

Playing politics over the Golan Heights

Writer - Arun K. Singh (India's Ambassador to the U.S. and Israel)

This article is related to General Studies Paper-II - (International Relations)

The Hindu

9 APR, 2019

"U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty is a challenge to the rules-based international order."

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!"

Third pro-Israel step

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”.

Tepid global response

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.

GS World Team...

Golan Heights

Why in the discussion?

- America has recognized Golan Heights as the territory of Israel.
- Donald Trump wrote on Twitter: "The time has come after 52 years when America recognizes Israel's domination over the Golan mountainous region, which is very important in terms of strategic and security for Israel and the stability of the region."
- During the war with Syria, in 1967, Israel took possession of Golan Hills. Since then, there is a dispute between the two countries about this area.
- In 1981, Israel had implemented its administration and legislation in the Golan hills while claiming its claim on this area, but countries around the world did not recognize it.
- This demand was raised in a meeting with Trump in the White House for the first time in February 2017.

What is it?

- Golan Heights is a mountainous region located in southern-western Syria. This area is very important in political and strategic terms.
- Golan Heights is a disputed area in Levante, the Middle East, it is spread over 1,800 square kilometers (690 square miles).

- Its east is Syria, Israel in the west, Lebanon in the north and Jordan in the south.
- According to Israel, it has occupied 1,150 square kilometers (440 square miles). According to Syria, Golan Heights is 1,860 square kilometers (718 square miles) of which 1,500 sq km (580 square miles) have been occupied by Israel.
- According to the CIA, this region is 1,300 square kilometers (500 square miles) in Israel.

Background

- Israel had captured Golan Heights in 1967 after a six-day war with Syria.
- Most Syrian Arab people living in the area left their homes after that time.
- Syria tried to regain Golan Heights during the Middle East War in 1973. But Syria fail to do so despite a huge loss to Israel in the war.
- In 1974, the two countries imposed a ceasefire in the area. UN army has been deployed on the ceasefire line since 1974.
- In 1981, Israel announced a unilateral announcement of joining Golan Heights in its territory. But this move of Israel was not recognized internationally.
- There are more than 30 settlements of Jews on Golan Heights, in which about 20,000 people live. There are also 20,000 Syrian people in the area.

Strategic importance

- The southern Syria and Syria's capital Damascus are clearly visible from the top of Golan Heights. Both of these areas are about 60 km away from here.
- When Golan Heights was occupied by Israel from 1948 to 1967, Syria also raised its military stir in northern Israel.
- Golan Heights gives Israel the advantage that they can keep an eye on Syria's activities here.
- This mountainous area also works as a shield for the safety of Israel from Syria.
- Golan Heights is also important for Israel for several other reasons. Golan is the main source of water in this dry area.
- Water of rain fall mixes is found in the Jordan River. It fulfills the need for one third of Israel's water.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements regarding Golan Heights-

1. It is a disputed area between Israel and Palestine.
2. It is a disputed area between Israel and Lebanon.

Which of the above statement is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1, Nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. How will the U.S. recognition of 'Golan Heights' in the favour of Israel affect international politics? Discuss.

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 8 APR. is 1(a)