

[U.S. Recognition of Israel's Golan Annexation a Threat to World Order](#)

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The Trump Administration's [decision](#) to recognize Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan Heights—Syrian territory seized in the June 1967 war—marks a serious violation of fundamental principles of international law. The inadmissibility of any country expanding its territory by force is a longstanding principle of the international legal order, enshrined in the United Nations Charter, U.N. Security Council resolutions, and repeatedly confirmed by the International Court of Justice.

Following its conquest of the Golan region, Israeli forces drove out most of its residents in what has accurately been [called](#) ethnic cleansing. The Druze inhabitants of the five remaining villages suffered under years of Israeli military occupation and largely remain loyal to Syria. [Protests](#) immediately broke out following Trump's announcement. When Israel tried to impose its laws on the region in 1981, the Syrian Druze engaged in a successful [nonviolent resistance campaign](#), blocking Israeli efforts to force them to carry Israeli ID cards, conscript them into the Israeli military, and other efforts to incorporate them into Israel.

In response to Israel's attempted annexation, the U.N. Security Council in 1981 unanimously adopted, with the support of the United States, [resolution 497](#), which declared 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.”

But the United States blocked any effort to enforce this and related resolutions.

Subsequently, the Israeli government has been building settlements in the fertile highlands and [growing](#) Golan's Jewish population to some 26,000 people, in violation of international law and U.N. Security Council [resolutions](#), which prohibit occupying powers from settling civilians onto territories seized by military force.

Again, however, the United States has blocked enforcement of these resolutions and Israeli colonization has therefore continued unabated.

Due to the ongoing Syrian civil war and war crimes by the Assad regime, few are suggesting an immediate return of the Golan to Syria. However, a number of other options are available, including handing over the territory to United Nations administration, [as took place](#) following the Indonesian withdrawal from occupied East Timor in 1999.

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International reaction to Trump's decision has been [overwhelmingly negative](#). The French foreign ministry [noted](#) how "The recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, occupied territory, would be contrary to international law, in particular the obligation for states not to recognize an illegal situation." The German government [condemned](#) the "unilateral steps" taken by Washington, D.C., observing that, "If national borders should be changed, it must be done through peaceful means between all those involved."

Former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs Tamara Cofman Wittes [noted in a tweet](#) that the decision "yanks the rug out from under U.S. policy opposing Russia's annexation of Crimea, as well as U.S. views on other disputed territories."

Along with the State Department's [decision](#) to no longer refer to the West Bank as occupied territory, the Golan decision may also serve as precedent to recognize Israeli sovereignty over much of the Palestinian territory seized in the 1967 war. It will no doubt embolden other governments with expansionist agendas, such as Morocco, which has occupied much of Western Sahara since 1975.

"If Washington stops upholding the core international principle opposing the acquisition of territory by force," [warns Wittes](#), "we should expect more states to seize territory they covet from their neighbors."

The timing of the U.S. decision was widely seen as an effort to boost the chances of Israel's rightwing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, currently in a [tough re-election fight](#) in the face of an imminent indictment on corruption charges.

But the move also destroys any hope of the United States playing a role in negotiating an end to Syria's civil war and strengthens the hand of Syria's brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad, enabling him to play the nationalist card and reinforce his alliance with the Iranian regime and the radical Lebanese Hezbollah.

"It really puts the moderates in an impossible position," [observed](#) Bassma Kodmani, a Syrian opposition leader and member of the negotiating team. "Assad will mobilize with the help of Iran and justify the presence of Iran, and the presence of militias, and the aggressive posture of Iran in the region."

Despite Trump's claim that Israeli control of the Golan Heights is vital for Israeli security, there is a growing awareness within Israel that it is far less important in an era when the principal threats to Israel's security come in the form of suicide bombers and long-range missiles. Israeli army chief Lt. Gen Moshe Yaalon [observed in 2004](#), that Israel could cede the Golan Heights in return for peace and more successfully defend Israel's internationally recognized border.

Trump's dangerous and rash decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan was actually built on policy failures of previous administrations. Israel and Syria came close to a peace agreement in early 2000 when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak agreed to withdraw from Syrian territory in return for the Syrian government agreeing to strict security guarantees, normalized relations, the demilitarization of the Golan, and the end of support for radical anti-Israel groups. A dispute regarding the exact demarcation of the border, constituting no more than a few hundred yards, prevented a final settlement.

With the death of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad later that year and the coming to power of the rightwing Likud Bloc in the subsequent Israeli election, talks were indefinitely suspended. Assad's successor, Bashar al-Assad, called for the resumption of talks where they left off, but both Israel and the United States rejected the proposal. A [2003 resolution](#) supported by an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress insisted that Syria enter new talks "unconditionally," effectively rejecting the position of the more moderate Israeli government of

former Prime Minister Barak and instead embraced the rejectionist position of the subsequent right-wing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

In 2006, several prominent members of the Israeli cabinet—including Defense Minister Amir Peretz and Internal Security Minister Avid Dichter—called on their government to resume negotiations with Syria. Although Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni appointed a senior aide to prepare for possible talks, such initiatives did not get any support from Washington. According to the [Jewish Daily Forward](#), it appeared that “Israel would be prepared to open a channel with Syria but does not want to upset the Bush administration.”

Indeed, when Israeli officials asked Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about pursuing exploratory talks with Syria, her answer, according to the Israeli newspaper [Haaretz](#), was, “don’t even think about it.” Similarly, the Israeli daily [Yedioth Ahronoth](#) [reported](#) that Israeli government officials “understood from President Bush that the United States would not take kindly to reopening a dialogue between Israel and Syria.”

U.S. pressure succeeded. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert [reportedly](#) expressed concern that it would be inappropriate to counter President Bush’s “clear position on this issue” and who is “Israel’s most important ally.” Similarly, Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres was [quoted](#) as saying, “The worse thing we could do is contradict the United States, which opposes negotiating with Syria.” Interior Minister Ronni Baron [told a television reporter](#), “When the question on the agenda is the political legacy of Israel’s greatest friend, President Bush, do we really need now to enter into negotiations with Syria?”

The failure of the United States to help bring peace between Syria and Israel when it was possible has now led us to the point where Trump and Netanyahu believe they can get away with this dangerous defiance of international legal norms and worsen an already difficult situation regarding Israel, Syria, and its neighbors. The decision could play a major role in destabilizing an already-tenuous world order.