



National Security Watch

24 September 1999

This series is designed to provide news and analysis on pertinent national security issues to the members and leaders of AUSA and to the larger policymaking community. For further information, please visit the AUSA Web site at www.ausa.org

National Security Watch is published periodically by

The Institute of Land Warfare

written by
Joseph Cyruk
and Wolf Kutter
of ILW's Studies and
Analysis Group

Reproduction and
distribution of this
document is encouraged



**Association of the
United States Army**

2425 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, Virginia
22201

703-841-4300, ext.298
Fax: 703-525-9039

The Golan Heights: Implications for U.S. Involvement in Peacekeeping Operations

With Israel moving slowly towards peace with its Arab neighbors, the status of the strategic Golan Heights is once again becoming an issue. This piece of Syrian high ground, occupied by Israel for over 30 years, is a primary obstacle to long-term peace. Syria will not make peace until it gets the Heights back, while Israeli security cannot be guaranteed with a potentially hostile power in possession of the Golan. The present UN peacekeepers, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), have not been effective, as both sides can and do simply bypass them, as was the case in the 1973 War. The question then becomes one of what both sides would accept for peace to be established. One possible solution is to demilitarize the Golan and return it to Syrian sovereignty, and to patrol the area with independent peacekeepers capable of enforcing the peace agreement. Many area experts posit that only heavily armed U.S. peacekeepers, in brigade strength or more, combined with State Department observers and backed up by the full reach of the U.S. Intelligence Community, are capable of keeping both sides in compliance in the near term while building confidence for long-term peace.

Keeping in mind the historical relations between Syria and Israel, and with the possibility that U.S. forces would be placed between them, it is important to review a few key issues.

The Golan Heights

The Golan Heights are a mountainous range running north to south, with Israel on the west and Syria on the east. They are bordered on the north by Lebanon and extend south to Jordan. On the Israeli side, the ground levels off rapidly into the Hula Valley and the lowlands around the Sea of Galilee, a plain extending west to the Mediterranean. This region is Israel's most agriculturally productive area and is also heavily populated. The Syrian side is rougher but levels off towards Damascus. Whoever controls the Heights is in an ideal position either to defend northern Israel or to launch an attack into it. Heavy artillery and observers placed on the heights could threaten any part of northern Israel as well, as they did in the past (1967 and 1973). The Golan also offers a useful jumping-off point for Israeli strikes into southern Lebanon and the Syrian-held Bekka Valley in their continuing war against Islamic guerillas.

Syria controlled the Heights from Israel's formation as a state in 1948 until 1967. During that time, Syria used the Heights intermittently as a staging point for artillery strikes and terrorist raids into northern Israel. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Syrians launched a full-scale invasion of Israel from the Golan Heights. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was able to repulse the attack and launch a counteroffensive into Syria, which secured the Heights for Israel. Despite protests, Israel retained the Golan, and lightly armed UN observers were placed between the combatants. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Syrian forces bypassed the UN posts and again attacked Israel through the Golan. The fighting was fierce, but IDF units were able to hold onto the Golan despite long odds. Since 1973, the Israeli government has moved settlers, many of them right-wing nationalistic citizens, into the Golan Heights. In 1981, Israel unilaterally annexed it, much as it has done with Gaza and the West Bank.

more . . .

Arab-Israeli Peace and the Golan

For long-term peace to be achieved between Syria and Israel, Syria must get the Heights back to assuage national pride and to secure Syrian territorial integrity. At the same time, the security of Israel cannot be guaranteed if Syria can station forces on the Golan Heights.

As a solution, many voices have called for the Golan to be returned to Syria and be demilitarized except for the presence of peacekeepers, as a way to reach a peace accord between the nations. This idea first surfaced during the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, and has since been gaining popularity in both countries. The United States has been repeatedly identified as a source of those peacekeepers, as Israel would accept American protection and the Syrians would not risk a showdown with the United States. Unlike the interpositioned UN observers, the future force would have to be capable of deterring both sides. If such a U.S. force was to be deployed, it would have to be in brigade strength to secure the whole area and it would need to be heavily equipped with Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, attack helicopters and artillery in order to deter both sides. Backing up the peacekeepers would be State Department observers on both sides and the full weight of U.S. intelligence assets to watch for build-ups of hostile moves on either side of the Golan. Before such a deployment is authorized, several important issues must first be addressed and weighed.

Securing the Golan would further stretch an Army already stretched to the breaking point. The deployment of a brigade to the Golan, and the need to rotate brigades through the area, would stretch the Army and decrease its warfighting capability. The active Army has but 33 combat brigades counting divisional and separate units, with brigade- or larger-sized forces deployed to Bosnia, Kosovo, Southwest Asia and Korea, and battalion-sized forces in the Sinai and elsewhere. Another brigade commitment would further stretch the Army and take away units sorely needed to fulfill the National Military Strategy of being prepared to prosecute two major theater wars (MTWs). It must also be noted that the deployment of a brigade combat team actually consumes a division's worth of resources, as one brigade is deployed, one is preparing and training to deploy, and one is recovering from deployment and retraining in its wartime missions. A deployment here would also be longer term, far longer than the Kosovo and Bosnia missions are projected to be and on par with the Multinational Force and Observer (MFO) mission in the Sinai, ongoing since 1982. Were Army National Guard units—such as the enhanced readiness brigades—to be rotated through, the Army would be pressed harder by the nation's employers, who are viewing the higher reserve OPTEMPO with concern.



U.S. forces in and around the Golan would be vulnerable to attacks by Islamic terrorists. The Golan rests just south and east of Lebanon's Bekka Valley, a stronghold and training ground for such terrorist organizations as Hamas and Hizbollah, as well as numerous smaller organizations. All of these groups are violently anti-American, and most are supported directly or indirectly by Syria or Iran or both. American forces in the Golan would have to have high force-protection standards to avoid a tragedy such as the 1983 Marine barracks attack in Lebanon. Even with strict force-protection rules, the force would still be vulnerable to mortar and artillery fire, as well as to the unguided Katusha rockets that bombard northern Israel and to the rumored FROG rockets controlled by Hizbollah. The American forces would be even more vulnerable while in transit to and from the Golan or while on R&R outside the protection of the American facilities. The Syrian, Lebanese and Israeli authorities would have to be held accountable for attacks originating outside the U.S. forces' control, but even if the locals fully cooperated (unlikely for Syria and impossible for the impotent Lebanese), some attacks would inevitably cause casualties.

U.S. forces could become a target for right-wing Israeli groups. While Islamic terrorists pose a threat, so do Israeli extremists such as ultranationalists and religious fundamentalists who disagree with a land-for-peace policy. These people would also be willing to strike at the American forces, either to disrupt or derail the peace accords or simply for revenge. These groups may even have covert support from sympathetic Israeli religious or military leaders. Given the Israeli ultrarealist stance in international politics, if such an attack took place, the government in Tel Aviv might become unwilling to prosecute the perpetrators or might even frame the Palestinians, Syrians or Lebanese for the act.

U.S. forces would have to fight to protect Israel or be put in a difficult situation if Israel attempted to attack Syria. In the first case, an attack by Syria on Israel would have to cross the Golan, and that means neutralizing the American forces. While a U.S. heavy brigade could defeat a Syrian division, the Syrians would likely commit multiple corps to the attack, and such a battle, regardless of the outcome, would be costly to the American force. In the second case, Israel has a long history of preemptive attacks on hostile neighbors, and an Israeli attempt to negotiate or bull through the Golan would put our peacekeepers in a very difficult situation. Related to this would be the role of the U.S. force if Israel and Syria went to war using only aircraft and missiles, as the Golan lies between Syria's largest airbases and Israel's.

The U.S.–Israeli security relationship would be changed. Rather than the United States supporting Israeli security through arms and equipment sales and money, we would be directly responsible for the security of the Israeli nation. This is a subtle but important distinction for the long-term stability of the region and future U.S. involvement.

U.S. forces would effectively be held hostage. An American unit garrisoning the Golan Heights would be a prisoner of the situation. Surrounded by Syria, Israel and Lebanon, such a unit would be dependent on outside powers for its line of supply and communication and, in the case of war, would be besieged from the outset. As the Golan lacks a modern airfield, even where the American forces land would be open to question. Personnel could be flown in to Damascus or Tel Aviv, but vehicles and equipment would have to land at a port. Haifa in Israel would be the best port of debarkation, but given that American forces would be on sovereign Syrian soil, the Syrians might demand using a Syrian-controlled port as the supply base. That means a long overland journey from Latakia in Syria or a short, dangerous journey from Beirut. If Syria and Israel went to war, the American brigade would have little choice but to "circle the wagons" and ride it out, with little hope of relief.

The United States would become involved in the problems relating to the water supply to Israel and western Jordan. A little-known but vitally important fact that would complicate U.S. presence on the Golan is that the Heights feed the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee from the Hebron Mountains. These water sources supply most of northern Israel, the West Bank and parts of western Jordan. The United States would de facto become involved with the security and ownership of those water sources, in a region where water is becoming an issue more volatile than oil.

more . . .

The United States would probably have to lend economic aid to Syria and Israel. Following the Camp David Accords, Egypt began receiving \$2 billion and Israel \$3 billion annually from the United States in economic and military aid. Following the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian National Authority received several hundred million dollars in U.S. aid. And when Jordan and Israel reached an agreement, Jordan was forgiven loans worth \$700 million. A Syrian-Israeli Peace would also likely result in increased foreign aid to both countries. It would cost up to \$5 billion for Israel to remove the military forces and settlers from the Golan Heights, costs for which Israel would demand compensation, or at least loan deferment.

Discussion

Despite the risks associated with such a deployment, this solution offers much promise as a way of securing long-term peace between Syria and Israel. In terms of America's long-term strategic interests, a peaceful relationship between Syria and Israel is an important goal and would lend an extremely high amount of stability to the Eastern Mediterranean. It may well be worth the expense in treasure and the risk in blood. In the short term, the goal would be to guarantee the security of both Israel and Syria and to facilitate the return of the Golan to Syrian sovereignty. In the long term, and relating to the exit strategy for U.S. forces, the goal would be to help promote confidence between Syria and Israel, securing the long-term peace and allowing the withdrawal of American forces.

Expense and risk are the key points to consider. To accomplish the mission, the Army would have to be funded and structured to be able to handle the Golan mission while retaining its other worldwide missions and the ability to prosecute the National Military Strategy. There would also be risks inherent in such a mission, ranging from terrorist threats to a full-scale MTW. The above concerns would have to be mitigated to a great degree for the gains to be worth the risks.

The bottom line is that the mission may be militarily feasible, and politically desirable, but we may still not want to do it. Including ancillary agreements with Israel and Syria to secure the safety of the American peacekeepers, it may be cheaper and easier for the two sides to come to a bilateral agreement and not bring the United States into it. For the United States, the mission means risks, costs in terms of the deployment and of aid to both Israel and Syria, and the problem of an open-ended, long-term commitment. The issue must be examined in detail and publicly discussed. The problem of the Golan Heights is not an easy one, and the solution will not be easy either.