

Lonely Planet

12 July 2016

Re: Lonely Planet guidebook and website representing the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am the director of Al-Marsad – Arab Human Rights Centre in the Golan Heights. Al-Marsad is a non-profit human rights organisation that monitors and documents violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed by Israel in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

I am writing to express my serious concern that Lonely Planet – on the basis of its ‘Israel & the Palestinian Territories’ guidebook (7th Edition) and the corresponding section of its website – appears to consider the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel. This is a view contrary to that of the international community and the situation according to international law.

Indeed, the military occupation of the Syrian Golan by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (during the same period that Israel occupied the Palestinian Territories); Israel’s purported annexation of the Syrian Golan in 1981; and Israel’s attempts to change the landscape of the Syrian Golan through settlement construction and natural resource exploitation (all at the expense of the native Syrian inhabitants);¹ have been roundly condemned by the international community,² which has repeatedly demanded that Israel cease its occupation and return to its pre-1967 borders.

Given the above, I was deeply shocked to discover Lonely Planet’s coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan, some examples of which I cite below:

1. Title of guidebook omits the Occupied Syrian Golan

The title of the guidebook – ‘Israel & the Palestinian Territories’ – does not even include the Occupied Syrian Golan, which as considered above, was occupied during the same period as the Palestinian Territories. Given that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part of the Palestinian Territories, the omission of its name from the title, alone suggests that Lonely Planet considers it part of Israel.

¹ Following Israel’s military occupation, approximately 130,000 native Syrian inhabitants were forcibly transferred or displaced from their homes and forbidden from returning. Subsequently, the Israeli military then began a widespread campaign to demolish their homes, resulting in the destruction of two cities, and over 300 villages and farms. Israeli settlements were then built over destroyed Syrian villages and farms, often using the same stones from the destroyed villages and farms. Today, there are approx. 22,000 Israeli settlers in the Occupied Syrian Golan, living in over 32 illegal settlements, whilst the remaining native Syrian population suffers from continued violations of their basic human rights.

² Including but not limited to: UN Security Council resolutions 446 (22 March 1979), 452 (20 July 1979), 465 (1 March 1980), 497 (17 December 1981). See also recent statements from the [United States](#) and the [European Union](#) rejecting Israel’s latest rhetoric regarding sovereignty over the Occupied Syrian Golan.

2. Lack of independent chapter on the Occupied Syrian Golan

Information related to the Occupied Syrian Golan features in a shared chapter with the Upper Galilee region of Israel – ‘Upper Galilee & Golan’ – as opposed to appearing in its own independent chapter. Therefore, it is likely that a reader unfamiliar with the status of the Occupied Syrian Golan will pass seamlessly from the Upper Galilee section to the Golan section believing that he/she is reading only about Israel.

3. Map in ‘Upper Galilee & Golan’ chapter

The issue above could have perhaps been partly mitigated if the map (see below) of the ‘Upper Galilee & Golan’ was accurate and correctly included the pre-1967 ceasefire line between Israel and Syria, that marks the internationally recognised border between the two countries. The inclusion of a line demonstrating the internationally recognised border between the two countries would not only ensure that the Lonely Planet map is in line with those employed by the international community, but would also indicate to the reader that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part of Israel (see below).

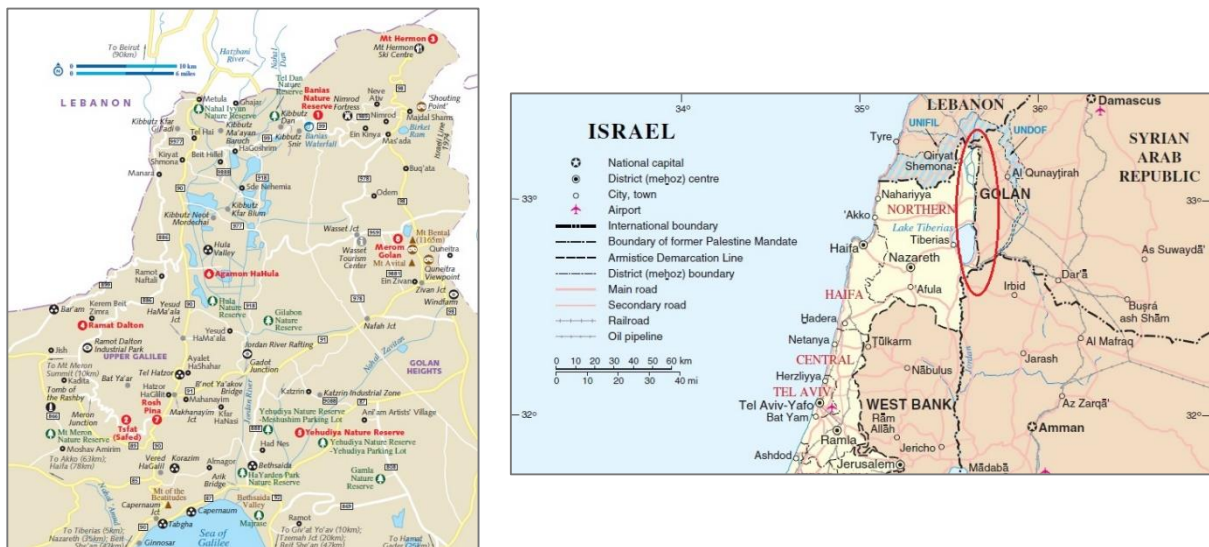


Fig. 1: Left: The Lonely Planet map of the ‘Upper Galilee & Golan’. Right: A map employed by the United Nations that indicates (see highlighted section) that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part Israel.

4. ‘Upper Galilee & Golan’ chapter lacks detailed account of history and current political situation of Occupied Syrian Golan

The Upper Galilee & Golan chapter provides just a single introductory paragraph on the history of the Occupied Syrian Golan (see below) and no information about the current political situation. It does

not explain that the international community has repeatedly condemned Israel's occupation of the Syrian Golan in 1967 and its purported annexation in 1981, and that these acts are illegal under international law. Furthermore, there is no mention of the severe human rights violations suffered by the native Syrian population at the time of the Israeli occupation – that continue to this day – and that there are currently around 22,000 Israeli settlers living in over 32 illegal settlements (whose construction and expansion have been repeatedly condemned by the international community). On the contrary, many of the recommended activities and places to eat and stay, provided in the chapter, are located in these illegal Israeli settlements. It is, of course, the prerogative of the Lonely Planet reader to decide where he/she visits, however, with absolutely no background information provided, it is impossible for the reader to make an informed decision on whether to visit such places.

The chapter also fails to provide more than a cursory overview of tourism opportunities in the five remaining Syrian villages in the Occupied Syrian Golan, lacking information on accommodation, restaurants and places of interest.



Fig. 2: Introduction to 'Golan Heights' section of chapter – highlighted area shows the single introductory paragraph on the history of the Occupied Syrian Golan.

5. General references to the Occupied Syrian Golan in the guidebook imply it is part of Israel

In general, throughout the guidebook, information related to the Occupied Syrian Golan implies that it is part of Israel. For example:

'Most Druze communities actually live in the bordering countries of Lebanon and Syria; in Israel they inhabit a few villages in the Galilee, on Mt Carmel and in the Golan' (p.391 - emphasis added)

'However, unique dining experiences can be found all over the country [referring to Israel], ranging from seafood institutions in Akko to Bedouin blowouts in the Negev, and from locally raised steaks on the Golan to vegetarian feasts in Amirim in the Upper Galilee' (p.398 - emphasis added)

6. Lonely Planet website

Lonely Planet appears to categorise the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel on its website. For example, the Lonely Planet website address and description for Majdal Shams, a village in the Occupied Syrian Golan, includes it under the 'Israel' section of the website. This also applies to other places of interest on the Lonely Planet website that are located in the Occupied Syrian Golan.



Fig. 3: Highlighted sections show that Majdal Shams, a village in the Occupied Syrian Golan, is categorised under the Israel section of the Lonely Planet website.

Given the above, I am sure that you can understand my concern that Lonely Planet appears to consider the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel, therefore, rejecting the position of the international community and that according to international law. This is particularly troubling since Lonely Planet guidebooks inspire and assist readers to travel the world to learn about different cultures and places. However, when it comes to the Occupied Syrian Golan, the Lonely Planet guidebook and website are currently providing readers with a highly distorted and misleading representation.

Having been informed of these concerns, I look forward to Lonely Planet making the necessary amendments to future editions of its guidebooks and to updating its website, so that they accurately reflect the status of the Occupied Syrian Golan according to international law.

I thank you in advance for your time and consideration of this important matter, and I am at your disposition to provide any information to help rectify this situation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Nizar Ayoub
Director, Al-Marsad
nizar@golan-marsad.org



Al-Marsad Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights
<researcher.almarsad@gmail.com>

Concern about Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan

████████████████████@lonelyplanet.com>
To: researcher.almarsad@gmail.com

Fri, Jul 15, 2016 at 12:03 PM

Dear Dr Ayoub,

Thanks for your letter about coverage of the Golan Heights in Lonely Planet, which was passed on to me as ██████████
████████████████████ at Lonely Planet.

While we fully appreciate the complexity of this region and do take on board your comments, we're a non-political organisation and our content is aimed at travellers. We aim to make our readers aware when there are sensitive situations in the places that they visit and give them enough information to make their own decisions about whether or not to go. We have provided relevant information in the introduction to the Golan Heights section to inform travellers' decisions, but to give further detailed political or historical analysis wouldn't be appropriate for a travel guidebook.

To answer some of your points specifically -

1) Title of guidebook omits the Occupied Syrian Golan

We often have book titles that don't mention every single place included in the book as it simply isn't practical to do so (eg our France guidebook includes Monaco, but we don't call it France & Monaco). It doesn't in any way imply the unnamed places are part of the named place. You will find that in the contents breakdown, we refer to Golan.

2) Lack of independent chapter on the Occupied Syrian Golan

We often group together destinations according to travel patterns, and would be very unlikely to have a chapter that was just 8 pages long for editorial reasons. We do offer background about Israel's capturing of the Golan Heights in the introduction (in a prominent position) so there's no danger of the reader passing into this region without being alerted to its complex history.

3) Map in 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter

The map shows a disputed border, not a regular one, which is an indicator of the area's irregular status. There are other demarcations we could have included in addition to this, such as the 1967 pre-ceasefire line, but the map is intended first and foremost to be useful to travellers, rather than show historic political boundaries. The accompanying text explains which line is shown and exactly what it represents.

4) 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter lacks detailed account of history and current political situation of Occupied Syrian Golan

The chapter includes a summary of the history and political situation - but this is a guidebook, so an extensive background of the conflict isn't possible or appropriate. We give enough detail for travellers to be informed about the situation but the purpose of the guidebook is to be a transportable aide for informed travel, not to provide a detailed political viewpoint.

5) General references to the Occupied Syrian Golan in the guidebook imply it is part of Israel

As above, we give an account of the situation in the Golan Heights in the intro to that section, but it would be inappropriate to cover this same information repeatedly every time the Golan Heights is mentioned throughout the

██████████
Lonely Planet

22 July 2016

Re: Lonely Planet guidebook and website representing the Occupied Syrian Golan as part of Israel

Dear ██████████,

Many thanks for your response of the 15 July to my letter regarding Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan.

I very much appreciate your prompt reply and explanation of Lonely Planet's position, however, unfortunately, I am dissatisfied by Lonely Planet's response on this issue. Primarily, I consider that the explanation provided for Lonely Planet's approach to its coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan is inconsistent with its coverage of other issues and areas in the region.

I have outlined my concerns below:

1. Historical and political overview

Lonely Planet considers that it has '*provided relevant information in the introduction to the Golan Heights section to inform travellers' decisions, but to give further detailed political or historical analysis wouldn't be appropriate for a travel guidebook*'. I am surprised by this statement and believe it to be inconsistent with the coverage in other chapters of the guidebook. For example, a political and historical overview of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is provided throughout those chapters. Indeed, over two full introductory pages are dedicated to the political and historical situation in the West Bank, compared to one introductory paragraph concerning the Occupied Syrian Golan.

I commend Lonely Planet for aiming to be a non-political organisation that provides readers with sufficient information to make informed decisions on whether to visit sensitive places. However, in this instance, Lonely Planet has failed to do this. An obvious example of crucial missing information (which I referred to in my first letter) is Lonely Planet's failure to explain that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Syrian Golan are considered illegal under international law, with the result that readers are unable to make an informed decision on whether to visit such places. This information is included with reference to Israeli settlements built in the West Bank (see specific section on 'Jewish Settlements' on page 258 of 'Israel & the Palestinian Territories' guidebook (7th Edition)), which again leads me to question the consistency of Lonely Planet's approach.

2. Title of guidebook omits the Occupied Syrian Golan

I can understand that Lonely Planet book titles do not mention every single place included in the guidebook for reasons of practicality, however, I contend that this should not apply to the present situation. Given the context of the relationship between Israel and the Occupied Syrian Golan, omitting the Occupied Syrian Golan from the title becomes a political statement which cannot be explained citing editorial reasons. It presumes the region is part of Israel, confusing potential travellers and undermining the native Syrian population's right to self-determination.

3. Lack of independent chapter on the Occupied Syrian Golan

I appreciate your explanation that destinations are grouped together by travel patterns and that, as a minimum number of pages are required to constitute a chapter, this explains the editorial decision not to include a separate chapter on the Occupied Syrian Golan. However, this being the case, I am confused why the existing chapter does not make a sufficient distinction between the 'Upper Galilee' and the 'Golan' in the same way as is done in 'The Negev & The Gaza Strip' chapter. The Gaza Strip section of that chapter starts on a brand new page with a bold heading; sub-headings such as 'Gaza at a Glance', 'Gaza in Numbers'; a map; etc; which marks a clear distinction between the previous section of the chapter (The Negev). The distinction is so clear that one has the impression that it is an independent chapter. Notably 'The Gaza Strip' section of its chapter is shorter than 'The Golan Heights' section of its chapter, which calls into question why Lonely Planet treats the two territories differently.



Fig. 1: Left: The start of 'The Gaza Strip' section of 'The Negev & The Gaza Strip' chapter. Right: The start of 'The Golan Heights' section of the 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter.

Furthermore, I respectfully suggest that if 'The Golan Heights' section of the 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter provided more information about tourism opportunities in the five remaining Syrian villages in the Occupied Syrian Golan, there would be ample material to justify, from an editorial perspective, an independent chapter for the Occupied Syrian Golan.

4. Map in 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter

According to your response, I believe that we may be referring to different maps, as I cannot see the line referred to and the accompanying text ('The accompanying text explains which line is shown and exactly what it represents'). I am referring to the map on page 225 of the electronic version of the 'Israel & the Palestinian Territories' guidebook (7th Edition), which does not contain any line or accompanying text.

Furthermore, I am confused by Lonely Planet's assertion that the map 'is intended first and foremost to be useful to travellers, rather than show historic political boundaries' when this is not the case elsewhere in the guidebook. For example, the Lonely Planet map in the West Bank chapter includes the '1967 Green Line' (that indicates to the reader that the West Bank is not part of Israel).

In addition, the map used on the Lonely Planet website includes a line indicating that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part of Israel, hence, I am confused by the inconsistency between this and the guidebook.



Fig. 2: Left: Map from the Lonely Planet website showing a line indicating that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part of Israel. Middle: Map from the 'Upper Galilee & Golan' chapter of the guidebook (p.225), which does not include a line indicating that the Occupied Syrian Golan is not part of Israel. Right: Map from the 'West Bank' section of the guidebook (p.256), which includes the '1967 Green Line', indicating that the West Bank is not part of Israel.

5. General references to the Occupied Syrian Golan in the guidebook imply it is part of Israel

I do not consider Lonely Planet's position that it 'would be inappropriate to cover this same information [*'an account of the situation in the Golan Heights'*] repeatedly every time the Golan Heights is mentioned throughout the book', sufficient justification for consistently implying that the Occupied Syrian Golan is part of Israel, throughout the guidebook. I agree that it would be impractical to provide an explanation of the situation in the Occupied Syrian Golan each time it is mentioned. Instead, Lonely Planet could simply refrain from mentioning it in the context of Israel. Indeed, using an example that I provided in my previous letter, rather than stating:

'Most Druze communities actually live in the bordering countries of Lebanon and Syria; in Israel they inhabit a few villages in the Galilee, on Mt Carmel and in the Golan' (p.391 - emphasis added)

Lonely Planet could say:

'Most Druze communities actually live in the bordering countries of Lebanon and Syria; in Israel they inhabit a few villages in the Galilee and on Mt Carmel. In addition, there is a significant Druze community in the Occupied Syrian Golan. (emphasis added)

6. Lonely Planet website

I understand that Lonely Planet wishes to be helpful to the reader and that it is not possible to access the Occupied Syrian Golan from Syria, but instead via Israel. However, this does not sufficiently explain why the Occupied Syrian Golan is classified under Israel, when it instead could have an independent website address and section, as is the case for the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

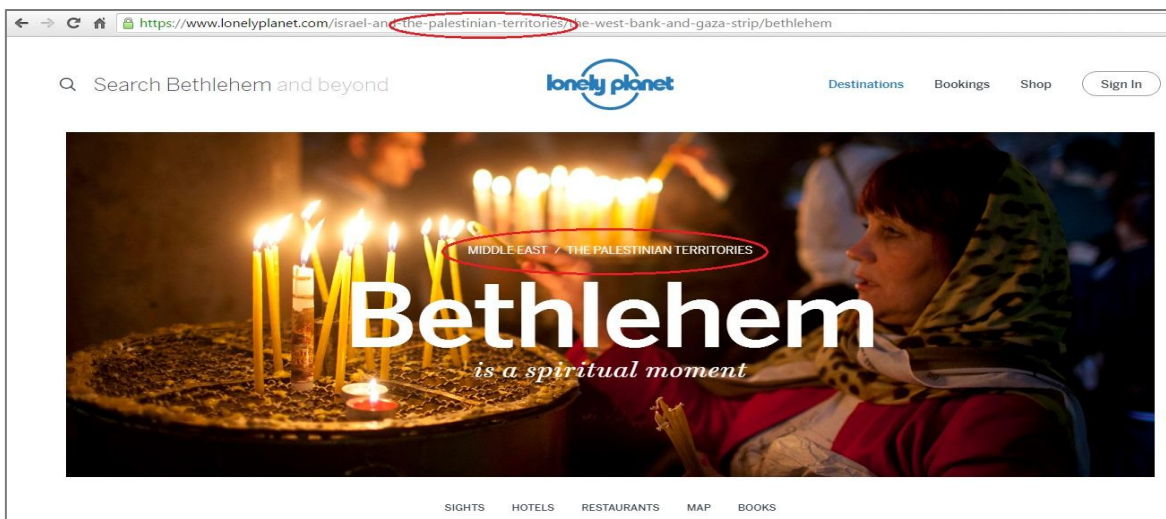




Fig 3: Top: Lonely Planet website for Bethlehem (Occupied Palestinian Territories). The highlighted sections show that Bethlehem is categorised under 'The Palestinian Territories'. Bottom: Lonely Planet website for Majdal Shams (Occupied Syrian Golan). The highlighted sections show that Majdal Shams is categorised under 'Israel'.

Given the information provided above outlining significant inconsistencies in Lonely Planet's approach to the Occupied Syrian Golan and other areas in the region, I hope that you can understand why I remain highly concerned about Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan.

Therefore, I respectfully call on Lonely Planet to re-evaluate its approach to the Occupied Syrian Golan, and make the necessary amendments to future editions of its guidebooks and to updating its website, so that they accurately reflect the status of the Occupied Syrian Golan according to international law, as I requested in my original letter.

Once again, I appreciate your prompt reply to my initial letter, and I remain at your disposition to provide any assistance you require to rectify this situation.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Nizar Ayoub
Director, Al-Marsad
nizar@golan-marsad.org



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<researcher.almarsad@gmail.com>

Concern about Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan

[REDACTED]@lonelyplanet.com>

Thu, Jul 28, 2016 at 1:51 PM

To: Al-Marsad Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights <researcher.almarsad@gmail.com>

Dear Dr Ayoub

Thanks for your email and offer of assistance - it's much appreciated. We welcome feedback and take every single comment into consideration. All of our content is created first and foremost to best serve the traveller, and all feedback is considered with this in mind.

Whilst, as outlined in my earlier email, we won't be making any immediate changes to our Golan Heights coverage; we will reconsider our approach each time we update our content and will certainly take your comments into further consideration then.

I did want to take the time however to respond to your question regarding the differences between the maps in our guidebooks and on our website, as this is due to our use of a third party provider for our maps on lonelyplanet.com. Our online maps are not put together by Lonely Planet, but are Open Street Maps, provided via Mapbox. If you click on the 'launch map view' button, you'll see the attribution at the bottom of the map. I hope that helps to clarify.

All the best

[REDACTED]
[Quoted text hidden]



AI-Marsad Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights
<researcher.almarsad@gmail.com>

Concern about Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan

AI-Marsad Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights

Tue, Aug 2, 2016 at 5:46
PM

<researcher.almarsad@gmail.com>

To: [REDACTED]@lonelyplanet.com>

Cc: nizar <nizar@golan-marsad.org>, marsad@golan-marsad.org

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your email.

I appreciate your response. However, I am disappointed that Lonely Planet will not be making any immediate changes to its Golan Heights coverage, nor outline any concrete changes it will make in the future. Currently, Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan (Golan Heights) implies that it is part of Israel, which it is not. In short, this situation could be easily rectified by Lonely Planet providing the necessary background information to the region and making simple formatting changes to its coverage. As you say, this would not only better serve the traveller, but also ensure that Lonely Planet's coverage of the Occupied Syrian Golan is objective and in line with the approach taken by the international community.

Given the above, I sincerely hope that Lonely Planet will reconsider its position. If not, I expect that AI-Marsad will consider publicising this issue. As always, I remain at your disposal for any further assistance.

Best,

Nizar Ayoub

AI-Marsad

[Quoted text hidden]