

The Future of the Golan Heights

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Ongoing Middle East wars within states are not too dissimilar to those of other regions and times. There are many ceasefires negotiated or impromptu, weather permitting. Ceasefires however are not the end of the conflict. Sometimes resent ferments for centuries and then blood spills once more. Sometimes the ceasefire barely lasts an hour. So too with the war in Syria. There are many blood feuds, ideological and religious struggles and even extra-state proxy disputes waged on Syrian soil. A ceasefire between a few in one part of the state cannot necessarily be seen as peace in Syria in our times.

Considering one specific ceasefire is interesting because it is a significant note on a regional timeline and because of the consequences it might have for Israel. The rule of President Asad in Damascus inherited from his father is that of a minority rule over a state that is typified by power held traditionally by families rather than tribes or political groupings. His family is a minority both religiously as well as politically. So, in some ways the defeat of the anti-Asad rebels in southern Syria marks the special note on the timeline of the contemporary Syrian conflict that erupted with the Arab Spring in 2010.

The small peaceful protests in Dara'a in southern Syria in January 2011 tilted the domino that would lead to the ongoing civil war throughout the country. Now thousands of Syrians in this region have begun to return to their homes. Rebels there have reached an agreement with Russia who is a key ally of the Syrian regime. In return for handing over their heavy weapons and some of their areas of control near Dara'a a ceasefire will come into effect. Although such deals are good news for the residents of Dara'a, President Asad, Iran, Hezbollah, and Moscow only time will tell how long it lasts. A return to the status quo of 2011 with no change or bettering for anyone is only good for the peaceful resident so all the others will no doubt consider their options to improve their position be it by violence or other means.

The domino effect that started the Syrian civil war from Dara'a will not necessarily replicate as a domino effect that will end the Syrian civil war. The various rebel groups have not been defeated. The agreement does not appear to include the areas of Syrian rebel control adjacent to the Golan Heights or the area of Islamic State control near the Golan. The agreement doesn't discuss or relate to the presence of Iran in Syria and Iranian-backed militias. So, for Israel the ceasefire will not bring peace. Mortars and rockets can continue to be fired into Israel without infringing upon the ceasefire as Israel is not a party to the ceasefire. Similarly the Israeli military response.

This not a surprise as there is no one at the negotiating table to present or to represent Israel's interests. Israel has been isolated and has isolated itself in negotiations about southern Syria that borders with northern Israel. Israel, is not a party to the Syrian conflict and it has not taken in large numbers of refugees

like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have despite having provided large amount of humanitarian and medical assistance to victims and refugees.

Israel has adhered to the United Nation Charter that prohibits the intervention of a state in the internal affairs of another state. Nevertheless, Israel has stressed from the onset that other states don't adhere to this. The Iranian presence in Syria is a red line threat as it threatens Israel's security. Iran has engaged in activities that under international public law constitute acts of war including flying a UAV over Israel with munition onboard. Israel has responded in accordance to the United Nation Charter with the right to self-defense proportionally in target and magnitude.

Any ceasefire in southern Syrian no matter how small or large, no matter how short or how long, prompts the next stage that is peace negotiations. For Israel this would signify the start of the beginning of the fight over the post-conflict era of Syria and indeed the future of the Golan Heights. This would be a complex struggle not only involving those in Syria but also the international community including America, Russia, the EU and interventionist Iran. For Israel there is an importance attached to the locals Druze community that lives on both sides of the Golan Heights border. Israel has a policy of Druze unity.

The future of the Golan Heights is as crucial for Israel's security if not more so than Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). The Golan Heights is designated for negotiations for Palestinian statehood. It was not part of the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 for Israel and Palestine statehood. It was conquered from Syria in the 1967 war. The international order before that placed Syria on the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). A return to this border is 100% unacceptable to Israel. However, it is part the United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council on November 22, 1967, in the aftermath of the Six Day War. It was adopted under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. It relates to the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and calls for the "Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict"

So, the main question today in the minds of Israel decision makers about the ceasefire in southern Syria Dara'a is whether Damascus will come out stronger or will Iran come out more of the winner and what the Russian role will mean. If any of these emerge as actors in a post conflict Syria then Israel may be forced to meet them at the negotiation table about the Golan Heights.