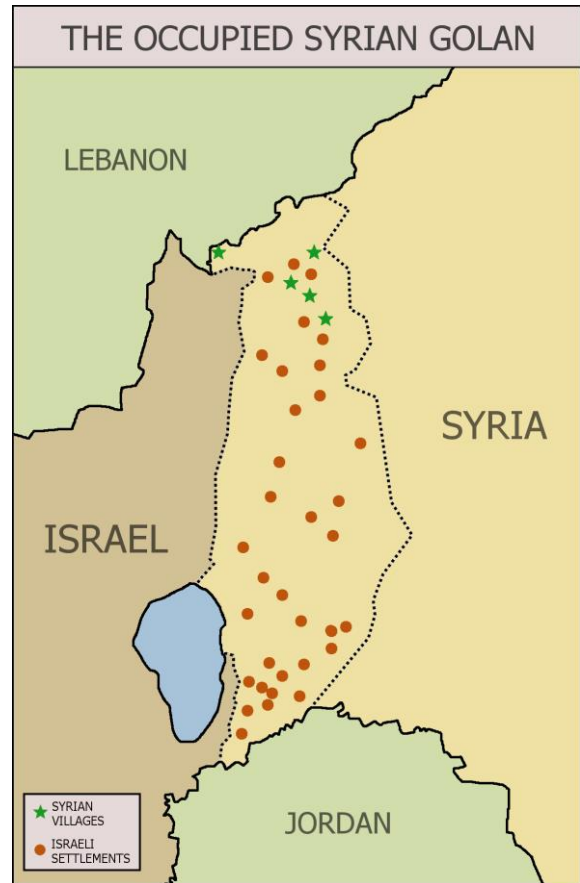


Briefing: Occupied Syrian Golan

The Syrian Golan / Golan Heights is a mountainous region in southwest Syria. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel occupied over two-thirds of the Syrian Golan – a land mass slightly smaller than Greater London. Today, this area is known as the Occupied Syrian Golan / Golan Heights.

Following the Israeli occupation, approx. 95% (130,000) of the native Syrian population was forcibly transferred or displaced from their homes and forbidden from returning. Subsequently, the Israeli military began a widespread campaign to demolish their homes, destroying one city and 340 villages and farms. These were replaced by Israeli agricultural settlements, often built with stones from the destroyed villages and farms. In 1981, Israel enacted the *Golan Heights Law* which purported to annex the territory into the state of Israel, an illegal action widely condemned by the international community.



Today, there are at least 23,000 Israeli settlers in the Occupied Syrian Golan, living in 34 illegal settlements. Together with the Israeli military and authorities, they control 95% of the land. Meanwhile, the remaining native Syrian population of approximately 25,000 live in five villages located in the far north of the Occupied Syrian Golan, controlling just 5% of the land.

Major issues of concern

Land appropriation and property destruction: Under the 'Hermon National Park' plan, the Israeli authorities are currently seeking to designate 20,000 acres of land around two of the remaining Syrian villages, as a national park. If approved, the plan would particularly affect the largest remaining Syrian village, Majdal Shams, leaving only agricultural land in the south – a main source of livelihood – available for urban expansion. The remaining Syrian villages are already severely overcrowded due to discriminatory land and housing policies that make it close to impossible to obtain building permits. Therefore, people are forced to build without permits, risking large fines and the full or partial demolition of their homes. In September 2016, the Israeli authorities illegally demolished a home in Majdal Shams. A further 80-90 Syrian home owners have been issued with demolition orders.

Illegal settlements and exploitation of natural resources: In October 2016, the Israeli Finance Ministry approved plans for the construction of 1600 settlement units in the settlement of Katzrin. Plans were announced in 2015 to encourage 100,000 new settlers to move to the Occupied Syrian Golan over the next five years. Fertile soil and abundant water resources mean that a substantial settlement agricultural industry has developed. Tourism is also a staple of the settlement economy. In 2013, the Israeli government issued a license to a private Israeli company, Afek Oil & Gas, to conduct oil exploration in the Occupied Syrian Golan. Afek proudly claims that the region contains 'Billions of Barrels of Israeli Oil'.

Conflict in Syria: The conflict in Syria is of huge concern to the remaining Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan, in particular due to the increased militarisation of the region. Projectiles have landed in the Occupied Syrian Golan. The conflict also has an economic impact as Syrian farmers in the Occupied Syrian Golan have lost vital markets for their produce in Syria. The conflict is also used by the Israeli government to further its claims to the Occupied Syrian Golan. Prime Minister Netanyahu held a cabinet meeting in an illegal settlement in the Occupied Syrian Golan last year during which he stated that "The Golan will always remain in Israel's hands. Israel will never withdraw from the Golan Heights".

Landmines and military bases: Since 1967 Israel has utilized vast areas of land in the Occupied Syrian Golan for military training and bases, leaving behind substantial amounts of military remains and landmines. Numerous land mines have also been laid in and adjacent to Syrian villages – often within just a few metres of people's houses and where their children play. Together with the remains of minefields from Syrian, French, Jordanian and Egyptian forces, this has led to more than 9000 acres – over 6000 football pitches – being mined. Landmines have caused the deaths of at least 18 civilians, including children, since 1967.

Revocation of residency & travel restrictions: Similar to the situation of Palestinians living in Occupied East Jerusalem, the native Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan hold permanent residency under an Israeli jurisdiction. Yet whilst Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem are permitted to have Jordanian nationality, the native Syrian population are recognised as having an 'undefined' nationality and are only awarded an Israeli 'Laissez-Passer' if they wish to travel. This creates onerous restrictions and costs for international travel. Approx. 100 people have had their residency status revoked following travel abroad for study or work, leaving them unable to return.

Education: Following the occupation, the Israeli government imposed a new curriculum that sought to disregard and diminish Syrian identity and culture. Parents have little say in what their children are taught. Many schools have building deficiencies and do not meet basic safety standards.

Labour rights: During the 1970s, existing trade unions in the Occupied Syrian Golan were banned by the Israeli military due to their links to Syria. As a result, many Syrians suffer from labour rights violations, due to a lack of knowledge of their basic labour rights or free or affordable legal advice and representation.