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Israel and the Golan Heights

By **Michael Curtis**

On June 11, 2013 Austria began withdrawing some of its 377-member contingent of the five-country United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) from the demilitarized zone on the cease-fire line between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights. The withdrawal was occasioned by the injury of two of the contingent caused by rebels who were fighting against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and briefly captured the town of Quneitra, the major crossing point between Syria and Israel in the zone. Austria felt the risk to its other soldiers was too great since the civil war had made the Golan a target area for both Assad's forces and the rebels.

The lesson can be quickly drawn: Israel cannot leave its security in the hands of an international force. That force cannot guarantee peace, especially against terrorist groups. An ironic reflection might be that UN observers, like UN peacemakers, are particularly effective when there is no fighting to observe or conflicts to resolve. Japan and Croatia already had pulled out their contingents in Golan because of military danger. Russia volunteered to replace the Austrian contingent, but this was a theatrical gesture since the original Israeli-Syrian agreement on Golan bars permanent members of the UN Security Council from being part of UNDOF. An additional irony is that the UNDOF headquarters base is located in Israeli territory, despite the condemnations of Israel by organizations of the United Nations on so many occasions.

All parties need reminding that UNDOF was created by UN Security Council Resolution 350 issued on May 31, 1974. It was to implement UN Security Council Resolution 338 of October 22, 1973 that was passed in the last days of the Yom Kippur War. This Resolution called on all parties to cease firing and to fulfill the crucial Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967 which called for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. The likelihood of this outcome has waned since Assad, who had previously been viewed as presiding over a failed state about to disintegrate, is now in control as a result of military victory in Qusayr and is presently considering an attack on Israel in the Golan Heights in collaboration with Iran and Hezb'allah.

The Austrian withdrawal has reminded the world of the unstable situation in and around Golan and the fear that terrorists and the increasingly potent Hezb'allah may come into the area. It is usually forgotten that, technically, Syria has been in a state of war with Israel since 1948. In spite of an armistice agreement in July 1949, clashes and shelling by Syria of Israeli territory continued unabated between 1948 and 1967. The UN Mixed Armistice Commission set up in 1949 failed to police the area successfully.

During the Six Day War, Israel captured the Golan Heights on June 10, 1967. Syria tried to retake the territory in the 1973 war, during which Israel suffered heavy losses. The cease-fire and later disengagement agreements left Israel in control of two-thirds (440 square miles) of the total geological Golan area, though the main town of Quneitra remained in Syrian hands.

For seven years Golan was under Israeli military rule until December 14, 1981, when the area was put under civilian rule and annexed by a law that extended Israeli civil law, jurisdiction, and administration to all citizens who lived there. Predictably, the UN General Assembly called on Israel to "desist from changing the institutional structure and legal status of the Occupied Syrian Golan." In Golan now there are 30 Israeli settlements with a population of about 20,000 and also 20,000 Syrians, mostly Druze. A pleasurable, if surprising, aspect of those settlements is the 30-year-old Golan Heights Winery in Katzrin, owned by four kibbutzim (collective farms) and four moshavim (cooperative farms) that produce the high quality wines Yarden, Golan, and Gamla. It is a reminder that winemaking by Jews goes back 3000 years, but was interrupted by the rise of Islam and Islamic strictures against alcohol consumption.

Israeli settlement in the Golan area is ancient. For four centuries, between 953 and 586 B.C. the Kings of Israel were engaged in a power struggle in Golan with the Aramaeans who ruled Damascus. More than 60 synagogues in the area date back to Roman and Byzantine times. Jewish settlement was halted in 636 when the area was conquered by Arab armies. The area was subsequently controlled by different conquerors: Amorites, Assyrians, Babylonian, and Persian Empires, Greeks, Arabs, and Mongols. Finally the Ottoman Empire seized it in the 16th century and ruled it as part of the vilayet of Damascus until 1918. France, under the League of Nations mandate, controlled the area until it became part of the independent Syrian Arab Republic in April 1946.

In the international maneuvering after World War I, the boundaries of the Middle East were defined by Britain and France. Golan went to Syria under the French Mandate, while a small part of the nearby land (Tel Dan and the Dan Spring) went in 1924 to the British Mandate of Palestine which also included the Sea of Galilee. Yet Syria has never recognized the Anglo-French drawn

boundary of 1923 as totally valid.

The problem of control of Golan remains. The elevation of the Heights, a plateau 1000 feet above sea level, makes Golan a strategically important military asset. Water from catchments in Golan go into the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. Israel wants to control Galilee and argues that any border should be a few yards from the shore. It is understandable that Israel would be concerned about Syrian control of water supplies. A compromise solution would be Israeli ownership of the water with Syrian access guarantees. Once a desolate area, Golan is a now a fertile site with orchards and vegetables, as well as vineyards, and even has a ski resort. Israel has engaged in exploratory drilling for oil and gas in the area.

Problems, political and military, remain, including disagreement over the legal status of the demilitarized zone and arguments about the political and legal rights over the land. Syria in the 1950s took over the land south of Lake Tiberius, and controlled the eastern shore of Tiberius. There is disagreement over the small area of Shebaa Farms (8.5 square miles), on the border between Lebanon and Syria, which is claimed by Lebanon, but which Israel insists is part of Syria, and therefore in Golan.

For Israel a dilemma exists. Most important is the military threat to Israel if Golan is used, as it has been in the past, by Syria and its allies to attack the Jewish State. Israel's main objective is a comprehensive peace with its Arab neighbors and their recognition of the existence and legitimacy of the State of Israel. To that end a number of Israeli leaders, Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, and Ehud Olmert, have offered to return most of the 440 sq.uare miles of Golan to Syria, a country of 71,000 square miles, in return for peace, but the offers have been rejected. Because of the water issue Israel insists on maintaining control of the Sea of Galilee, its source of fresh water. However, President Assad has insisted that the return of the whole Golan Heights is not negotiable and that Israel must cede the area without preconditions. An attitude of this kind is not likely to bring peace to the area. Israel cannot at this moment withdraw from the Golan Heights in the light of military threats by Syria and its present ally Iran