Defensible Borders on the Golan Heights

Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

For most of the period since the June 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria, Israel has viewed this strategic region as the front line of its defense in the north. Prior to 1967, Syrian armor and artillery on the Golan posed a constant threat to Israeli farms and villages in the Galilee below. However, in the years that followed, with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) positioned on the Golan, Israel acquired an optimal line of defense to enable its quantitatively inferior standing army to hold back a Syrian ground attack and provide Israel with the time it needed to mobilize its reserves and neutralize any aggression against it.

Despite these military considerations, since the early 1990s, both direct and indirect contacts have taken place between Israel and Syria to examine the possibility of arriving at a peace agreement. In most cases the contacts did not mature into genuine and open negotiations with the intent of arriving at a detailed agreement. The one exception was the effort initiated by Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the years 1999-2000. The negotiations at that time reached the stage of discussion over details that included security arrangements intended to compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan Heights. The talks at that time did not lead to the signing of a peace agreement, but the reason behind the failure to reach an agreement did not stem from an appreciable gap on the security issue. On the security issue, both sides appeared to reach almost total agreement.

Given that background, when indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations were renewed again in 2008 under Turkish auspices, they were conducted under the assumption that there was a military solution that would compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan and that such a solution was acceptable to the Syrians.

The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that Israel does not possess a plausible solution to its security needs without the Golan Heights. Not only was the "solution" proposed in the year 2000 implausible at the time, but changing circumstances, both strategic and operative, have rendered Israel's forfeiture of the Golan today an even more reckless act.

This analysis is composed of seven sections:

- Geography and History of the Golan Heights

- A Peace Agreement with Syria – Truth and Illusion

- Israel's Current Security Concept

- The Importance of Strategic Depth

- Security Arrangements Discussed in 1999-2000

- Changed Circumstances Since 2000

- Diplomatic and Military Implications of a Golan Withdrawal

Geography and History of the Golan Heights

The Geographic Structure of the Golan

The entire area of the Golan Heights is 1,800 km²; the size of that part of the region under Israeli control is 1,200 km². The Golan Heights is bounded on the north by Mt. Hermon (that is partially in Israeli hands), on the west by the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee, and on the south by the Yarmouk River. Its length is 62 km. and its width varies from 26 km. in the Mt. Phares area to 12 km. in the area of Majdal Shams.

The maximum altitude of Mt. Hermon in the area controlled by Syria is 2,814 meters (9,230 feet), while the highest area in Israeli hands is the "Snow Observation Post" at 2,224 meters (7,300 feet). The average altitude in the northern Golan Heights is 1,000-1,200 meters, while in its southern part the Golan Heights is about 250 meters above sea level (about 450 meters above the Sea of Galilee). At the western edge of the Golan Heights are rock cliffs that drop 500 meters (1,700 feet) to the Jordan River Valley and the Sea of Galilee below.

The eastern portion of the Golan Heights is the watershed line and control of the hills in this region gives the IDF a distinct topographical advantage in the event of a Syrian attack. For example, one of those hills, Mt. Avital, which is under IDF control, is 1,204 meters above sea level, while the opposite area inside Syria is roughly 700-800 meters above sea level. Thus, control of this line is extremely important for Israel's ground forces.

The Golan is a relatively narrow territory, without the kind of depth from which Israel benefited in the Sinai Peninsula (280 kilometers or 120 miles). Yet this territory provides Israel with invaluable defensive advantages because of its unique terrain conditions and topography. On the one hand, these conditions provide fire and observation control over an area extending scores of kilometers into Syria, while on the other hand the bulk of Israeli territory on the Golan descends in the west, and is protected from Syrian

Israel's Forward Defense Line on the Golan Heights: a Cross-Section at Mt. Avital
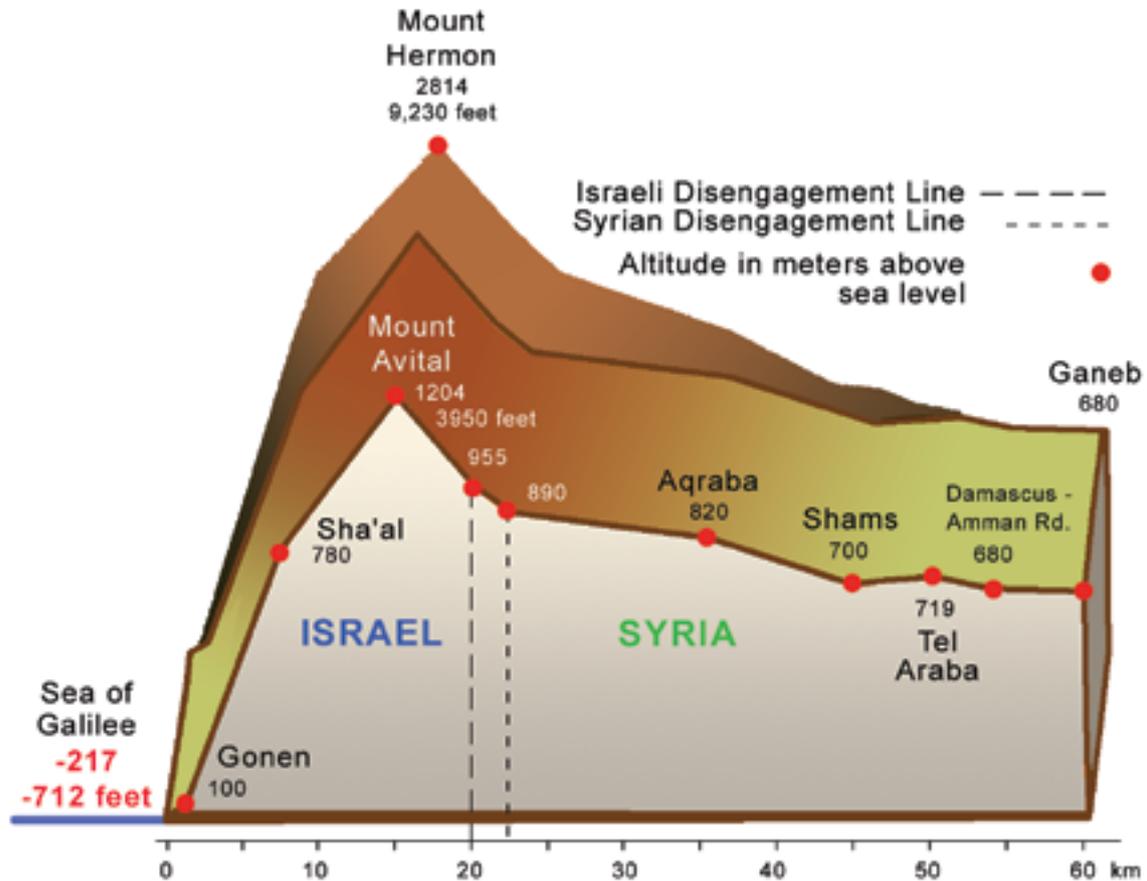
surveillance capability and flat trajectory fire. Additionally, the majority of the eastern hill line is impassible to tank movement, thus obligating enemy armor to move through low-lying areas that are under IDF surveillance and control.

As long as the outcome of wars is ultimately decided by the movement of ground forces, these considerations of terrain and topography will remain critical for the defense of Israel, notwithstanding the growing prevalence of ballistic missiles and rockets in the Middle Eastern battlefield.

A History of the Golan

Jewish settlement in the Golan began during the era of King Herod (23 BCE), and the Jews established scores of communities in the southern and central Heights. To this day, remnants of synagogues and other buildings are preserved in the vicinity of the town of Katzrin.

The Jewish community in the Golan was destroyed by the Romans as part of their repression of the Great Revolt. The conquest of the town of Gamla and the killing of its inhabitants in 66 CE were particularly notable.

Following the First World War, the British and French partitioned the Middle East between them (the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement). The border between their two empires was delineated in 1923, with France receiving Syria and Lebanon, which became a League of Nations mandate, and Britain receiving the Land of Israel (British Mandatory Palestine). The boundaries between the empires awarded Britain a clear advantage in everything pertaining to water. It was determined that the border with French-controlled territory would pass east of the Banias Springs, 50 meters east of the Jordan River and 10 meters east of the Sea of Galilee, in order to remove any doubt that Britain would enjoy exclusive control over the water sources.

The Syrians controlled the Golan Heights from the time they received independence in 1946 until 1967, when Israel captured the territory during the Six-Day War. Initially, Israel also controlled an additional area in the central Golan that included the town of Kuneitra.

During the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Syrians conquered Mt. Hermon and in the southern Golan Heights they breached the Israeli defense line that was based on the eastern ridge line. In the northern Golan Heights, despite their numerical advantage, the Syrians were checked before this line. In a counterattack, the IDF restored its control of the area and also captured additional territory within Syria, known as the "Syrian enclave."

According to the armistice agreement of April 1974, Israel agreed to return to Syria both the "enclave" and the town of Kuneitra. Despite severe diplomatic pressure by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Israel refused to withdraw from the eastern ridge line, insisting that the "Kuneitra hills" (Hermonit, Avital, and Bental) remain in Israeli hands.

Today 40,000 people, half of them Jews, live on the Golan Heights. The remainder include 17,000 Druze who live in four communities in the northeastern part of the Golan, and about 3,000 Alawites in Ghajar, a village on the old border between Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

Israeli–Syrian Balance of Forces on the Golan Heights on the Eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War
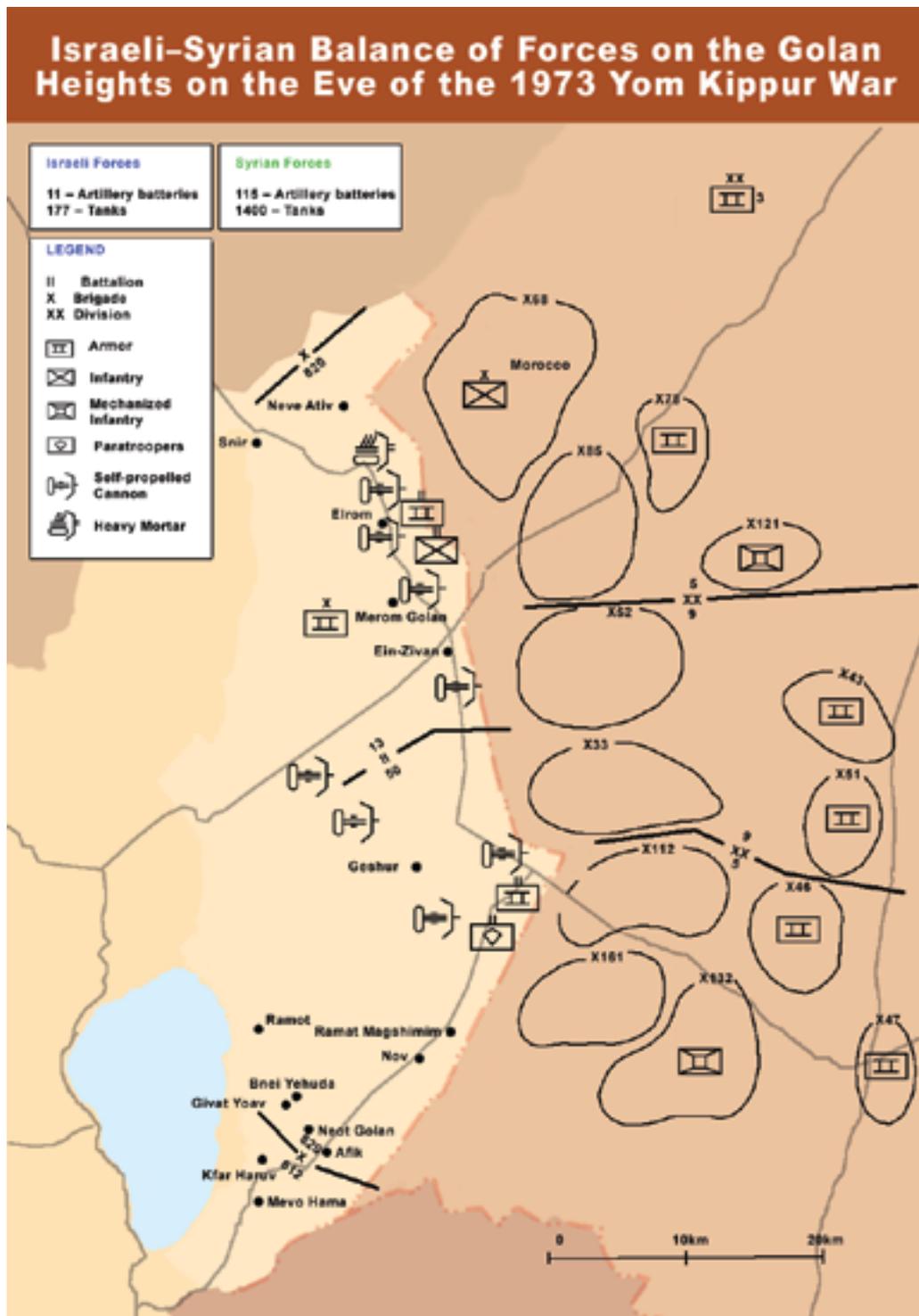
A Peace Agreement with Syria – Truth and Illusion

A formal peace agreement between Israel and Syria is believed to be in the realm of the possible if Israel agrees to withdraw from the Golan to the June 4, 1967, line that puts the Syrians on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It is plausible that given additional conditions (U.S. support), the Syrians would be genuinely interested in such an agreement.

Such a peace agreement would include four components:

1. The transfer of the entire Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty.

2. The maintenance of diplomatic relations between Syria and Israel.

3. A resolution of the water issue.

4. The maintenance of security arrangements that are intended to compensate Israel for the loss of the area.

However, irrespective of how advisable such an agreement may be from Israel's perspective, and without relation to future security arrangements (which is the major purpose of this analysis), a dangerous tendency has been created in recent years by fostering the belief that a peace agreement with Syria would have positive repercussions in seven additional areas. Unfortunately, it would be a dangerous illusion to believe that these seven contentions would become assured byproducts of an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement.

1.   "An Israeli-Syrian peace agreement will drive a wedge between Syria and Iran."

Even accepting, for the sake of argument, that Iranian-Syrian relations might be damaged as a result of a peace agreement with Israel (which is far from guaranteed since the Syrians officially insist that this will not happen, whereas Iran is not opposed to such agreements

with Israel as long as they result in Israeli territorial concessions), this issue is totally unrelated to the major problem that Iran poses – its efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. Syria perhaps currently needs Iran, but Iran doesn't need Syria. The greatest strategic threat to Israel is posed by nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran. The continued existence of such a threat will not be influenced at all by whether there will be a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.

2. "A peace agreement between Syria and Israel will weaken Hizbullah."

At the time of the 1999-2000 negotiations, the Syrians ruled Lebanon both *de facto* and in a semiformal fashion. During that time Damascus could not evade responsibility for what was occurring in Lebanon and therefore it was compelled to agree that a peace agreement between Israel and Syria also meant a full peace agreement with Lebanon. A peace agreement with Lebanon accordingly obligated the Syrians to guarantee the dismantling of Hizbullah as a fighting force.

Today this situation has been altered. Under international pressure, Syria was compelled in 2005 to withdraw its forces from Lebanon and presently it is not responsible for that state. Since Syria can evade responsibility for what happens in Lebanon, and given that its continued interest is to reinforce Hizbullah even in the event of a peace agreement between Syria and Israel, it is clear that Hizbullah will continue to constitute a threat to Israel from Lebanon. It should be remembered that a close Syrian relationship with Hizbullah is critical for Syria in order for Damascus to safeguard its interests in Lebanon, which have always been a paramount consideration for the Syrian regime.

3. "An Israeli-Syrian peace agreement will prevent Hizbullah from arming."

Hizbullah receives its primary assistance (political, economic, and military) from Iran. Iran can transfer arms to Hizbullah via Syria but also via other routes. Since the Syrian interest to continue buttressing Hizbullah will exist even after the signing of a peace agreement with Israel, it may be expected that the weapons flow from Syria to Hizbullah will persist, even if the methods become more clandestine. It is worth recalling that Egypt encountered difficulties in preventing weapons smuggling from its territory to Gaza, despite the fact that the Egypt-Gaza border is only 12 km. long across a flat terrain. Syria's border with Lebanon

extends hundreds of kilometers, most of it over mountainous terrain with bountiful cover. As long as the will to maintain the weapons flow continues to exist on both sides, the flow may be expected to continue.

4.   "A peace agreement with Syria will assist the Israeli-Palestinian track."

One can assume that the reverse will be the case. Given the assumption that it will be difficult for Israel to manage both the Syrian and Palestinian tracks in tandem, the Palestinians are likely to feel that they are being reduced to a lower priority. It is plausible that this will engender frustration and that such frustration could possibly lead to the outbreak of a "third intifada."

5.   "A peace agreement between Syria and Israel will compel Syria

to banish Hamas headquarters from Damascus."

This may possibly occur, but why is it important where Khaled Mashaal, the exiled leader of Hamas' political wing, resides? Furthermore, should a peace agreement exist between Israel and Syria, it may actually be preferable that Hamas headquarters be located in Damascus (which might be able to exert influence) rather than in Yemen, Sudan, or Somalia.

6.   "The agreement will improve Israel's relations with the Arab world."

The Arab world is committed to the Palestinian issue, but not to the Syrian issue to the same extent. Just as the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement and subsequently the Israeli-Jordanian agreement did not change the attitude of other Arab states toward Israel, an agreement with Syria may not make much difference. Moreover, the Arab world is divided between a pro-Iranian axis including Syria, Qatar, Hizbullah, and Hamas, on the one hand, and an anti-Iranian axis based on Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other states, on the other hand. Under present conditions, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are actually interested in isolating the Syrian regime today and would not respond well to any diplomatic move that gave Bashir Assad more international legitimacy.

7. "The peace agreement with Syria would enhance international support for Israel."

The world is angry with Israel because of its "occupation" over the Palestinians and would like to see this problem solved. The influence of a peace agreement with Syria on Israel's legitimacy would be negligible.

To sum up, there are those who contend that conceding the Golan is a worthwhile strategic risk for Israel, given the major political advantages that a peace agreement with Syria would provide. Yet in fact, such strategic advantages are slim and far from guaranteed.

Changes in the Balance of Power

Since the Yom Kippur War, the balance of power between Israel and Syria has been altered substantially. In the classic, conventional realm, the Syrian quantitative advantage has been offset by Israel's qualitative military improvements. Today, the gap in favor of Israel has increased in almost every dimension. The danger of an invasion by Syrian armored divisions, a tangible threat in 1973, has diminished appreciably due to the vast enhancement of Israel's ability to destroy armored combat vehicles both from the air and from the ground.

The relative advantages of the Israeli Air Force and Israeli Navy over their Syrian counterparts have also markedly increased. The Syrian Air Force is at a very low state of technical and operational readiness. The air defense system that was a Syrian strong point continues to present a challenge but has improved only a little when compared to the Israel Air Force's capabilities to contend with it.

Faced with the clear enhancement of Israel's advantages in these areas, the Syrians have developed three capabilities that are intended to offset Israel's capabilities. The first is the capability for "close-range fighting," infantry capabilities (without armored combat vehicles) replete with the most advanced anti-tank missiles and night vision gear. Over the last forty years, improvements in anti-tank weaponry (effective range, penetrating power, mobility, night-fighting capability) have grown faster than the advantages in tank capabilities, creating

a situation in which the effectiveness of infantry and commando forces operating against armored forces in built-up areas or areas rich in cover has improved markedly.

The second significant Syrian capability is in the realm of surface-to-surface missiles. In addition to the deployment of heavy missiles capable of reaching any target in Israel, the Syrians have equipped themselves with a huge quantity of rockets with an effective range of between a few scores of kilometers to 200 km. This network is more problematic from Israel's standpoint than the heavy surface-to-surface missiles, since it involves much greater quantities, superior concealment capabilities, and greater accuracy.

The third Syrian capability involves its arsenal of chemical weaponry, capable of being launched both by missiles and other means.

Israel's Current Security Concept

In its concept of combat with Syria, the IDF attempts to maximize its relative advantages, predicated on seven principles:

1. Given the assumption that war with Syria also means war with Lebanon (Hizbullah), defeating Syria will be accorded priority.

2. The existing defense line on the Golan Heights is the nearly optimal line. It allows Israel to defend the Golan Heights with a relatively small force, while moving to an offensive posture under comfortable conditions. Additionally, the conditions of the terrain that are suitable for defense allow Israel to allocate the bulk of its air force at the outset of the fighting to secure the objective of achieving air superiority rather than providing air support for the ground battle. Achieving air superiority at the outset is a necessary condition for countering Syrian ground-to-ground missiles, as well as for supporting ground combat and inflicting severe damage on infrastructure targets.

3. Victory over Syria will be obtained first and foremost due to Israel's capability to destroy substantial parts of the Syrian forces on the ground, in the air, and at sea.

4. A rapid victory requires the capability of maneuver that can create a ground threat to the Damascus region within a few days.

5. Israel must prevent Syrian use of chemical weaponry either by striking it or by creating deterrence.

6. Without reference to the size of Israel's territorial successes within Syria, Israel must prevent any Syrian territorial achievements on Israeli soil at the end of the war.

7. Israel is incapable of preventing the massive firing of ground-to-ground missiles and rockets at Israel, including Syrian fire toward Israel's strategic rear area. By allocating vast resources, Israel can significantly reduce the quantity of fire directed at the Israeli rear,

but the most useful response to the Syrian threat is to achieve a rapid victory. Victory will be obtained by neutralizing the bulk of the Syrian military force while preserving favorable attrition ratios, damaging the interests of the Syrian regime (destroying "strategic" objectives), and creating a ground threat to the Syrian capital.

The Importance of Strategic Depth

Geostrategic characteristics remain a key factor in determining a country's ability to defend itself. England was never conquered not because its army is strong but because it is surrounded by the sea. Russia was not defeated by Napoleon nor by Germany due to its size and strategic depth. The Soviet Union during the 1980s and the United States currently find it difficult to control Afghanistan both due to its size and its topographical features. Israel is threatened by Hizbullah from Lebanon and by Hamas from Gaza not because of their strength but because geography allows them to strike deep into Israel with primitive weapons. If Hizbullah, for example, with the very same arsenal, was located 200 km. from the Israeli border, it would not be defined as a threat at all.

While the Egyptian army is inordinately superior to the Syrian army, we assume that even if a regime change were to occur in Egypt and the new regime was oriented toward war, Israel possesses a plausible capability to cope with this. The principal reason is the 280 kilometers (120 miles) distance between the Suez Canal (with the Egyptian army located only on the western side) and the Israeli border.

The principal advantage of the attacker over the defender is his ability to mass his forces and concentrate his military effort. While the defender must be deployed along the entire breadth of the theater (because he doesn't know where the attack will occur), the attacker, as the initiator, can choose a narrow theater, concentrate his efforts on this theater, and obtain decisive superiority at the location of his choosing. How can one defend oneself? The primary principle of defense is "depth and reserves." According to this principle the defender forwardly deploys only a small segment of his strength. When the attack has begun, and when he has correctly identified where the attacker is making his principal effort, the defender can put the bulk of his forces located in the rear into play, both in order to reinforce his forces located in the theater under attack and to launch a counterattack.

For the defender to deploy his forces efficiently, he requires depth. One must be in a situation where even if the attacker scores successes at the outset of the attack and he manages to conquer a certain area, the situation remains reversible. The situation is reversible as long as the attacker does not threaten by his very presence the area of the defender's strategic rear, and as long as he is not positioned in a location that will prevent the reserve forces of the defender from efficiently performing the counteraction.

The ability of the defender to perform efficiently is contingent on the existence of depth – the distance between the front line and the rear – and the nature of the terrain.

On the Golan Heights, the distance from the front line to the rear is minimal. More importantly, due to the structure of the terrain, any westward movement of the contact line from its present location would significantly degrade the ability to defend the territory.

Nevertheless, one can delineate two hypothetical border lines west of the current defense line. The first line could rest on the "rear ridge line" – located 3-5 km. west of the present border. It begins in the north at Jebel Keta (south of Majdal Shams) and continues southward to Tel Shiban, Mt. Shifon, Tel Fazra and Givat Bezek. There is little diplomatic logic to this line, but it would permit the transfer of three of the four Druze villages to Syria (not including Ein Kinya).

The second line is the "cliff line" 2-5 km. from the Jordan River. This is the last high area before the steep westward descent towards the Jordan, the Hula Valley, and the Sea of Galilee. From a diplomatic standpoint, an Israeli withdrawal to this line means forfeiting the entire Golan, including almost all the Jewish communities there.

From a military standpoint, there is some advantage in a stance on this line as opposed to a full withdrawal to the western side of the Jordan River. Continued Israeli control of both sides of the Jordan would increase the likelihood that the passage of forces to the Golan could be performed more expeditiously. In addition, Israeli possession of this line would diminish the exposure of Israeli force concentrations in the Hula Valley and the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee to flat trajectory Syrian fire.

To sum up, the present border line is the only one affording plausible defense for the State of Israel. It creates strategic depth, albeit minimal, and, in addition, this line exerts eastward control deep into Syrian territory. Any movement westward by Israel would create a considerable depreciation of Israel's defensive capability, owing to the nature of the terrain that descends from east to west.

The two other possible defense lines mentioned here (the "rear ridge line" and the "cliff line") are far worse, but they are still preferable to a border line located west of the Jordan River.

The Golan Heights: A Topographical Representation
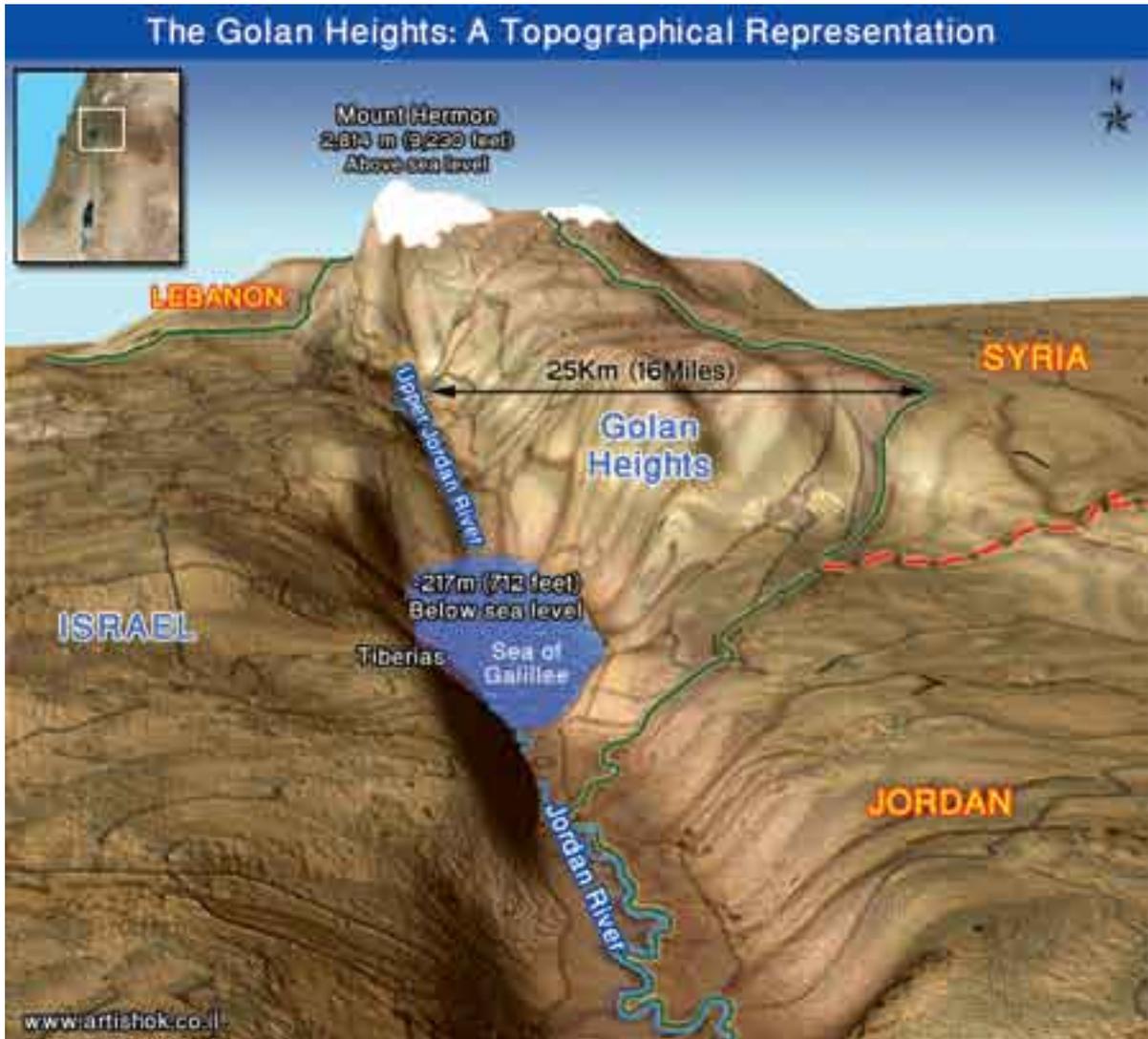
Security Arrangements Discussed in 1999-2000

The Idea of Security Arrangements

When the issue of a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights was raised in the 1990s, the first question discussed by the Israeli defense establishment was: Can Israel begin its defensive battle in the Hula Valley? The answer was negative. There was a unanimity backed by the political echelon, led by Prime Minister Ehud Barak, that in order to defend itself, Israel had to begin its defensive battle at the line where it was presently stationed.

How could this conclusion be reconciled with the understanding that a peace agreement with Syria mandated a concession of the entire Golan Heights? The response was based on security arrangements that were intended to bridge the gap between conceding the Golan and creating a situation that would guarantee that in case of war, IDF forces could return to the place where they are currently stationed. This was an attempt to "do without but feel satiated."

The idea was based on two components:

1. Israel would indeed concede the Golan and its most forward forces would take up positions below the Heights, but the territory itself would be totally demilitarized and the Syrian divisions would be moved back, eastward to the region of Damascus and even further.

2. Israel would retain an early warning intelligence base on Mt. Hermon and in this manner could identify any serious violation of the agreement.

On the basis of this security concept, as soon as the IDF would comprehend that Syria intended to go to war, or the moment that the movement of Syrian forces westward was identified, IDF forces could move rapidly eastward onto the demilitarized Golan Heights.

Since IDF forces would be stationed in the Hula Valley (and south of the Sea of Galilee), about 20 km. from the current border, whereas the Syrian forces would be at a distance of 60-80 km. from that line, the IDF was expected to reach its optimal defensive line before the Syrians arrived. In such a manner, the encounter between IDF forces and Syrian forces would take place in the region of the present border, at the "eastern ridge line."

Weaknesses of the Security Arrangements

The security arrangements proposed in the 1990s was flawed in a number of ways. First, it relied on five dangerous assumptions, discussed below. Second, it addressed the single threat posed by mechanized Syrian divisions, while ignoring other threats whose gravity is increasing.

Five Problematic Assumptions

1. **"When the war erupts, it will begin with a situation in which both sides are located where they are obligated to be."**

Israel's experience with Egypt at the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur War demonstrates that this assumption is unrealistic. It is plausible to assume that over the years an erosion will ensue in terms of compliance with the agreement, both with regard to the clandestine introduction of prohibited armaments into the demilitarized area as well as in the disposition of forces. As opposed to tanks and artillery, whose location is easily verified, it is almost impossible to verify the location of anti-tank missiles, certain types of anti-aircraft missiles, and small rockets.

2. "The warning will be issued in real time."

This assumption is based on the estimate that if Israel has an early warning intelligence station on Mt. Hermon, then it will always be possible to identify the movement of Syrian forces in real time, in order to permit the launching of an effective response. This assumption is based on a further assumption that since Israel currently has good intelligence on what is taking place in Syria, it can preserve that same capability after descending from the Golan. Today, Israel's intelligence capabilities are based on a number of components with a large degree of redundancy and with broad backup. This redundancy is a result of the large number of intelligence bases present on the Golan Heights.

According to what was discussed in the year 2000, there was to be one warning station on Mt. Hermon. Currently, Israel has two large stations on Mt. Hermon that provide backup and an additional three stations along the entire length of the Golan Heights. There is no possibility that one station on Mt. Hermon will provide sufficient intelligence coverage. Additionally, it is clear that even with the station on Mt. Hermon manned by Israelis, there will always be various sorts of limitations on their number and their freedom of action.

3. "A correct interpretation will be made with regard to any Syrian violation."

Even if Israeli intelligence correctly identified any deviant movement on the Syrian side, there is no guarantee that the interpretation will be accurate. History provides countless examples of situations where an enemy action was correctly identified by intelligence, but the attacked side did not undertake the proper reaction because it granted a lenient interpretation to enemy activity. The most relevant example is from the Yom Kippur War. The Egyptian military concentration in the vicinity of the Suez Canal was correctly identified by Israeli intelligence, but the intelligence system concluded that it was only a military exercise. In a situation where on the front opposite the Syrian divisions there is sovereign Syrian territory extending over scores of kilometers, this provides the Syrians with a vast range of opportunities to create subterfuge. For example, the Syrians could dispatch the army under the pretext of responding to riots by Syrian citizens on the Golan Heights, but in reality this could enable Syrian combat forces to arrive at battle stations against Israel.

4. "The Israeli government will react speedily and vigorously to any serious violation."

Ron Tira in his book *Shaping Israeli Policy toward Syria* calls a concept based on these assumptions "the trip wire concept." According to this explanation, any Syrian violation will cause Israel to respond automatically, rapidly and effectively in real time.

Yet even if from an intelligence standpoint a warning in real time is provided, and even if it is correctly interpreted, the Israeli government will still be called upon to decide whether to order the introduction of Israeli forces into the Golan Heights before the arrival of Syrian forces in the area. This decision will have to be taken in a matter of hours. The difficulty in making it derives from the asymmetric situation that will be created. The movement of Syrian forces toward the border is indeed a violation of the agreement, but since it would occur within sovereign Syrian territory, it will be hard to determine definitively that this is a *casus belli*. By contrast, the movement of IDF forces toward the same region means crossing an international border and entering the sovereign territory of another state. From an international standpoint, it is Israel that has initiated a war against a country with which it shares a peace agreement. Furthermore, it is difficult to assume that in any situation the government of Israel will speedily adopt the harsher interpretation concerning the movement of Syrian forces and decide within a matter of hours to go to war.

5. "The IDF will fulfill its plan by outracing the Syrian force and arriving at its positions on the "ridge line.""

Even if Israel successfully met all of these challenges, the IDF would still have to reach its optimal position on the "eastern ridge line" quickly and without significant attrition of its forces. However, there are three factors that will encumber any such maneuver:

1. Following an agreement, the area will not necessarily resemble the current Golan Heights. The Syrians may be expected to build cities and towns around the principal transportation arteries. It is plausible that the Syrians will also build anti-tank obstacles under the guise of irrigation canals and in this manner could hamper the movement of Israeli forces.

2. The Syrians will also most likely choose a time when weather conditions are forbidding, making ground movement extremely arduous.

3. Finally, Israel's need to make rapid land movements in order to capture the high ground before the Syrians get there makes the launch of a ground operation incumbent as Israel's first move, but in doing so Israel will be compelled to forego preparatory air activity.

Responding to Changing Threats

Three additional problems remain for which the security arrangements idea formulated in 2000 provided no answers.

1.   The Increased Effectiveness of Advanced Anti-Tank and

   Anti-Aircraft Missiles

Both of these weapons can be carried and operated by a single soldier or by a pair of infantrymen. The relative improvement in these two types of weaponry is greater than the improvements in the capacity of tanks or airplanes, and especially helicopters or UAVs, to contend with them.

Beyond the tactical advantages that these weapons confer, they have a decisive advantage in that no supervisory apparatus exists to control their stationing in the Golan. While an effective supervisory apparatus can identify the prohibited presence of tanks or artillery, it cannot identify a truck loaded with vegetable crates that also contains Kornet anti-tank missiles or SA-18 anti-aircraft missiles.

2.   The Expected Urbanization of the Golan Heights

Israel must assume that the Syrians will build cities and towns on the "liberated" Golan Heights along transportation arteries that will constitute compulsory passageways for the entering Israeli forces, and along the cliff line commanding the Hula Valley.

There will be many "policemen" in these cities who during the day will circulate armed only with pistols, but when the time arrives they can, together with many other "civilians," operate thousands of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles that will be stored in those cities. This combination of a densely built-up area together with infantry fighters operating advanced anti-tank weaponry could slow the movement of Israeli forces and result in vast attrition.

Even if Israeli forces are finally able to reach the eastern ridge line, this may not necessarily occur before the Syrian forces have arrived there.

3.   The Syrian Strategic Threat

With all due respect to the importance of Syrian ground forces, the major Syrian threat is predicated on two other components: ground-to-ground missiles and large quantities of chemical weapons. In discussions that took place in 1999-2000, no attempt was made to reduce the presence of these two capabilities. It is possible that this approach was foredoomed, but it is still important to realize that in return for a concession on a strategic asset of the first order – the Golan Heights – no reciprocal concession was made in terms of a reduction in Syrian strategic capabilities.

Changed Circumstances Since 2000

Changes in Syrian Military Capabilities

Many changes have occurred in the relation of forces between Israel and Syria since the previous round of discussions on security arrangements for the Golan Heights. Not only have these changes not reduced the importance of strategic depth, but they have even increased its importance.

Syria has developed a growing advantage in its inventory of high trajectory weapons, from mortars and artillery to ground-to-ground missiles. Quite naturally, as the range needed for the weapons diminishes, the number of effective firing pieces that the enemy possesses increases. The Syrian army has thousands of mortars and hundreds of artillery pieces, as well as hundreds of rockets (with a range surpassing 30 km.) and scores of ground-to-ground missiles. If war was to erupt today, Syrian mortars could only hit advanced IDF outposts (that are properly fortified). Syrian artillery could reach the heart of the Golan Heights, but all the IDF's logistic concentrations, assembly points for reserve forces (a particularly vulnerable target), command headquarters, and air force bases are beyond artillery range and are only within the effective range of rockets and ground-to-ground missiles. These types of weapons are relatively small in number and their vulnerability to attack by Israeli aircraft is high.

A forfeiture of the Golan Heights would create a situation where the IDF's assembly areas in the Hula Valley would be within the effective range of Syrian mortars and artillery. The structure of the terrain also ensures that these areas would also be within the effective range of Syrian anti-tank missiles. We are no longer dealing with the Sagger missiles of Yom Kippur War vintage, but with advanced missiles with an effective range of 5 km., both day and night. Additionally, improvements in anti-aircraft missiles and especially the existence of advanced shoulder-launched missiles will allow the Syrians to conceal them in built-up areas prior to the war and launch them from the most forward line at the beginning of the war.

On the other hand, the Israeli advantage lies with its modern air force and its capability of precision target destruction from the land and from the air. However, the IDF's superior ground capabilities may not find expression because their operation requires preparatory activity and deployment from areas that are not subjected to intense enemy fire.

Furthermore, the air force is liable to suffer from two difficulties:

1. The immediate Syrian missile threat to Israel's strategic rear will compel the Israel Air Force to fight both in support of ground troops as well as to suppress Syrian rocket and missile fire at an early stage. This stands in sharp contrast to the current security concept positing that Israeli ground forces can get along almost on their own during the first days of the fighting while the air force achieves air superiority. Air superiority at an early stage is not only a prerequisite for victory, but also a condition for minimizing attrition at the front, limiting damage from missiles to the rear, and abbreviating the duration of the fighting.

2. As the Syrian anti-aircraft missile threat is based closer to Israel's heartland, it will cover a larger portion of the country's north and will severely hamper efficient action by the air force.

The Lebanese Theater

The negotiations that took place between Israel and Syria in 1999-2000 were intended to lead to a general peace agreement between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. An inseparable part of that agreement mandated the complete dismantling of Hizbullah's military forces. In 2005 the Syrians were compelled under international pressure to withdraw their forces from Lebanon. From that stage onward, the Syrians contend, and quite rightly, that they cannot speak in the name of the Lebanese government, and definitely they cannot guarantee the dismantling of Hizbullah.

The result is that Israel can reach a full peace agreement with Syria that will mandate a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, but Hizbullah will continue to exist at its full strength. Furthermore, any security arrangements that were agreed upon assumed that no tangible

threat existed from the area of Lebanon. It is clear that a forfeiture of the Golan without totally guaranteeing the Lebanese flank would be an act of national irresponsibility.

The New Economic Reality

In the previous round of negotiations, in return for conceding the Golan Heights, Israel was slated to receive lavish economic compensation from the United States. The sum of money discussed at the time was $17 billion, an amount which would have led to a tangible upgrade in IDF capabilities. It is clear that today, in the midst of a major economic crisis, the U.S. is in no position to offer any such economic compensation in the amount that was proposed at that time.

In other words, in return for the danger and the weakness that will result from conceding the Golan Heights, Israel will not be fully or even partially compensated with an improvement in its other capabilities.

Diplomatic and Military Implications
of a Golan Withdrawal

In the foreseeable future, the sole possible peace agreement between Syria and Israel mandates an Israeli concession of the entire Golan Heights. It is possible that Israel would not be in such a predicament had Israeli prime ministers, from Rabin onward, not agreed explicitly or implicitly to such an arrangement. Theoretically, other solutions are possible (leasing the Golan Heights, joint sovereignty, a regional territorial agreement, etc.), but today it will prove almost impossible to induce the Syrians to consider any other idea aside from the full transfer of the Golan Heights to their sovereignty.

Such an agreement is possible, and it is a plausible assumption that the entire world will support its attainment. Contrary to its image, Iran would support such an agreement. Iran supported and will continue to support any arrangement that transfers areas from Israel to the Arabs. Since Syria will insist that the peace agreement with Israel has no bearing on the relationship between Damascus and other countries, this agreement will not weaken Syrian-Iranian ties. Neither would a peace agreement between Syria and Israel significantly curtail Hizbullah's military and political power, since Hizbullah relies more on Iran and the support of the Shiite community in Lebanon. Public Syrian support is much less important to Hizbullah, and Syrian assistance in weaponry is guaranteed even following any peace agreement (even if Syria should pledge otherwise).

An Israeli-Syrian peace agreement would mandate Israel's total withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The only room for negotiations would be in relation to two narrow strips of land, the first northeast of the Sea of Galilee and the second in the area of Hamat Gader. These areas stem from the gap between the 1923 international boundary (the Israeli position) and the 1967 line (the Syrian position) that included Syrian encroachments on Israeli territory between 1949 and 1967. The possibility that Syria will consent to continued Israeli sovereignty in even part of the Golan (the cliff line) appears very slim.

In return for an Israeli descent from the Golan, full relations of peace are to exist between the two countries, and there will be arrangements on the water issue as well as security provisions.

The security provisions will focus on three topics: demilitarization, the maintenance of intelligence warning stations, and the existence of an international supervisory apparatus. With all the importance of these matters, they cannot guarantee Israel a sufficient military response should the Syrians decide for any reason whatsoever to violate the agreement.

It is plausible that if such an agreement is signed, it will be honored by the present Syrian regime, but Assad's continued rule is far from guaranteed. Hafiz al-Assad and his son Bashar have predicated their rule on the support of the Alawite community that constitutes only 14 percent of the Syrian population. The Sunni majority (80 percent) despises them, defines their rule as illegitimate, and is awaiting the moment to exact vengeance for the severe repression that they have suffered. The Sunnis view the Alawites as an inferior community whose religion is closer to idolatry than to Islam.

Should a Sunni revolution occur in Syria, particularly if it is carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood, it is totally unclear that the new regime will honor any agreement that was made by the "apostate" Bashar al-Assad.

Indeed, a peace agreement with Israel could serve as a catalyst for this revolution. Hafiz al-Assad and Bashar rule Syria with the aid of emergency security laws whose existence is justified by the "Israeli aggression." If peace was made with Israel, this excuse would disappear and it would be hard for the regime to continue to repress the Sunnis in the same manner.

The Israeli-Syrian conflict, as opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a territorial conflict between two sovereign states. It resembles scores of conflicts throughout the world, some of them soluble and some of them not. The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir is an example of the insoluble category. In this situation it is preferable to continue managing the conflict rather than trying to solve it at an exorbitant price and risk. Should it ever be possible to reach another solution, then this can be re-examined.

Other solutions could involve a long-term lease on the Golan Heights (for a hundred years), a solution predicated on joint sovereignty in the Golan, or a regional solution under which Syria will receive only part of the Golan Heights from Israel. In this last scenario, Syria would receive in compensation an area of comparable size from Jordan, which in turn would

receive a similar slice from Israel in the Arava region. Since at the moment none of these solutions appears to have matured, and the options are "all or nothing," "nothing" remains the preferred option.

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Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland chaired Israel's National Security Council from 2004 to 2006. Prior to that he served as head of the IDF's Operations Branch and its Planning Directorate, where he was responsible for designing and implementing the IDF's operational and strategic policies. Gen. Eiland retired from active duty in January 2004.

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The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs is a leading independent research institute specializing in public diplomacy and foreign policy. Founded in 1976, the Center has produced hundreds of studies and initiatives by leading experts on a wide range of strategic topics. Dr. Dore Gold, Israel's former ambassador to the UN, has headed the Jerusalem Center since 2000.

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- www.globallawforum.org (Global Law Forum)

Defensible Borders on the Golan Heights

In the years 1999-2000, Israeli-Syrian negotiations reached the stage of discussion over details that included security arrangements intended to compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan Heights. When indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations were renewed in 2008 under Turkish auspices, they were conducted under the assumption that there was a military solution that would compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan.

The idea of security arrangements was intended to bridge the gap between conceding the Golan and creating a situation that would guarantee that in case of war, IDF forces could return to the place where they are currently stationed. The idea was based on the Golan being totally demilitarized, with the Syrian divisions moved back eastward to the region of Damascus and even further.

This analysis demonstrates that Israel does not possess a plausible solution to its security needs without the Golan Heights. Not only was the "solution" proposed in the year 2000 implausible at the time, but changing circumstances, both strategic and operative, have rendered Israel's forfeiture of the Golan today an even more reckless act.