

Trump Changes U.S. Policy in Middle East

by Michael Curtis



Times are a'changing as are policy proposals in Middle Eastern affairs, though religious festivals remind of the complexity and perhaps relevance of the past. Purim is a Jewish holiday in March 2019 that commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from the Persian ruler who 2,500 years ago was planning to kill all the Jews. On March 22, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike R. Pompeo suggested that President Donald Trump could be on a similar mission to save the Jews from a new Persian massacre in Iran by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal. Similarly, Trump's clear evidence of U.S. support for Israel is, for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, "a miracle of Purim."

More in secular than in religious mode, Trump has been

reshaping U.S. policy towards the Middle East, most recently by asserting that Israel's claim to and control of the Golan Heights, is critical. Iran, officially the Islamic Republic of Iran, home to a civilization that can be traced back to 7th century B.C. Syria, officially the Syrian Arab Republic, is a state politically created in the 20th century, and now largely an example of a failed state.

On March 21, 2019 President Trump asserted that the U.S. should recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Trump said it was 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.

It is a move important in itself, agreeing that Israel's sovereignty is crucially important to Israel's security but more significant of a change in the direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The U.S. has already shown this by opposing the UNSC Resolution that condemned Israeli presence in the Golan Heights, the first time the U.S. has issued such a veto, and by using the phrase, "Israel controlled," rather than "Israel occupied," of territories claimed by Palestinians.

This Trump view is one that challenges the views of many in the "international community," and of a substantial number of the U.S. Democratic Party including contenders for the 2020 presidential nomination, who refuse to recognize Israel's control of the Golan Heights as legitimate. Their views are in accordance with opposing the move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and in more general way, oppose seizure of territory in violation of international agreement.

Some of the opponents of the Trump position, of whom Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar, Somali-American, now a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has become the most publicized,

have spoken of the "evils of Israel," questioned the loyalty of those politicians who accept donations from pro-Israeli organizations, above all AIPAC, and even implied the allegiance of those politicians to a foreign country, not the U.S.

The Golan Heights is a 700 square miles area, 500 of them occupied by Israel, and 200 controlled by Syrian Arab Republic. It is bounded by Jordan river and Sea of Galilee on the west, Mount Herman on north, Yarmuk river on south, and is 40 miles southwest of Damascus. About 40 square miles of Mt. Herman's slopes are used for skiing. Home to variety of diverse ethnic, and religious groups. During the era of the old testament, the area was a power struggle between the rulers of Israel and the Aramaeans, based near modern Damascus. The area was conquered by Jews for a short time and Golan became a city of refuge. The area was conquered by Arabs in 7th century, and by the Ottomans in 16th century. The Golan was part of the vilayet of Damascus until 1918.

After the end of the Ottoman Empire, the post-World War I Allied Supreme Council at San Remo in 1920 set up two Mandates, one British, the other French, and the boundaries between them were defined in December 1920. The bulk of the Golan Heights was given to France, and became part of the French Mandate, while the Sea of Galilee was put under the British Mandate.

Syria was created and was 1920-46, a French Mandate, and got independence in 1946.

In the Six Day War in June 1967 between Israel and Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Israel captured Golan on June 11, 1967 and took the Golan Heights after its victory in war. Arabs refused peace with Israel, recognition of Israel, negotiation with Israel. Five villages of Druze were offered Israeli citizenship, but refused, and kept Syrian citizenship. About 30 Jewish settlements were set up and put under Israeli

military administration, and Golan was integrated into the communications and financial framework of Israel.

It applied Israeli law and administration to the region in 1981, action that was rejected by the international community by UNSC Resolution 497 which states that the Israel decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction, and administration, in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect.

For Israel, Syria under Assad during the long civil war has remained a problem as Iranian backed Shia militias use Syria as a platform to move persons and supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. By holding the area, Israel can see the rest of the whole Syrian area, including Damascus, and can contain the water for an arid season, supplying Israel with one third of its water supply.

As result of the Yom Kippur war, Ramadan, of October 1973 , the UN set up in the area a UN Disengagement Observer Force ,UNDORM, which is renewable every six months.

It is unlikely that Arab countries, whose main focus is to counter Iran's influence in their areas, will be seriously troubled by Trump's decision. Indeed, recent events suggest the opposite may be the case: frequent visits of Jared Kushner to Middle East countries, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar. Israel's female culture and sports minister visited the UAE during the international judo competitions in Abu Dhabi, during which Hatikva was played. Netanyahu visited a number of countries.

The long civil war has changed Syrian reality. There is general recognition that the 1967 lines no longer are appropriate. Trump's statement is part of that recognition, of reality on the ground, the need and ability of Israel to protect itself. Surely, even leading politicians, Bernie, Warren, Harris , and AOC, (A.O-Cortez) agree?