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Syria: Forty years on, people displaced from the Golan remain in waiting

The situation of tens of thousands of Syrian Arabs displaced from the Golan Heights forty years ago is still far from resolved. They fled their homes in disputed circumstances during the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan, a strategic strip of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. Since then, Israel has prevented the displaced from returning to their homes. In 1981, Israel formally annexed the area, but this annexation has not been recognised internationally. The Syrian government estimates that around 305,000 people remain displaced today, a figure which includes the descendants of those displaced in 1967. Forty years on, the Golan's internally displaced population has largely integrated in their current places of residence across Syria. But while they do not face particular humanitarian risks, many continue to express a wish to return to the Golan. The issues of the restitution of their property and compensation for lost or destroyed property are also unresolved. A more immediate concern is that many displaced Syrians continue to be prevented from maintaining ties with their relatives living in the occupied Golan. Regular contact between Syrians living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members is not possible, with the exception of specific cases facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Golan remains a potential source of tension and renewed conflict in the region. Israel and Syria have taken part in a series of unofficial talks but formal negotiations have not taken place since 2000. In the summer of 2006, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad restated Syria's willingness to resume official talks but Israel refused conditioning the reopening of talks on a change in Syrian policy. A recent Israeli air raid into northern Syria has further discouraged the renewal of peace talks. No progress was noted either on return for a small number of the displaced to Quneitra, a town bordering the occupied Golan which Syria regained in 1974 but never rebuilt. Since the government of Syria unveiled plans to rebuild Quneitra in 2004 to allow an estimated 50,000 people to return, reconstruction has advanced only slowly.

Internal Displacement in Syria



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Background and main causes

The displacement occurred during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan Heights (hereafter referred to as the Golan), a narrow stretch of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The exact circumstances are subject to controversy, and Syrian and Israeli accounts differ. According to the Syrian government, Israeli forces forcibly expelled the inhabitants of the Golan and destroyed villages and farms, while the Israeli government maintains that these people fled following reports of violence (UN HRC, 25 August 2000; Arnold, 1 February 2000). The Syrian government estimates that there were about 250 villages and farms and 150,000 Syrian inhabitants in 1967. Today five of these villages are still inhabited, with an estimated population of between 18,000 and 25,000 Syrians (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, para. 10; UNCHR, 16 April 2003; Mission of Syria to the UN, October 2004; UNSC, 11 December 2006).

Following the 1967 war, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242 calling for the Israeli armed forces' withdrawal from the occupied territories and for the respect and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of every state in the area (UNSC, 22 November 1967). Conflict broke out again in 1973 and Syria attempted without success to regain the Golan. The 1973 war prompted the Security Council to adopt Resolution 338 urging Israel on the one side and Syria and Egypt on the other to agree to a ceasefire (UNSC, 22 October 1973).

An Israeli-Syrian ceasefire agreement (the "Agreement on Disengagement") was signed in 1974, which enabled Syria

to regain Quneitra, an area in the Golan emptied of its 50,000 inhabitants and left in ruins following the Israeli occupation (Schneider, 8 May 2001; Khawaja, 2002). The agreement also provided for a UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to maintain the ceasefire along the UN demarcation line which separates the occupied Golan from the remaining Syrian territory (UNSC Resolution 350 (1974)).

In December 1981, Israel unilaterally annexed the Golan which has since been under the jurisdiction and administration of Israeli law. However, the demarcation line between the Israeli-occupied Golan and Syria is not an internationally recognised border, and therefore people displaced from the Golan are considered internally displaced people (IDPs). No government has recognised Israel's annexation, and in 1981 the Security Council found that "the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan was null and void and without international legal effect" (UNSC Resolution 497, 17 December 1981). The UN has since reaffirmed this principle on numerous occasions and has regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced people to return and recover possession of their properties.

The Golan is described as Israel's "quietest frontier" and the Israeli-Syrian ceasefire has generally been respected by both sides (MERIP, 26 July 2007). The UN Secretary-General has nevertheless renewed the mandate of UNDOF every six months given the absence of a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement (UNSC, 5 June 2007 and UNSC Resolution 338 (1973); UN, 20 June 2007). The

relationship between Syria and Israel remains volatile. Israeli air force planes attacked what Israel claimed was a military target in northern Syria on 6 September 2007, raising fears of a possible war (UN News, 1 October 2007; BBC, 1 October 2007). Other incidents include an Israeli air strike on Ain al-Sahib village near Damascus on 5 October 2003 and reported Israeli violations of Syrian airspace (UN HRC, 15 September 2006).

Figures

Reports vary of the number of people displaced from the Golan during the 1967 Six-Day War. The Syrian government maintains that approximately 130,000 people were displaced from the Golan as a result of the conflict and that those displaced and their descendants now number 305,660 (Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, October 2004, August 2005). Israel says that only 70,000 people were displaced from the Golan in 1967 (USCR 2002; Dammers 1998, p.189). Most of the IDPs have resettled in villages close to the Golan, in the suburbs of Damascus, or in Sweida in the south of Syria.

The humanitarian crisis and ongoing conflict in Iraq has led an estimated 1.5 million Iraqi refugees to seek refuge in Syria, according to figures from the UN (UNHCR, September 2007). Some 250,000 Iraqi refugees have sought refuge in Jermana, a suburb of Damascus which has been home to a large part of the displaced population from the Golan, many of whom settled in the area forty years ago (ICRC, 22 August 2007).

A field survey would be required to know more about the numbers and status of

Golan's IDPs. The living conditions of internally displaced people in Syria are not well documented but they do not have immediate humanitarian needs. What information exists suggests that most of the people displaced from the Golan and their children have integrated into the areas where they initially took refuge. Some reports suggest that in the past IDPs have been given priority for public service jobs and university places by the government. Although they do not have particular vulnerabilities which separate them from the rest of the Syrian population, many of the people displaced from the Golan have expressed a desire to return (Fecci, June 2000; Khawaja, 2002).

Displaced suffer separation from their families

A pressing human rights issue for the displaced people is the separation from their families caused by entry and exit restrictions imposed by the Israeli government on the occupied Golan. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) notes that local communities consider it the single most important issue tied to the occupation (ICRC, 16 March 2007). It continues to be nearly impossible for most of the people displaced from the Golan to exercise their right to respect for family life. Family visits were authorised by the Israeli authorities until 1992, but since then, contact between tens of thousands of Syrians living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members has been severely restricted. There are some exceptions, including students, pilgrims and brides, who have been regularly allowed to cross the separation line, under the auspices of the ICRC (ICRC, 21 March

2005 and 28 June 2004; Syria Today, 1 January 2005; UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, Sect. B).

The repercussions of this ongoing separation which has prevented many displaced Syrians and their families from maintaining social, cultural and family ties have been underlined in interviews conducted by the ICRC in 2007. For example, a man recounts his experience of meeting his family who were displaced to Syria proper after being cut off from them for more than a decade. Separated family members are generally not able to attend funerals, weddings, births and other important family events, although the Israeli government sometimes gives individuals permission on a case-by-case basis. Some families in the town of Majdal Shams in the northern tip of the occupied Golan, where nearly half of the Syrian-Arab population lives, resort to using megaphones to communicate across the valley which divides them from their families in Syria proper (ICRC, 5 June 2007).

In January 2006, the Syrian government expressed concern that Israel was imposing increasing restrictions on the movement of Syrians living in the village of Ghajar (a village which is partly inside Lebanon and partly in the occupied Golan). In a letter to the UN Human Rights Commission, Syria expressed concern at Israel's plans to build a permanent separation wall through the town, which could effectively lead to the displacement or "transfer" of its population. The letter reported increased restrictions imposed by Israel on Ghajar's residents, including instructions to villagers to evacuate part of the village (UN CHR, 11 January 2006).

A further issue is the concentration of mines in the area of separation between the occupied Golan and Syria proper. In his report of June 2007, the UN Secretary General reported that owing to the age of the mines and their deteriorating explosives, the danger which they present had increased (UNSC, 5 June 2007).

No solutions in absence of political dialogue

Neither the return of the displaced population nor compensation for property loss can be envisaged without a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. However, identifying the terms of such a treaty involves finding solutions to key issues of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, namely access to water resources (the Golan is a significant source of Israel's water supply), resolution of disputed boundaries, security and the normalisation of bilateral relations (ICG, 16 July 2002; Middle East, July 2007).

Attempts to negotiate a political solution to the conflict between Israel and Syria began in 1991 at a peace conference on the Middle East convened in Madrid. In 2000, negotiations broke down over disagreements over the Golan. The Israeli government had offered to return the Golan excluding the strip along the Sea of Galilee, but the government of Syria insisted on an unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 line, which would ensure Syrian access to the Sea of Galilee (MEMRI, 23 Jan 2000; The Guardian, 8 May 2003 and 17 July 2003). Israel wishes to control access to the Sea of Galilee and to address its security concerns before agreeing to withdraw (Ben-Nahum Yonatan, 19 Dec 1995; MEMRI, 24 March 2000). In returning the Golan,

Israel would also have to dismantle its settlements in the area (BBC, 31 December 2003, 10 October 2004 and 9 June 2007).

Some analysts suggest that recent talks have also failed because of the Israeli government ceding to pressure from an American government intent on isolating Syria. Officially, Israel rejected several calls by President Bashar Al-Assad to reopen negotiations (UNSC, 11 December 2006; ICG, 11 February 2004). However, secret talks are reported to have taken place between Israeli and Syrian representatives between September 2004 and July 2006 (BBC, 16 January 2007). The US has largely opposed renewed dialogue with the Syrian government because of its alleged support for Hizbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and insurgent groups in Iraq (The Guardian, 7 June 2007 and 8 June 2007; ICG, 10 April 2007). Israel has also conditioned negotiations on evidence of change in Syria's policies towards Hizbollah, Hamas and Iran (ICG, 10 April 2007). Meanwhile, Syria has demanded the presence of the United States as a third party in peace talks (MERIP, 26 July 2007).

Prospects for the restitution of the Golan and the return of the displaced population are also complicated by the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in the area, and public opposition in Israel to a withdrawal (UNHRC, 19 October 2004; BBC News, 31 December 2003; Arutz 7, 11 December 2002; ICG, 10 April 2007). The Israeli government has on several occasions publicly stated its intention to continue to expand settlements in the Golan (Washington Post, 30 October 2006; UNGA, 3 May 2007). In 2004, Israel's

Ministerial Committee on Settlement Affairs announced a decision to double investment in the Golan, and build nine new settlements (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.91; UNECSC, 7 June 2004; UNHRC, 19 October 2004). In December 2006, the Interior Minister announced the government's intention to facilitate accelerated settlement construction near the border with Syria (Foundation for Middle East Peace, February 2007; UNGA, 3 May 2007). A report by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia submitted to the UN's General Assembly and Economic and Social Council details ongoing settlement expansion in parts of the occupied Golan (UNGA, 3 May 2007). Although figures are not consistent, reports suggest that there are some 40 Israeli settlements and around 20,000 Israelis living in the area (UNSC, 11 December 2006; UNGA, 3 May 2007). Meanwhile, a public opinion poll in January 2004 suggests that a majority of Israelis opposed plans to hand back the Golan to Syria (BBC News, 10 October 2004).

More recent news reports hint that a new series of peace negotiations between Israel and Syria may hinge on the issue of the Golan. In August 2006, President Bashar Al-Assad of Syria said he was interested in peace with Israel but that he would consider war to regain the Golan. In June 2007, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was reported to have sent messages to President Assad that Israel was prepared to give up the Golan in exchange for a peace deal (The Guardian, 7 June 2007 and 8 June 2007). Olmert delivered these messages while a publicised military training exercise was carried out by the Israeli army in the south of Israel, including an attack on a mock Syrian vil-

lage (The Guardian, 11 June 2007). The Israeli press during this period cited Israeli military and intelligence sources as saying that Syria was increasing its military activities on the border and may be preparing for an attack (The Guardian, 8 June 2007). Some of Golan's residents also reported an increase in Israeli military activities in the occupied Golan (BBC, 6 June 2007; The Guardian, 11 June 2007). In October 2007, Assad announced that his government would not attend a November peace conference in Washington on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, unless the agenda included negotiations over the Golan (BBC, 1 October 2007). Israel has said that any future agreement with Syria would involve the return of sovereignty to Syria, but with Israel retaining possession of the territory under a lease of at least 25 years (The Guardian, 9 June 2007; Middle East, July 2007).

National response

The Syrian government has regularly presented its concerns regarding the ongoing occupation of the Golan and the return of Golan's displaced to the UN's human rights mechanisms and the Security Council. The government has made some efforts to help those displaced from areas bordering the occupied Golan, including building some homes and a hospital in the area (USCR, 2000; IHT, 23 October 2004; Syria Today, 2005).

There has been no significant progress in government plans to facilitate returns to Quneitra, which borders the occupied Golan. The inhabitants of Quneitra, estimated at 50,000 people, were forced to flee during the 1967 war when the town was destroyed by Israeli forces. Although

Syria regained control of the area in 1974, the government had made little effort to rebuild Quneitra, keeping the ruins as a memorial to the Israeli incursion and ongoing occupation of the rest of the Golan (Syria Today, March 2005; IHT, 23 October 2004). In March 2005 there were hopes that some of the internally displaced people might be able to return in the foreseeable future, with Prime Minister Naji Otri inaugurating a new hospital and laying the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two nearby villages destroyed in the 1967 war. However, the reconstruction of the area has since progressed slowly. In view of a possible return, more than 100 people have approached the ICRC with legal claims to ownership of land and buildings in Quneitra (ICRC, 21 March 2005).

Grassroots organisations on both sides of the border have called for the situation of the displaced people to be resolved. Several local groups have formed among displaced Syrians to raise awareness of their plight, such as the Popular Commission for the Liberation of the Golan, but some of these groups also appear to have militant political motives (Syria Today, March 2007; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 November 2006; MERIP, 26 July 2007). Israeli activists have also lobbied their government to restart peace negotiations on the Golan (Middle East Report, 26 July 2007), and in November 2006, journalists and human rights activists participating in an International Media Forum on the Golan in Quneitra called for the right of displaced Syrians to return to their homes to be respected.

International response

The international response to the situation of the Golan has largely been political rather than humanitarian, although UNDOF has maintained its presence and carried out demining activities.

The UN Security Council and the General Assembly as well as the Economic and Social Council have adopted a number of resolutions calling for Israel's withdrawal from the Syrian Golan in accordance with international principles which underline respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of every state of the occupied territories. UN resolutions have called for peace negotiations and urged Israel to refrain from changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan. The General Assembly has also declared Israel's decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the Golan null and void and without international legal effect (UNSC Resolutions 242 (1967), Resolution 338 (1973) and Resolution 497 (1981); UN GA Resolution 61/27 (1 December 2006) and Resolution 61/118 and 61/120 (14 December 2006); ECOSOC, 26 July 2007).

Advocacy has been undertaken at the regional level by the League of Arab States. In March 2006, the Arab League adopted a resolution rejecting all measures taken by Israel which aim to change the legal, physical and demographic character of the Syrian Golan and describing them as null and void and in breach of international convention and of the charter and resolutions of the UN (UNGA, Resolution 6612(125), 7 February 2007).

Following the 1967 war, the UN General Assembly established a "Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories" (UNGA Resolution 2443 (XXIII), 1968). The mandate of the Committee includes reporting to the Human Rights Council on the human rights of the Golan's IDPs, or "persons normally resident in the areas under occupation but who had left those areas because of hostilities" (for example UNGA 59/33, 31 January 2005 and UNGA 59/125, 25 January 2005). However, since its establishment, the Committee has been denied access to the occupied Golan (UN Special Committee, 8 June 2007).

The UN's human rights bodies, in particular the Human Rights Council (previously the UN Commission on Human Rights), have regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced people to return to and repossess their former homes. In a resolution adopted in November 2006 the Council emphasised that the displaced population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties (UN HRC, Resolution 2/3, 9 January 2007). The Council also adopted a second resolution concerning the Golan (Resolution 2/4), reaffirming the illegality of Israel's annexation of the territory and calling on Israel to refrain from "changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan" (UN HRC, 9 January 2007).

No UN agency has adopted a role in monitoring or providing humanitarian assistance to the IDPs in Syria, because

they generally do not have any humanitarian needs specifically linked to their being displaced. A number of UN agencies are present in Syria, mainly operating under a development framework. The UN's development policy framework document for Syria for the period of 2007-2011 makes no reference to Golan's displaced. This is in contrast to an earlier draft of the UN Development Assistance Framework (2001) which noted the need for UN support in the event of the reintegration of the occupied areas (UN, 2001; UN Syria Office of the Resident Coordinator, December 2000). Given the lack of a peace agreement, plans to support the return of the displaced population and rehabilitation of the Golan have not been developed.

The ICRC is the only international organisation assisting the displaced people, though in many cases it is only able to do so minimally. It has operated in Syria since 1967, to restore and maintain family links broken by Israel's occupation (ICRC, 28 June 2004 and 19 June 2003; Arabic News, 14 November 2002). The ICRC continues to call for the resumption of the family visit programme discontinued since 1992 which enabled people separated from their displaced family members to meet together in Syria once a year for two weeks (ICRC, 23 March 2007).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Syria. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this overview are directly accessible on the Syria [List of Sources](#) page of our website.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

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