

Analysis Trump's Golan Declaration: Blessing for Netanyahu, Message to Russia

The international response is likely to be weak, and returning the Golan isn't something most Israelis support. The significance is mostly political, and the timing unsurprising.



U.S. President Donald Trump (right) and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hug after speaking at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, May 23, 2017. MANDEL NGAN / AFP

- **Trump: Time for U.S. to recognize Israel's sovereignty over Golan Heights**
 - **In first, U.S. drops 'occupied' from report on West Bank, Gaza and Golan Heights**
 - **Hezbollah entrenching itself in Syrian Golan, establishing terror infrastructure, Israeli army says**
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U.S. President Donald Trump's tweet on his intention to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights reflects the new rules of the game in the Middle East.

In Trump's eyes, the old conventions that guided previous U.S. presidents belong in the trash. In the Trump era, what matters is radiating strength – and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who gains the most out of this move, is on the winner's team.

Compared to another decision that made Netanyahu happy – moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem – the international reaction to this move is expected to be fairly weak. Europe still sees Syrian President Bashar Assad with disdain over his responsibility for the mass murder of his people over eight years of civil war. A future negotiation over the Golan between Israel and Syria is nowhere near in sight, anyway.

For most Israelis, too, the civil war in Syria and Islamic State's takeover of the southern Syrian Golan sufficed in determining whether Israel should give up the Golan. The fact that Netanyahu himself (in his first term in the 1990s, and during in his second term, in 2009) considered leaving the Golan seems irrelevant right now.

The American move is mostly important as a declaration. In the immediate term, it has no practical, security-related repercussions and it is not expected to change the pattern of activity of the UN force in the Golan, which only recently returned to its posts on the Syrian side of the border now that Assad's regime has finished reclaiming the area.

It appears that at the heart of this move is a political issue. The timing of Trump's statement enables Netanyahu to emphasize his experience and political connections as areas where he has a significant upper hand over his political opponents. Trump will reinforce the gesture in their joint press statement that they will hold when Netanyahu visits Washington next week, a trip during which the prime minister will speak at the annual AIPAC conference.

Netanyahu welcomed on Thursday evening the "Purim miracle" that Trump gave Israel. One can assume that the premier was also thinking about Trump's timing. The submarine affair in which he is embroiled drew renewed public interest this week after failing to grab headlines for a year. Daily revelations in this corruption case have placed Netanyahu for the first time in the line of opposition fire, and it appears that the opposition has finally managed to set the agenda. Trump provided him with a respite and some good news.

The American president is not only joining the Likud election campaign – at the end of February, he enthusiastically extolled Netanyahu during a press briefing he gave at the end of a summit with North Korea leader Kim Jong Un – but is also completely aligned with Likud's themes, as seen in the withdrawal from the

nuclear accord with Iran, the decision to move U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and now, the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan.

Like the two previous moves, it appears that Trump coordinates everything with Netanyahu, down to the very content of his statement. This fulfills the dreams of the Israeli right wing, especially after years of mutual hostility between the premier and former U.S. President Barack Obama.

Those who won't approve of Trump's statement, except for the Syrians, are mostly the Russians and the Palestinians. Washington is already taking Moscow to task by stressing the need for political negotiations over the Golan. This also looks like an American response to the Russian alliance with Iran in Syria and the failure to make good on previous promises to Israel and to the U.S. that Russia would help distance Iranian forces and Hezbollah troops from the border along the Golan.

For the Palestinians, this is a dangerous precedent, because Washington is legitimizing a unilateral Israeli move - an annexation of territory taken while Israel occupied the West Bank during the Six Day War.

Brigadier Gen. (res.) Asaf Orion, a member of the Institute for National Security Studies and a former chief of the General Staff's strategic brigade, told Haaretz pm Thursday that Trump's decision "diverges entirely from the traditional approach of the American foreign policy, which determines that annexed territories will not be recognized without official agreements. This is the stance the United States took regarding border disputes in Ukraine, Crimea, Cyprus and other places."

According to Orion, "Jerusalem is welcoming this move and of course it rings well to Israeli ears. But in the international arena, the security reasoning Trump used is less acceptable. There they discuss legitimacy, not security."

Source:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-trump-s-golan-declaration-blessing-for-netanyahu-message-to-russia-1.7044940>

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