

# The Occupied Syrian Golan

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AN OVERVIEW

AL-MARSAD

ARAB HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE IN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

[www.golan-marsad.org](http://www.golan-marsad.org)

## Background

The area known as the Syrian Golan / Golan Heights is a mountainous region and plateau in southwest Syria that borders Lebanon to the north, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the west. The overall landmass of the Syrian Golan is 1,860 square kilometres. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel militarily occupied over two-thirds (1,230 square kilometres) of the Syrian Golan – a land mass slightly smaller than Greater London. Today, this area is known as the Occupied Syrian Golan / Golan Heights.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Israeli occupation, approximately 95% (130,000) of the native Syrian inhabitants were forcibly transferred or displaced from their homes and forbidden from returning (with only 5% percent of the original population able to remain).

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 using the same stones from the destroyed villages and farms. The first Israeli settlement, Merom Golan, was established in the Occupied Syrian Golan within just one month of the 1967 war.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 is approximately 25,000 who live in five villages located in the far north of the Occupied Syrian Golan, and who control just 5% of the land.<sup>4</sup>

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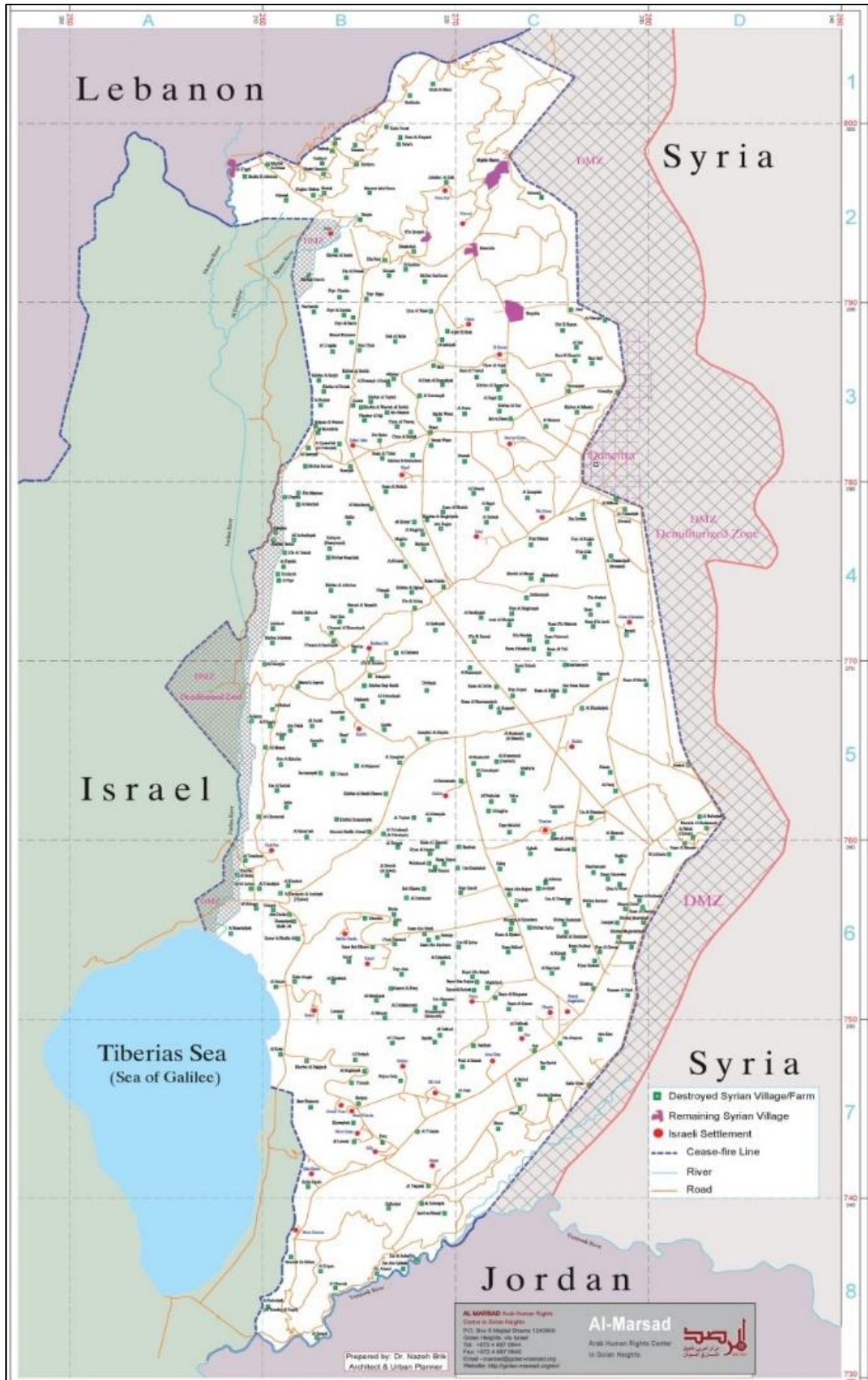
The map on page 2 shows the Syrian villages and farms (marked in green) destroyed by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and subsequent occupation of the Syrian Golan, and the Israeli settlements (marked in red) built on their ruins. The only five villages to escape destruction are in the extreme north (marked in purple). An electronic copy of the map is available at: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Map-english-24.1-2.compressed.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> Dr Ray Murphy, Irish Centre for Human rights, *Changing the Landscape: Israel's Gross Violations of International Law in the Occupied Syrian Golan*, Al-Marsad (2008), available at: [http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Changing\\_The\\_Landscape.pdf](http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Changing_The_Landscape.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See: United Nations Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) which states that: '[...] the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect'. Available at: <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/73D6B4C70D1A92B7852560DF0064F101>

<sup>4</sup> The forcible transfer of native Syrian inhabitants from the Occupied Syrian Golan; the destruction of their property; the transfer of Israeli settlers into the Occupied Syrian Golan; the exploitation of natural resources for private gain; the purported annexation of the Occupied Syrian Golan; amount to serious violations of numerous provisions of international law, including, but not limited to: A.49 Fourth Geneva Convention; A.53 Fourth Geneva Convention; A.55 of the Hague Regulations; A.43 of the Hague Regulations.



## Major issues of concern

### Land appropriation and property destruction

The Israeli authorities are currently seeking to appropriate 20,000 acres of land under the guise of the 'Hermon National Park' plan from around two of the remaining Syrian villages, Majdal Shams and Ein Qynia, that has been used by the native Syrian residents since Ottoman rule for agriculture and urbanization.<sup>5</sup> If approved, the 'Hermon National Park' would, in particular, surround Majdal Shams in the north and west. Therefore, the only area available for urban expansion of the village would be agricultural land in the south – a main source of livelihood for the local population. It is not possible to expand the village to the east given its close proximity to the fortified ceasefire line.

The designation of land by the Israeli authorities as a 'national park', 'abandoned property' or for 'military or public needs' is a regularly used tactic to either prevent the expansion of Syrian and Palestinian communities under occupation, or to appropriate land for settlement construction.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Marsad has submitted an objection to the 'Hermon National Park' with the District Planning Committee in Nazareth and has raised this issue with the diplomatic missions of the EU and Permanent Members of the UN Security Council in Tel Aviv.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2016, a home in Majdal Shams was illegally demolished by the Israeli authorities.<sup>8</sup> This is the first time that the Israeli authorities have demolished a home in the Occupied Syrian Golan for over thirty years. Further, another 80-90 Syrian home owners have been issued with demolition orders for their houses. Hence, there is serious concern that this action marks the adoption of a new systematic policy of 'administrative' home demolitions directed at the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan. This would be the extension of a policy that has been applied to homes belonging to the Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel for a considerable time.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Marsad has raised this issue with the diplomatic missions of the EU and Permanent Members of the UN Security Council in Tel Aviv.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/press-release-al-marsad-submits-objection-to-hermon-national-park-plan/>

<sup>6</sup> A detailed explanation of these policies (in a Palestinian context) is available at: [http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national\\_parks](http://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/national_parks) and: [http://www.btselem.org/area\\_c/taking\\_over\\_land](http://www.btselem.org/area_c/taking_over_land). Israel has applied the same policies in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-to-embassies-regarding-expansion-of-illegal-settlement-and-Hermon-National-Park-plan-in-Occupied-Syrian-Golan-EU-Delegation-version-of-letter.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/press-release-israeli-authorities-demolish-home-in-majdal-shams-in-the-occupied-syrian-golan/>

<sup>9</sup> Israel's policy of home demolitions constitutes a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits 'extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly' by an occupying power. See A.147 Fourth Geneva Convention.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-regarding-home-demolition-by-Israeli-authorities-in-the-Occupied-Syrian-Golan-1-1-1.pdf>

## 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 illegal Israeli settlement of Katzrin.<sup>11</sup> Katzrin is the largest Israeli settlement (population 8,000) in the Occupied Syrian Golan. It was built over the destroyed Syrian villages of Qasrin, Shqef and Sanawber. Katzrin is also home to various settlement businesses that illegally exploit the natural resources of the Occupied Syrian Golan, such as the Golan Heights Winery<sup>12</sup> and Eden Springs / May Eden<sup>13</sup> mineral water.

This follows plans announced in 2015 to encourage 100,000 new settlers to move to the Occupied Syrian Golan over the next five years.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Marsad has raised this issue with the diplomatic missions of the EU and Permanent Members of the UN Security Council in Tel Aviv.<sup>15</sup>

The Syrian Golan has fertile soil and abundant water resources,<sup>16</sup> hence, a substantial Israeli settlement industry has developed, that includes beef, vegetable, fruit, wine and mineral water production.<sup>17</sup> At least 14 wineries operate out of illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Syrian Golan. In addition, many vineyards in the Occupied Syrian Golan also supply grapes to wineries in Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Since 2013, an Israeli company Afek Oil & Gas has been conducting oil exploration in the Occupied Syrian Golan. Afek proudly claims that the region contains 'Billions of Barrels of Israeli Oil'.<sup>19</sup> Afek is owned by Genie Energy, a US company that includes Rupert Murdoch, Dick Cheney and James Woolsey on its advisory board.<sup>20</sup> Some estimates suggest that the Occupied Syrian Golan contains approximately 40 billion barrels of oil.<sup>21</sup> Afek is also involved in drilling operations for the extraction of water in the Occupied Syrian Golan.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See: [http://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/israel-okays-1600-new-homes-in-golan-heights/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israel-okays-1600-new-homes-in-golan-heights/)

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.golanwines.co.il/english>

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.meyeden.co.il/>

<sup>14</sup> See: [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session31/Documents/A%20HRC%2031%2043\\_E.docx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session31/Documents/A%20HRC%2031%2043_E.docx)

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-to-embassies-regarding-expansion-of-illegal-settlement-and-Hermon-National-Park-plan-in-Occupied-Syrian-Golan-EU-Delegation-version-of-letter.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that the Occupied Syrian Golan provides a third of the water consumed in Israel. See:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14724842> ; <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-israeli-occupied-golan-heights-an-occupation-for-natural-resources-water-land-and-oil/5521207>

<sup>17</sup> In 2009, revenue from agriculture produced in the Occupied Syrian Golan was estimated at USD 143 million. See:

<http://schools.aucegypt.edu/research/ebhrc/publications/Documents/Economic%20Stakes%20in%20the%20Golan%20Heights.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> See: <https://www.whoprofits.org/sites/default/files/WhoProfits-IsraeliWines.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://afekoil.co.il/en/>

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://genieoilgas.com/about-us/strategic-advisory-board/>

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://globalriskinsights.com/2015/02/increased-security-risk-ahead-for-golan-heights/>

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Environment/Drilling-firm-to-pursue-water-gas-oil-projects-477953>

In February last year, Al-Marsad submitted a joint objection with Adalah, a human rights organisation in Haifa, to the Israeli Ministry of Infrastructure demanding the immediate cancellation of permits to drill for oil in 12 sites in the Occupied Syrian Golan.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the natural beauty of the region attracts a significant number of tourists. In 2005, approximately 1.5 million people visited the Occupied Syrian Golan. Hence, tourism is a staple of the settlement economy. Referring to it as 'Northern Israel', the Israeli government and tourist industry promote the Occupied Syrian Golan as a site for hiking, camping, biking, horseback riding, sightseeing, wine-tasting, and picking fruit. Promoted activities and accommodation are almost all either located in settlements or owned by settlers. Further, international travel companies such as Lonely Planet, Booking.com and Airbnb – amongst others - also misleadingly describe the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel and promote accommodation and tourism in illegal Israeli settlements.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to benefiting from the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the Occupied Syrian Golan, Israeli settlers enjoy preferential treatment from the Israeli authorities compared to the native Syrian population. A notable example is the price of water: due to discriminatory policies, Syrian farmers estimate they can pay up to four times as much for water as Israeli agricultural settlers.<sup>25</sup>

## Conflict in Syria

The conflict in Syria is of huge concern to the remaining Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan. People are concerned for the safety of relatives and friends, both in the immediate vicinity across the fortified ceasefire line and elsewhere in Syria. Furthermore, the fighting is close enough to some Syrian residential areas to make the windows of the houses shake, causing serious distress and worry. In addition, the location of Israeli military bases in Syrian residential areas adds to people's concerns given their potential as military targets – in particular – when increased militarisation of the region is occurring. Projectiles have landed in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

The conflict in Syria has also had an economic impact on the local Syrian economy in the Occupied Syrian Golan. Previously, farmers could sell their apples to markets in Syria where they obtained a higher price than in Israeli markets, however, due to the conflict this is no longer possible. Farmers now struggle to obtain a sustainable price for their apples in Israeli markets due to the difficulty competing with subsidised Israeli agricultural settlers and an oversupply of apples in Israeli markets. In addition,

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<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/8755>

<sup>24</sup> For Al-Marsad's correspondence with Lonely Planet and Booking.com regarding the Occupied Syrian Golan, see: <http://golan-marsad.org/advocacy/third-party-states/>

<sup>25</sup> See: [http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Water\\_is\\_Life\\_2013.pdf](http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Water_is_Life_2013.pdf)



students from the Occupied Syrian Golan used to study at university in Damascus for free. This has been largely interrupted by the conflict and students are instead faced with high tuition fees in Israeli universities and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> As a result, many defer university education and enter the labour market in low skilled roles, leaving them at risk of exploitation.<sup>27</sup>

To make matters worse, the conflict in Syria is being used by the Israeli government to further its claims to the Occupied Syrian Golan. Indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu held a “celebratory” cabinet meeting in an illegal settlement in the Occupied Syrian Golan last year, in which he called for recognition of Israel’s “sovereignty” of the Occupied Syrian Golan, stating that “The Golan will always remain in Israel’s hands. Israel will never withdraw from the Golan Heights”.<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated these calls in a meeting with President Trump earlier this year.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Marsad has raised this issue with the diplomatic missions of the EU in Tel Aviv.<sup>30</sup>

## 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. The Israeli military has neglected to maintain much of this land. Numerous land mines also have been laid in and adjacent to Syrian villages on the pretext of security – often within just a few metres of people’s houses and where their children play.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the Occupied Syrian Golan also contains the remnants of minefields laid by Syrian and French forces during their control over the territory, as well as mines from the period of the British Mandate, laid by Jordan and Egypt. More than 9000 acres – the equivalent of over 6000 football pitches – are suspected to be mined in the Occupied Syrian Golan, distributed over 2000 minefields that vary greatly in size. New anti-personnel mines have been laid by the Israeli military as recently as 2011. Since 1967, it is estimated that at least 66 Syrians have been victims of landmines in the Occupied Syrian

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<sup>26</sup> A small group of students has been able to travel to Damascus this year for the first time in several years.

<sup>27</sup> See: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_481042.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_481042.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> See: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-vows-golan-heights-will-remain-part-of-israel-forever/>

<sup>29</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-golan-idUSKBN15U2XX>

<sup>30</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-re-EU-Israel-Association-Council-meeting-EU-DELEGATION.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> The continued deployment of landmines and Israeli army bases in Syrian residential and civilian areas violates multiples rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.6 & A.12 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); A.5 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); A.6 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Golan. Among these, 16 died, half of whom were children.<sup>32</sup> Israeli civilians, Israeli soldiers and tourists have also been victims of landmines, however, accurate figures on casualties are difficult to obtain.

In 2013, following an extensive campaign and communication with the Israeli Landmines Authority, Al-Marsad successfully obtained the removal of one of the Israeli military bases (and clearance of surrounding mines) from Majdal Shams. Al-Marsad remains in communication with the Landmines Authority regarding the clearance of other minefields in Syrian residential and agricultural zones, and is due to initiate legal action in the near future to advance this process.

## Housing and planning

Discriminatory land and housing policies have meant that the remaining Syrian villages in the Occupied Syrian Golan are severely overcrowded, as expansion on surrounding land is rarely permitted. In Majdal Shams alone, there are 800 Syrian families who are in desperate need of housing. As a result of severe restrictions imposed by Israeli planning committees, it is close to impossible for the Syrian population to obtain building permits. Therefore, the Syrian population is forced to build homes without building permits, as this is the only way to meet their housing needs. Those who build without permits risk large fines – USD55 to USD85 per square metre (potentially doubling the cost of construction) – and the full or partial demolition of their homes.

Not only do these policies have an adverse effect on available housing, they also severely inhibit the improvement of road and sewage systems; the construction of education, health and cultural institutions; and the establishment of infrastructure for industrial areas.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Marsad has prepared a report on discriminatory planning policies and has also considered these issues in an objection to the 'Hermon National Park' plan.

## Revocation of residency & travel restrictions

Following the purported annexation of the Occupied Syrian Golan, on January 17, 1982, the Israeli Ministry of Interior began administrative procedures seeking to impose Israeli nationality on the remaining native Syrian population. Despite intimidation by the Israeli authorities that included arrests and the use of 'administrative detention', the Syrian population organised a general strike in early 1982

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<sup>32</sup> See: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/landmines%20the%20occupied%20Golan.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Discriminatory land, housing and development policies violate multiples rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.1 & A.26 ICCPR; A.5 ICERD; A1 & A.11 ICESCR.



calling for the annexation to be suspended and for attempts to impose Israeli citizenship on the Syrian population to stop.

Today, the majority of the native Syrian population continue to reject Israeli citizenship and hold a form of permanent residency status. The situation is similar to that of Palestinians living in Occupied East Jerusalem who have permanent residency under an Israeli jurisdiction. Yet whilst Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem are permitted to have Jordanian nationality, the native Syrian population of the Occupied Syrian Golan 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. Indeed, the total cost of the visa process can be in excess of 500 USD for certain countries. Further – and of most concern – is that visa applications are frequently denied by certain countries, primarily Russia, Ukraine, the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the residency status may be revoked if an individual’s ‘centre of life’ changes or if citizenship of another country is obtained.<sup>35</sup> According to Al-Marsad research, around 100 native Syrian inhabitants of the Occupied Syrian Golan have had their permanent residency status revoked since 1982 following travel and residency abroad for study or work. These people are unable to return back to their homes and join their families in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

Recently, Al-Marsad was able to secure residency in the Occupied Syrian Golan for two children who had been born in Syria to parents born in the Occupied Syrian Golan. The Israeli Ministry of Interior had previously denied residency for these two individuals.

## Family separation

It is estimated that those forced to leave the Occupied Syrian Golan and their descendents amount to approx. 500,000 people who mainly live in the outskirts of Damascus and the southern city of Daraa. Given the current conflict in Syria, many of these people have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) for a second time in their lifetime, or refugees.

Prior to the outbreak of the current conflict it was possible for certain groups of residents from the Occupied Syrian Golan to visit Syria. Selective categories consisted of religious Druze men, students, and non-religious men over 35, and some women over 70.

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Marsad has raised this issue with the diplomatic missions of the EU and Permanent Members of the UN Security Council in Tel Aviv, see: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-regarding-travel-restrictions-for-native-Syrian-residents-of-the-Occupied-Syrian-Golan-EU.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> The denial of the right to nationality, freedom of movement and non-discrimination violates multiples rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) A.12 & A.26 ICCPR.

However, even those considered eligible were not guaranteed passage. Following an extensive campaign that involved the submission of individual complaints for 15 women to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in 2012 Al-Marsad successfully obtained permission for a group of women to visit their relatives in Syria for the first time. Unfortunately, family visits to Syria for residents from the Occupied Syrian Golan ceased later in 2012 due to the conflict in Syria.<sup>36</sup>

## Education

Following the occupation of the Syrian Golan, a new Israeli curriculum and school system was imposed on the remaining Syrian population. These changes sought to disregard and diminish Syrian identity and culture, as well as the history of the local community. The Israeli curriculum does not facilitate Arab cultural activities and the Syrian population has little say in how their schools are run and what their children are taught.<sup>37</sup> In addition, many schools have building deficiencies and do not meet basic safety standards.

Al-Marsad has visited five schools and prepared an expert opinion on building deficiencies that endanger the lives of the students and inhibit their education. Al-Marsad has submitted this report to the Israeli authorities.

The Syrian community has sought to establish summer camps and alternative kindergartens to provide educational, social and cultural activities to help younger generations preserve and explore their Syrian identity. However, the Israeli authorities have interfered with and discouraged such initiatives. In the past, representatives from grassroots organisations who developed these initiatives underwent prolonged custody, and students were prevented from joining initiatives. Current attempts to provide alternative education and cultural activities for young Syrians suffer from a lack of funding.

## Labour rights

During the 1970s, existing trade unions in the Occupied Syrian Golan, such as the Farmers Trade Union, were banned by the Israeli military due to their links to Syria, and later attempts to establish grassroots organisations in their place were prohibited. As a result, many Syrians are unaware of their basic labour rights or lack free or affordable legal advice and representation. Further, given its relatively small size

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<sup>36</sup> Israeli policies on the issue of family separation violate multiples rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.46 of the Hague Regulations; A.49 Fourth Geneva Convention; A.10 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); A.23 ICCPR.

<sup>37</sup> Lack of decision making and participatory powers in the education system violates multiple rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.1, A.13 & A.15 CESCR; A.5 CERD; A.27 ICCPR; A.29 & A.30 CRC; A.50 Fourth Geneva Convention.

and marginalisation as an occupied people, the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan is very interconnected. Therefore, many workers work for friends or family members, which fuels a culture in which workers do not necessarily wish to complain about violations of their rights, in case it creates a problem in the community or, simply, that they will be fired from their jobs if the contractual arrangement is an informal one.

Finally, the situation of Syrian workers has become more precarious due to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Previously, the Syrian government was able to provide financial support for the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan, for example, by providing higher level education for free in Syria or buying workers' products – mainly apples – at guaranteed advantageous prices.

As a result of these factors, many Syrian workers suffer from violations of their labour rights, both by local Syrian employers and employers in illegal Israeli settlements.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Marsad has recently launched a project to ensure that Syrian workers are better aware of their labour rights and have access to free or affordable legal representation. This project involves the provision of workshops, legal consultations and the distribution of leaflets and posters.

**Al-Marsad** regularly publishes legal publications, position papers and press releases on its website: [www.golan-marsad.org](http://www.golan-marsad.org)

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<sup>38</sup> Failure to ensure just and favourable working conditions violates multiple rules of international law, including, but not limited to: A.6, A.7 & A.10 CESCR; A.5 ICERD; A.32 CRC.