents to return is a matter of national importance for Syria. Former Syrian President, Hafiz al-Assad, as an authoritarian leader from a minority sect, always had to be mindful of his legitimacy in the eyes of the people. As Minister of Defense in 1967, Assad's biographer, Patrick Seale, notes that Syria's loss of the Golan Heights was a turning point in his life. Although Assad did not consider himself personally responsible for the loss, much of the blame was directed towards him.<sup>42</sup> Assad likely felt strong pressure to not come to any agreement that would make him appear weak or that would suggest he did not recover the entire Golan, which only proves how important the Golan Heights is to the legitimacy of Syrian leaders.

## IDENTITY

From the authors' interviews, it was evident that the Syrians living in the Israeli portion of the Golan are very open about professing their loyalty to Syria and their desire to return. Syrian flags, photographs of Syrian presidents, and pro-Syrian demonstrations are common in the four Golani Druze villages. Many still have family living in Syria proper. Most identify more

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41 Moustapha interview.

42 Patrick Seale, Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East (University of California Press, 1988) 143-144.

with Syrian culture than with Israeli culture. They watch Syrian movies and listen to Syrian music. Although many have learned to speak Hebrew, Syrian Arabic is spoken on the streets and in the homes of Golan Druze. Ties to Syria are further reinforced by an Israeli agreement which allows the youth to attend university in Syrian cities. If these college students do not return to the Israeli side of the Golan upon graduation, however, they will not be allowed to return later on. Much like the Israelis we spoke with, many Syrians blame the lack of peace on the other side. They claim that Israel is only interested in land, not peace.<sup>43</sup>

When Israel annexed the Golan Heights in 1981, the Syrian inhabitants were offered Israeli citizenship. Nearly all of them refused to renounce their Syrian citizenship as a means to protest the annexation. The authors' sources claimed that only about 1% of Syrians in the Golan accepted Israeli citizenship. These Syrians were then effectively ostracized from the rest of their society. Today they remain socially isolated—even intermarriage between pro-Israel and pro-Syria Druze is extremely rare to nonexistent.<sup>44</sup>

Many Syrian Druze feel they live outside the bounds of Israeli democracy. Although there are a number of Druze politicians in the Knesset, they are often regarded as traitors for having accepted Israel and its government. Moreover, there is a sense among some of the residents of Majdal Shams—the largest Druze village in the Golan—that Israel is excessively involved in their lives. Some residents complain, for example, that the Israeli government appoints their school teachers, thereby prohibiting Syrian nationalist views from being expressed in schools. One interviewee spent time in an Israeli prison for protesting the manner in which the Israeli government appoints members of their local council. Proudly displayed in this man's home were pictures of his fellow prisoners—a symbol of their strong resistance to Israel.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Personal interviews with Syrians in the Golan Heights.

44 Ibid.

45 Personal interviews with Syrians in the Golan Heights.

While many of Majdal Shams' older residents maintain hard-line views regarding the land and their loyalty, several of the younger generation are more accommodating in their views towards Israel. Although they are quick to affirm their love of Syria, they nevertheless profess no animosity towards Israel and express a desire to have more Jewish friends. Furthermore, some have little interest in going to Syria and would prefer to attend university in Israel, which, in their view, would provide them with a better education. Despite their apparent acceptance of their lives in Israel, however, they continue to ardently proclaim that the four Druze villages should be returned to Syria. This attitude seems to indicate an underlying internal conflict—on the one hand, these youth identify more as Syrians and would feel a greater sense of belonging in Syria. There is certainly a sense of isolation—they are cut off from family in Syria and largely removed from Israeli culture. On the other hand, they long to create decent lives for themselves and their future families. While never wanting to abandon their loyalty to Syria, they nevertheless recognize that it is in their interests to make the most of what they have.<sup>46</sup>

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GOLANIS' VIEWS

In discussions with both Israelis and Syrians, one common denominator was people's sentiment that, no matter what their personal views, a peace agreement or lack thereof is ultimately not for them to decide. Both groups feel rather disconnected from their politicians who, in their view, are calling all the shots. While it is indeed the politicians who will negotiate, the politicians who will decide to go to war, and the politicians who will sign peace treaties, the authors submit that the views of the people are immensely important to the peace process. As discussed previously, throughout the Syrian-Israeli negotiations there have been numerous instances when a leader caved into strong domestic pressure and retreated from his original position.

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46 Ibid.

## A PEACE PARK AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

This paper originally aimed to explore the possibility of a peace park as a means to achieving peace between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights. Such a peace park would give Syria sovereign rights to the land of the Golan Heights up to the 1967 line, which is a condition for Syria, and it would give Israel access to water and nature reserves in the Golan. Through research on public opinion polls and qualitative interviews with dozens of Syrians and Israelis, in addition to an interview with Syrian Embassy officials, it appears that a peace park is not a viable solution for peace. While in theory it is a creative solution that aims to satisfy the economic needs of the Israelis and the nationalist concerns of the Syrians, it does not seem to be a feasible idea. Ross opines that “creative solutions” such as a peace park, if employed at all, are best saved till “the parties are looking for a way out.”<sup>47</sup> As long as leaders on both sides have such unshakeable bottom lines and the citizens of both nations do not display sufficient support to make such a plan politically viable, the likelihood of this plan's successful implementation is very low. For example, the Syrian ambassador stated that while creative solutions such as a peace park should not be discouraged, they would likely not factor into peace negotiations between Israel and Syria. He also mentioned that giving another country, in this case Israel, access to water within the boundaries of another sovereign nation, was unprecedented and a condition that Syria would not accept.<sup>48</sup>

Little support was found among Israelis and Syrians for such a plan, and surely public support would be crucial to the implementation of such a project. First, Syrians and Israelis have a deep psychological connection to the land that is indissoluble. Several IDF soldiers in addition to Israeli shopkeepers that the authors interviewed said that this was their land and that they

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<sup>47</sup> Ross 529.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with Syrian officials.

would fight for it if necessary. Similarly, many Syrians did not support the notion of sharing the land. A Syrian Druze couple in Majdal Shams asserted that they wanted all of the land back for Syria's national pride and to be free from occupation.<sup>49</sup> The Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. also characterizes the Golan as being occupied, and spoke of Syria's deep psychological attachment to the land.<sup>50</sup> He opined that anything less than a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders would still be an occupation. Professor Murhaf Jouejati expressed similar sentiments as he noted that the Golan is important to him personally because it is part of Syria and Israel has created a refugee situation, since it has occupied the land. In terms of sharing the land, Jouejati said that the (Golan) territory is not negotiable and that Syrian President Assad would be viewed as weak if he compromised on the 1967 lines.<sup>51</sup> Assad himself said, "the land is not negotiable, and the Israelis know that we are not going to negotiate the line of 1967."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to these personal anecdotes, public opinion polls display similar results. According to a recent Israeli-Palestinian Public Opinion Poll, "62% of Israelis oppose full evacuation of the Golan Heights in return for a complete peace agreement with Syria,"<sup>53</sup> suggesting that Israel is unwilling to budge on giving up the Golan as well. Deep psychological ties to the Golan region make it difficult to accept the concept of a shared peace park, as both sides want the symbolism of all of the land to themselves.

A peace park does not solve the more pressing security concern for Israel about Syria's connection with Iran and Hezbollah. Since 2000 negotiations have become more complicated because the Iran and Hezbollah issue has garnered more attention and Syria has not committed to

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49 Personal interviews with Israelis and Syrians in the Golan Heights.

50 Personal interview with Syrian officials.

51 Jouejati interview.

52 "Syria Calling: The Obama Administration's Chance to Engage in a Middle East Peace." See: [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/06/090406fa\\_fact\\_hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/06/090406fa_fact_hersh)

53 "Israeli-Palestinian Public Opinion Polls: Joint Israeli-Palestinian Poll, June 2009." See: <http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=279>

severing its ties with these entities that pose a threat to Israel. For example, none of the Syrians we interviewed said that Syria would guarantee to cut off its ties with Iran and Hezbollah in exchange for the Golan. President Assad himself said, “You discuss everything after the peace and getting your land. Not before.”<sup>54</sup> This suggests that he would not agree to cutting off ties to Hezbollah and Iran until after he got the land back. Syrian embassy officials also opined that the issue of Hezbollah and Iran is an unnecessary pre-condition, as it does not address the core issue of land. Israel would be more willing to negotiate over the Golan if it could be assured of Syria cutting off its ties with Iran and Hezbollah. For example, in a 2009 public opinion poll, it was noted that “if in the peace agreement, Syria will commit to disconnect itself from Iran and stop its support of Hezbollah and Hamas, support (for Israeli-Syrian peace) increases to 34%.”<sup>55</sup>

Finally, domestic politics in Israel are an obstacle to the peace plan. There is no political impetus or signaling from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that he would be willing to give up (or share) the Golan for peace, and likewise Syrian President Bashar Assad has not signaled that he would be willing to negotiate on his ties to Iran and Hezbollah in exchange for peace. Given these obstacles, a mere peace park is not the solution. The people in the Golan, Syria, and Israel, as well as leaders on both sides, are not supportive of it and it will not address the deeper concerns that are needed to achieve peace.

In conclusion, this paper recommends a set of conditions needed to achieve a lasting peace between Syria and Israel. First, it is critical to build upon what the Syrians and Israelis have already agreed to, including a joint water sharing mechanism and a security station for Israel at Mt. Hermon. The issue of water resources and security for Israel will be key in future talks. Second, the issue of Syria’s ties to Iran and Hezbollah will be vital to a future peace

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54 “Syria Calling: The Obama Administration’s Chance to Engage in a Middle East Peace.”

55 “Israeli-Palestinian Public Opinion Polls: Joint Israeli-Palestinian Poll, June 2009.”

agreement. While it is not likely that Syria will renounce its ties with Iran and Hezbollah up front, there needs to be some level of certainty based on private diplomacy that Syria will begin to steer away from Iran and Hezbollah in the future if it gains the Golan back. Third, Israel's government needs to recognize that the Golan is a source of national pride to Syria, and that they will not be able to make a long lasting peace with Syria until they give up the land back to the 1967 borders. Fourth, the United States should be a mediator in any future negotiations. Both Israel and Syria have expressed an interest in having the U.S. mediate talks, particularly as Turkey's poor relationship with Israel makes it an objectionable option to the latter. Fifth, it is critical to emphasize that a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement will help achieve an overall Arab-Israeli peace, and specifically will influence the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. These five conditions will be crucial for any future Syrian-Israeli peace treaty, and such a treaty will help create a lasting peace in the region.

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