

PLAYING POLITICS OVER THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On March 21, U.S. President Donald Trump upended another long-standing American policy, tweeting: "After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully [recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights](#), which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!"

This was another major pro-Israel step Mr. Trump has taken as President. On May 8, 2018, he had walked out of the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) with Iran, negotiated by the Obama administration with provisions for sanctions relief in response for Iranian restrictions on its nuclear programme. Israel had opposed the agreement and any sanctions relief for Iran, seeing a continuing threat to itself from Iran's growing presence in Syria, its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist, and its military capabilities.

Before that, on December 6, 2017, in a speech from the White House, Mr. Trump had declared: "I have determined that it is time to officially recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel." He also proceeded to close the Palestinian office in Washington DC, as well as U.S. consulate in Jerusalem dealing with the Palestinian Authority.

Hitherto, U.S. policy had been that any formalisation of status changes on the ground, following Israel's victory and gains in the 1967 Israel-Arab conflict, could only flow from negotiations among parties concerned. UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) had asserted inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by force, and called for Israeli withdrawal. UNSCR 497 (1981) had declared that "Israel's decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect".

Mr. Trump's decisions have a bearing on U.S. and Israeli domestic politics. The American Jewish community, traditionally around 65% Democratic, has grown in its support for him, despite an increase in anti-Semitism within the U.S. because of his encouragement to right-wing groups. His base among Evangelical Christians backs Israel. Some of the major contributors to his campaign are also ardent supporters of Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing a tough election on April 9, and under threat of indictment for corruption and misdemeanour, is touting his influence on Mr. Trump as having potential for further gains for Israel. To consolidate right-wing support for himself, he just announced that if re-elected he would not carry out any withdrawal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank, putting an end to the "land for peace" formula advocated since the Camp David Accords of 1979.

Faced with international opposition, Israel and its supporters have, in the past too, leveraged the support of the leading global power of the time to advance their cause. On November 2, 1917, Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, declared that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". This eventually led to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, despite Palestinian and Arab opposition. In an April 14, 2004 letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that "in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949" (position before the 1967 conflict). This has been interpreted by many in Israel as beginning of the process of establishing the legitimacy

of Israeli/Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and denting the viability of a fully sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state. Mr. Netanyahu's latest announcement would take this another step further. In Israeli political discourse, which has moved over time to the right, many now question the possibility of a two-state solution. The constraint for Israel is that its goal of a democratic and Jewish state would be difficult to achieve in a one-state solution with current near equal proportions of Arab and Jewish populations.

Mr. Trump's announcement on Golan Heights goes a step further. The Syrian Golan was part of the French post-World War I mandate, and hence technically not covered by the Balfour Declaration. Mr. Trump is now seeking to extend recognition of Israeli sovereignty to an area beyond Balfour, beyond the UN partition plan for Palestine in the 1940s, and beyond the outcome of the 1948/49 Arab-Israeli conflict.

In his proclamation of March 25, issued in presence of the visiting Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Trump cited Israeli security interests and regional threats. The present situation in Syria is no doubt a factor. The U.S. wants to draw down its military presence, Russia and Iran have significantly enhanced their presence and influence. Israel is concerned about Iranian presence beyond Golan in Syria and that of Hezbollah on the Lebanese side. It has repeatedly targeted Iranian positions and supplies, including to Hezbollah. Following Mr. Trump's announcement, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton tweeted that to allow Golan Heights "to be controlled by the likes of the Syrian or Iranian regimes would turn a blind eye to the atrocities of Assad and the destabilizing presence of Iran in the region".

The new U.S. position has not received support from any other country, including its European allies. While Iran, Russia, Turkey, among others, have been critical, the Arab response has been assessed as insufficiently strident. This is no doubt a reflection of reduced influence in Washington, with greater U.S. leverage on oil supplies, divisions among Arab countries over Qatar, pressure on Saudi Arabia because of Yemen and the Jamal Khashoggi issue.

India's interests are not directly involved immediately. It has a strong and growing relationship with Israel, and has maintained its relations with Syria. Indian troops have been a part of UN peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights. Mr. Trump's move, however, is indicative of shifting geopolitics in the West Asian region, with longer-term implications for India. It also asserts unilateralism, is a challenge to a rules-based international order, and is contrary to positions U.S. has taken elsewhere, as for instance in its response to Russia and Crimea.

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