

The Syrian Golan - the twice-forgotten occupation: the rights of Golan Syrians must be respected

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Al-Marsad - Arab Human Rights Center in Golan Heights

Following the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria and Israel cynically using the opportunity to occupy more Syrian territory militarily, Al-Marsad calls on the interim government in Syria and the international community to ensure that Israel ends its military occupation of the Golan – both newly occupied territory and territory occupied since 1967, as required by Security Council Resolutions 242 of 1967 and Resolution 338 of 1967. In the meantime, the human rights of Syrians living under Israeli military occupation must be respected, including the ability to travel, work and study in the rest of Syria and other Arab countries.

After 54 years of enduring various forms of repression, persecution, arbitrary detention, murder, torture, forced displacement, the impoverishment and fragmentation of the country, and the unity of their being exposed to the danger of division and the invasion of their lands by foreign occupations occupiers ... the tyranny regime, whose foundations were laid by Hafez al-Assad, fell suddenly and resoundingly, marking a significant shift in the region.

When Assad, the father, was Minister of Defense and the de facto ruler of Syria, Israel militarily seized the Golan Heights in June 1967. Three and a half years later, Assad orchestrated a military coup on November 16, 1970, and assumed absolute control of the country, a reign that would last for three decades until his death. His son, Bashar, then took the reins and ruled Syria for 24 years. His rule ended on the morning of December 8, 2024, when the armed opposition groups successfully took over Damascus on the eleventh day of their military operation. This takeover occurred without significant resistance from the Syrian army after its external supporters withdrew their support.

Immediately after the fall of the crumbling regime and the flight of Bashar al-Assad, Israel launched a military campaign of unprecedented scale, the largest in its history. According to Israeli sources, this campaign targeted the entire Syrian geography and destroyed all of Syria's strategic installations and defensive capabilities, some research centres, document vaults, and archive centres. In conjunction with the air bombing campaign, its ground forces invaded the remainder of the Golan, imposing military control over the separation zone, which was under the supervision of international forces, the highest peak of Mount Hermon - which is 2,814 meters above sea level - and the sources of the Yarmouk River, which feeds the Jordan River, and surrounding areas. Rainwater collection facilities are adjacent to the city of Kenitra. Israel also announced the establishment of a 'security' buffer zone with a depth of 15 km and an intelligence activity zone with a depth of 60 km, that is, up to the outskirts of the Syrian capital, Damascus.

The area most recently controlled by the Israeli occupation forces, encompassing more than eleven towns and villages inhabited by about 70,000 Syrian civilians, is in a state of urgent crisis. These civilians are enduring numerous human rights violations, such as curfews and other limits on their freedom of movement, destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, and land access restrictions. The situation of these Syrians now living under Israeli military occupation demands our immediate attention and action to alleviate their suffering.

The total area of the Golan Heights is 1,860 km². Israel occupied the majority of it (1,260 km²) during its attack on June 5, 1967. The population of the Golan that Israel occupied before its attack was estimated at approximately 147 thousand people. These people were subsequently subjected to one of the most significant ethnic cleansing operations in the modern era. Israel terrorised and permanently displaced more than 95% of the Golan population during the war and the few weeks that followed while also destroying 341 Syrian villages and farms. Subsequently, Israel had 35 illegal settlements on the ruins of these villages and farms, which are inhabited today by about 30,000 Jewish Israeli settlers. Only five Syrian villages escaped the destruction, and today, they are home to about 28 thousand Syrians.

The Israeli occupation forces subjected these remaining five villages, located on the slopes of Mount Hermon, in the far north of the Golan, to military rule that lasted 14 years. In parallel, Hafez al-Assad, preoccupied with strengthening his repressive authority, ignored the issue of the occupied Golan in an attempt to erase it from the consciousness of all Syrians. However, the October War of 1973 was a turning point. Although Syria only regained an area not exceeding 50 square kilometres of the Golan, including the city of Quneitra, which was utterly destroyed, about 1,200 square kilometres remained under Israeli occupation.

While Assad's artillery was pounding the neighbourhoods of Hama and its civilian population and committing horrific massacres in February 1982, the residents of the remaining Syrian villages in the now forgotten occupied Golan (numbering 13 thousand people at the time) were challenging the decision of the Knesset (Parliament) of Israel to annex the Golan, attempt to strip people of their Syrian citizenship and impose Israeli citizenship at gunpoint. The Syrian population of the Golan resisted through demonstrations, marches, civil disobedience, and their famous strike, which extended for nearly six months, in what was called the "Identity Intifada," supported by the Palestinians and the rest of the free people of the world. The United Nations Security Council also condemned this annexation in its Resolution 497.

The struggle of the Syrians of the occupied Golan brought their issue back to the forefront, especially since it coincided with the Security Council's issuance of Resolution 497. This resolution, a significant milestone, considers Israel's decision to impose its laws, authorities and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan Heights as null and void and without legal effectiveness at the international level. It also called on Israel, as the occupying power, to immediately rescind its decision. The resolution declared that all provisions of the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949, relating to the protection of civilians in times of war, remain in force on the Syrian territories occupied by Israel since June 1967.

The uprising of the Syrians of the occupied and forgotten Golan forced the Assad regime to officially recognise and deal with the reality of the presence of Syrian citizens under occupation. However, the Assad regime did not carry out its minimum duties towards the Syrians under occupation. The communication of the Syrians under occupation with their homeland Syria was limited to three channels: Education at Damascus University, an annual religious visit limited to religious men and not women, and marketing part of the Golan farmers' apple products in Damascus markets. As for the internal life of the Syrians of the Golan, the Assad regime's obsession, through its usual security policy, has been limited to winning loyalties, even if it means sowing division among them, as in the rest of the Syrian. These limited links from the Golan to the rest of Syria have been severed since the beginning of the peaceful protests in Syria in early 2011. Israel did not want and did not allow these links to be renewed, especially since it was forcefully pushing its project to Israelize the Golan and its remaining Syrian residents, exploiting the horror of the war of extermination launched by Bashar al-Assad to persecute and kill the Syrian people.

The rule of the Assad family has left Syria in urgent need of restoration. Half its population is displaced, with hundreds of thousands of victims of torture, forced disappearance, mass graves, and crimes against humanity. The magnitude of the grave responsibilities placed on the shoulders of the de facto authority, represented by the transitional government, cannot be overstated. The unity of Syria and the establishment of a civil democratic system based on the principles of citizenship, the rule of law, and the assurance of human rights are not just aspirations but urgent necessities. It is imperative to restore the devastation and tragic legacy left by the authoritarian Assad regime, achieve security and ensure the basics of survival for millions of Syrians and lay the foundations for transitional justice to ensure that perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity are held accountable and rehabilitate the infrastructure in preparation for the return of millions of refugees and displaced persons in diaspora countries. The interim government or any future government in Syria must act swiftly and decisively.

While the Israeli occupation of the Golan has continued since 1967, it is now expanding again to annex more Syrian territory. It is violating the rights of its Syrian population, which are guaranteed by international human rights standards, the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of the civilian population in times of war of 1949, and the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1977. Israel has been preventing Syrians from the Golan from free movement between the Golan and the rest of Syria for 57 years, preventing families dispersed on both sides of the ceasefire line from communicating, depriving Golan students of their right to study in Syrian universities, and refusing to re-establish economic relations and allowing the marketing of products. These specific rights violations paint a clear picture of the impact of the occupation on the Syrian population.

At the same time, Israel has not stopped exploiting the Syrian tragedy since 2011 to erase the Golani Syrian's affiliation to their homeland, Syria, and erase their Arab identity, for example, by encouraging service or volunteering in its military forces and security services in a manner that violates the Fourth Geneva Convention (Article 51).

Overall, recent developments indicate that the occupied Golan will not be among the priorities of the current Syrian administration during the coming period. The omission of mentioning the occupied Golan in 1967 from the public discourse of the new political administration in Damascus and limiting it to declaring its commitment to the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement creates the impression among the Syrians of the occupied Golan that they are destined to be forgotten again under occupation. In light of the difficult conditions in Syria and the existential challenges that the Syrian people face in rebuilding their state, the Syrians of the occupied Golan continue their struggle, a poignant reminder of their plight, to cling to their Syrian identity and engage in the Syrian national scene.

In light of all these facts and developments, Al-Marsad calls on both local and international levels to do the following:

1. The interim government, the current military leadership, and any future authority in Syria

- Public and frank affirmation of the principle of Syrian state sovereignty over the Golan by the principles of contemporary international law. Israel must withdraw beyond the lines of June 4, 1967, in the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 of 1967 and Resolution 338 of 1967. This withdrawal is a condition for achieving comprehensive, just, and sustainable peace in the region, a future we all strive for.

- Raising the issue of the occupied Golan and the Israeli occupation authority's violations of the rights of its Syrian citizens before the United Nations, its institutions and other international and regional

forums. We affirm the right of nearly half a million Syrians who were forcibly displaced in 1967, a violation of significant scale, to return to their hometowns in the occupied Golan.

- Carrying out its duties towards the Syrians living under Israeli occupation as Syrian citizens, including them in official population records, and establishing a unique institution concerned with their affairs and needs.

- The current situation has severed the connection between the Syrians of the occupied Golan, their people, and their homeland. Urgent coordination with the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross is needed to restore this connection through free movement without any discrimination whatsoever. This will allow for the restoration of communication between separated families and the resumption of their right to education in Syrian universities and institutes.

- Calling on the United Nations, with all its institutions, the special rapporteurs on human rights, the relevant investigative committees, the independent international commission of inquiry concerned with the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, and the special committee concerned with investigating Israeli practices that affect the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arab residents in occupied territories, and other international and humanitarian organizations, to travel to the occupied Golan (including the newly settled areas) to review the human rights situation, know the needs and demands of its Syrian citizens, and fulfil their responsibility by providing all necessary services to them.

- Proposing measures and agreements with Arab countries to facilitate the travel of Golani Syrians. This would allow Syrians who live under Israeli occupation and refuse to accept Israeli nationality to travel to Arab countries. It would stop the political blackmail to which they are subjected, which stipulates that they possess Israeli nationality to allow them to enter some Arab countries.

2. The international community and the United Nations

- Always affirming the principle of the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic over all its territories, including the occupied Syrian Golan (including the newly occupied areas), its independence, territorial integrity, and territorial integrity.

- Always stressing the illegality of the Israeli occupation of the Golan and the invalidity of the law annexing the Golan by the Israeli occupation authority. This is in line with the Security Council Resolution No. 497 issued on December 17, 1981, a crucial document that declares the occupation as a flagrant violation of the principles of international law and the provisions of international humanitarian law. The resolution prohibits the occupying authority from imposing its laws, authorities, and administrations in the occupied Syrian Golan. It also upholds the fundamental rights of the residents of the Syrian Golan to adhere to their Syrian identity and to reject the policies of imposing Israeli citizenship on them, whether by coercion or inducement.

- By forcing Israel, the occupying power, to end its occupation of the Syrian Golan, including the lands it has occupied since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, we can pave the way for its withdrawal beyond the borders of June 4, 1967. Implementing the principles of international law and resolutions will be a significant step towards establishing just, comprehensive and sustainable peace in the region, bringing hope for a better future.

