

February 1, 1996

BEWARE OF DEPLOYING U.S. PEACEKEEPERS ON THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

INTRODUCTION

Israel long has sought a comprehensive peace with its Arab neighbors, and has made great progress since the landmark 1991 peace conference in Madrid. It signed a peace accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993 and concluded a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994. But negotiations with Syria have proceeded at a glacial pace. One of the major obstacles in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations has been Syrian insistence on recovering the strategic Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, without ironclad security guarantees that Syria would not use the Golan as a staging area for aggression against Israel.

The Clinton Administration has tried to bridge the negotiating gap by offering U.S. peacekeeping forces to monitor compliance with any agreement, but it has resisted congressional calls to examine the wisdom of such a commitment, claiming that a public debate would be premature. Administration officials contend that the details of a peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights have not been worked out and a final commitment has not been made. However, Defense Secretary William Perry, after meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres on January 8, confirmed the Clinton Administration's long-standing offer to provide U.S. peacekeeping forces to monitor the Golan Heights. Although Perry had said last September that the U.S. "should be willing" to contribute forces that would facilitate a peace accord, he recently firmed up the U.S. offer by proclaiming, "we are prepared to do that."¹

1 Barton Gellman, "Perry Firms U.S. Commitment to Golan Force," *The Washington Post*, January 9, 1996, p. A12.

Congress Should Hold Hearings. Now that Secretary Perry has explicitly made this offer, Congress should hold hearings to examine the potential costs and benefits of this commitment. It also should press the Administration to reconsider its risky plans to enter such an open-ended peacekeeping operation.

The Administration has resisted congressional scrutiny of the Golan peacekeeping question, arguing that it could complicate efforts to negotiate a peace agreement. While this may be true, the Administration would be wise to gauge congressional support for a possible Golan peacekeeping operation now, rather than risk having an agreement unravel later due to congressional disapproval.

Congress has its own reasons for debating a Golan peacekeeping commitment sooner rather than later, as underscored by the recent experience in Bosnia. The rapid pace of developments in the Bosnian peace negotiations greatly limited congressional debate, with U.S. troops being deployed to Bosnia only 11 days after the November 21, 1995, signing of the Dayton peace accords. While the pace of Syrian-Israeli negotiations is likely to be slower, Congress must address the Golan peacekeeping issue before, not after, the Israelis and Syrians negotiate a deal if it wants to avoid being presented with another diplomatic *fait accompli* by the Clinton Administration.

Israel is a sovereign state, and it is Israel's prerogative to negotiate whatever diplomatic arrangements it finds necessary to assure its security and promote peace. Washington should actively support efforts to build a just and lasting Arab-Israeli peace.² But when America is asked to ensure the implementation of an agreement which entails obvious risks to American peacekeepers, the U.S. Congress has a right and duty to examine the risks and benefits of such a commitment, as it would do with any other peacekeeping commitment.

As Congress examines the Golan Heights peacekeeping issue, it should bear in mind that American troops should not be involved in such a mission. There are five reasons for this conclusion.

REASON #1: The Golan Heights present a more formidable peacekeeping challenge than the existing U.S. peacekeeping mission on the Sinai Peninsula. Unlike the American troops assigned to the multinational peacekeeping force on the Egyptian-Israeli border in the Sinai since 1982, peacekeeping forces in the Golan will be sandwiched between two large armored forces in a much smaller area. Moreover, Syria historically has been much more hostile to the U.S. than has Egypt, which is now a U.S. ally. Thus, a Golan peacekeeping operation would be much riskier.

REASON #2: Terrorism would pose a threat to U.S. troops. U.S. peacekeeping forces in the Golan will be close to southern Lebanon, which is a major staging area for numerous terrorist groups that oppose Arab-Israeli peace.

2 See James Phillips, "Beyond the Israeli-PLO Peace Agreement: The U.S. Role in Consolidating Peace," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 963, October 13, 1993.

REASON #3: It could adversely affect U.S.-Israel relations. An American presence on the Golan will constrain Israel's military options more than Syria's and will sap Israel's self-reliance. In the long run, this could strain U.S.-Israel relations.

REASON #4: It could be too costly and too much of a drain on U.S. forces. A small force will be unable to defend itself against possible terrorist or Syrian military attacks, while a large force will be a major drain on active U.S. Army forces.

REASON #5: Americans are not needed. Other countries can play the same peacekeeping role. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, comprised of troops from Austria, Canada, Finland, and Poland, has been deployed on the Golan for almost 22 years to monitor the 1974 Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement.

Under no circumstances should the U.S. promise foreign aid to Syria as a sweetener for a peace agreement. The prospective recovery of the Golan Heights and peace itself are Syria's peace dividends. Moreover, the U.S. should remember that it has important national interests to advance regarding Syria that go beyond brokering a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. Congress must prevent the Administration's preoccupation with the peace process from obscuring American interests in halting Syrian support of terrorism, promoting Lebanon's independence from Syrian domination, ending Syrian subversion of Turkey, halting drug smuggling in Syrian-controlled Lebanon, and isolating Syria's ally Iran.

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

The Golan Heights comprise some of the most strategically significant terrain in the world. Occupying its high forward slopes gives Israel line-of-sight surveillance of Syrian military movements and electronic communications. Electronic intelligence-gathering facilities in the Golan provide early warning of threatening developments in the plains southwest of the Syrian capital of Damascus, or in south Lebanon. Control of the Golan also provides Israel, a small country, with something it badly needs: a buffer zone to give it strategic depth. Before losing the Heights in 1967, Syria used its commanding position on the Golan to bombard the Israeli settlements in the nearby Galilee region. Highly lucrative agricultural and tourist sites around the shores of Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) now are safe. Finally, the Golan highlands form a watershed that supplies approximately 30 percent of Israel's water. Dominating the Golan watershed means potential control of this vital freshwater resource.

For these strategic reasons, most past Israeli governments, whether led by the Labor or Likud parties, have not been willing to withdraw from the Golan, which the Israel Defense Force (IDF) captured in a bold and courageous operation in 1967. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin began direct negotiations with Syria under American auspices after his June 1992 election, but declined to specify how far Israel would withdraw on the Golan until Damascus made clear what kind of peace and security arrangements it was willing to make. Syria's Hafez al-Assad broke off the talks in July 1995, insisting on the unconditional return of the Golan Heights. After Rabin's November 4 assassination, his successor, former Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, dropped Rabin's insistence that security arrangements be dealt with first.

Map 1



The Golan Heights: A Strategic Buffer Zone

Map by Thomas J. Timmons

Peres used his December 12, 1995, speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress to appeal to Assad to resume the talks. Assad agreed and the talks were revived on December 27. Two rounds of Syrian-Israeli talks already have been held at the Wye Plantation in eastern Maryland, and a third round began on January 23. Secretary of State Warren Christopher has offered to undertake open-ended shuttle diplomacy between the two countries to bridge the still-wide gaps.

Even though Israel is eager to make peace and maintain the momentum generated by the diplomatic breakthrough with the Palestinians reached in Oslo in 1993, many Israelis are deeply concerned about the potential threat to their security if the IDF withdraws and the Syrian army moves back onto the Golan. The position of the Peres government is that the benefits of a deal with Syria outweigh the risks and that Israel must deal now, while the opportunity exists, and while Israel is in a position of strength. But most Israelis nevertheless believe that only extraordinary security guarantees can make the return of the Golan to Syria acceptable.

FIVE REASONS TO REJECT U.S. PEACEKEEPING IN THE GOLAN

One possible guarantee is the deployment of U.S. troops on the Golan, either as part of a multinational operation or alone, and either in a pure "peacekeeping" role or as a kind of tripwire to hedge against renewed hostilities from Syria. This possibility has been a matter of speculation in Washington for over two years. The Clinton Administration has aggressively discouraged congressional consideration of the issue, maintaining that it is premature to address the issue of an American peacekeeping force on the Golan.

Secretary Perry's January 8 statement indicating that the U.S. is prepared to deploy a Golan peacekeeping force has considerably undermined this argument. Congress soon must consider the implications of a U.S. peacekeeping deployment on the Golan, or it will find itself reacting to a diplomatic *fait accompli*, as in Bosnia. While examining the Golan peacekeeping issue, Congress should bear in mind five reasons that the U.S. should reject a U.S. peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights.

REASON #1: The Golan Heights present a more formidable peacekeeping challenge than the existing mission on the Sinai Peninsula. U.S. and Israeli officials often cite the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), which monitors compliance with the security arrangements in the Sinai peninsula, as a model for an American peacekeeping presence on the Golan. The MFO, created in 1982 to monitor compliance with the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, is composed of three battalions of troops from Colombia, Fiji, and the U.S. and a Civilian Observer Unit staffed with American personnel.

The U.S. peacekeepers in the Golan Heights, however, would operate in a markedly different geographic, military, and political environment. Rather than being deployed in a vast, empty desert far from the main bodies of the opposing military forces, Golan peacekeepers would be stationed in a constricted area, sandwiched between large armored forces in positions that would quickly become important military objectives if fighting were to break out. Unlike the remote, sparsely populated Sinai, the Golan also would be a more hospitable operating theater for terrorists based in neighboring Lebanon or among civilians living in the Golan Heights. Finally, Hafez al-Assad's Syria today is a far cry from Anwar Sadat's Egypt. Not only has Syria supported terrorists that have killed Americans and provoked military clashes with the U.S. in Lebanon in 1983, but Assad is extremely unlikely to become a reliable U.S. ally in the future, unlike Sadat's Egypt.

Much depends on the details of an Israel-Syrian treaty. If an agreement leads to the removal of a standing Syrian mechanized army within 40 kilometers of the Golan, then U.S. troops, as in the Sinai MFO, might play a useful role in monitoring or verifying compliance with the treaty. But if large Syrian forces remain deployed close by and a significant potential security threat remains, then a mere monitoring mission makes little sense. In essence, the U.S. force would be serving as a deterrent or tripwire to prevent Syria reverting to the use of arms.

There also are major questions about size, composition, mission, and command and control of the Golan force. An MFO-like monitoring force would be small and lightly armed. But a small, light force would have difficulty protecting itself from terror attacks emanating from Lebanon, let alone a Syrian military offensive. Therefore,

a U.S. peacekeeping force in the Golan would have to be large enough to deter attacks from any source and defend itself. In other words, it must be a large combat formation, configured for possible combat, with appropriate rules of engagement. But a large force, such as an armored or mechanized infantry brigade, would be costly and a drain on the U.S. military presence in more important regions such as Europe or South Korea.

REASON #2: Terrorism would pose a threat to U.S. troops. Unlike the Sinai MFO, Golan peacekeepers would be vulnerable to significant terrorist threats. They would be stationed close to southern and eastern Lebanon, the staging area for some of the world's most dangerous terrorists, including Hezbollah, the militant pro-Iranian terrorist group responsible for the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Hezbollah and other terrorist groups operating in Lebanon have a history of attacking Americans. They will have even more reason to use terrorism to disrupt an American-brokered peace agreement that they violently oppose.

Syria itself is one of the chief exporters of international terrorism.³ Assad repeatedly has used terrorism as an adjunct of foreign policy in inter-Arab politics, in Lebanon, and against Israel. He also supported Hezbollah's terrorist campaign against American peacekeeping forces in Lebanon in 1983-1984. Given his success in helping Hezbollah to drive U.S. peacekeepers out of Lebanon in 1984, Assad may try a similar strategy in the Golan if he decides to seek their removal. Even if Syria cooperates in restraining terrorism, however, Iran, Iraq, and Libya could support Lebanon-based terrorist proxies against U.S. forces in the Golan. Since U.S. troops will be a lightning rod for terrorism, particularly due to American brokering of a Syrian-Israel peace accord, a Golan peacekeeping operation should not be manned by Americans.

REASON #3: It could adversely affect U.S.-Israel relations. A peacekeeping force is supposed to be a neutral, honest broker, but maintaining a neutral stance is likely to have a negative political, military, and psychological impact on U.S.-Israeli relations. This would be particularly true if the U.S. maintains strict neutrality with respect to Israel and Syria in the implementation of any agreement. At a minimum, sharp differences of opinion are likely to arise concerning compliance issues and the interpretation of Syrian activities along the border. Deeper strains in the bilateral relationship could occur if Israel concluded that the peacekeeping forces were turning a blind eye to Syrian violations of the peace treaty or if Washington concluded that Israel was overreacting to minor or ambiguous Syrian violations. It should be remembered that American participation in the 1982-1984 multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon led to considerable friction with Israel and at one point an American Marine officer brandished a pistol to halt the advance of an Israeli tank.

A U.S. presence on the Golan also will sap Israeli self-reliance. Because Syria adamantly rejects allowing Israel to maintain early warning facilities in the Golan as an infringement on its sovereignty, Israel is likely to become more dependent on U.S. spy satellites and aircraft. The U.S. presence also will put a brake on Israeli military

3 See James Phillips, "The Changing Face of Middle Eastern Terrorism," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1005, October 6, 1994.

operations in the event of conflict with Syria or terrorists in Lebanon. Their presence will constrain Israel's military options, possibly depriving Israel of the opportunity to launch a preemptive military strike if a Syrian attack was imminent. Ironically, the U.S. presence could prove to be more of a deterrent to Israel than to Syria.

American forces on the Golan will be inadequate to defend Israel if it is attacked. They are likely to constitute only a marginal military deterrent to Syria and they will be unable to provide adequate early warning to Israel.⁴ The real rationale for the U.S. presence is not military, but political—to reassure a nervous Israeli public about security concerns that the U.S. will be in no position to remedy if conflict erupts. This is dangerous because it could engender a false sense of security that could lead Israelis to take more risks in peace negotiations with Syria than they otherwise would take.

REASON #4: It could be too costly and too much of a drain on U.S. forces. The U.S. cannot afford to commit an ever-larger proportion of its declining active duty forces to worldwide peacekeeping operations. Sending U.S. troops to Haiti and Bosnia already has depleted America's strategic reserve and could jeopardize American interests by stretching U.S. forces thin around the world. It should be remembered that the peacekeeping commitments to Haiti and Bosnia, and now possibly on the Golan as well, were made in addition to the existing military alliance commitments in Europe and Asia—and even as the Clinton Administration is trying to cut the defense budget even further.

For a Golan peacekeeping mission to be credible, it would require the commitment of a large force consisting of at least a heavy brigade, roughly 5,000 troops. To maintain a long term deployment of this force, three brigades would have to be dedicated to the mission: one on deployment, one recovering and retraining after returning from the mission, and one training and preparing to deploy on the mission. This is roughly 10 percent of the U.S. Army's active duty combat strength, a prohibitively high burden for an open-ended peacekeeping mission. If the U.S. is suddenly faced with conflict in other regions of the world, such as the Persian Gulf or the Korean peninsula, the forces on the Golan could be sorely needed to protect vital U.S. national interests.

In addition to diverting troops from other, more important missions, an open-ended peacekeeping mission on the Golan will reduce the military effectiveness of troops available for other missions. Troops returning from the Golan will need many months of retraining⁵ to regain the warfighting skills that atrophied during their peacekeeping deployment.

4 For a more detailed analysis of the likely military shortcomings of a U.S. peacekeeping force, see Dore Gold, "US Forces on the Golan Heights and Israeli-Syrian Security Arrangements," Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum No. 44, August 1994. See also Douglas Feith, General John Foss, Frank Gaffney, and Admiral Carl Trost, "Mission Impossible: The Case Against Deploying U.S. Forces on the Golan Heights," Washington, D.C., Center for Security Policy, October 12, 1994.

5 See U.S. General Accounting Office, "Peace Operations: Effect of Training, Equipment, and Other Factors on Unit Capability," GAO/NSIAD-96-14, October 1995.

An American Golan peacekeeping commitment also would entail considerable financial costs, and could drain away hundreds of millions of dollars from the defense budget. Congress already has scaled back the U.S. contribution to the Sinai MFO budget, cutting it from \$80 million to \$74 million in fiscal year 1988. Similar budgetary pressures could undercut a Golan MFO, even if other nations contribute to the costs of the operation.

REASON #5: Americans are not needed. If peacekeepers are needed to monitor a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty, they should not be Americans. An American peacekeeping presence would be a lightning rod for terrorism, would drain the U.S. defense budget unnecessarily, and would strain Israeli-American relations. Other countries are willing and fully able to contribute neutral peacekeeping forces. After all, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force has deployed peacekeepers from Austria, Canada, Finland, and Poland on the Golan Heights for over two decades to monitor compliance with the 1974 Israeli-Syrian Disengagement Agreement.

In addition to blocking an American peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights, Congress should press the Clinton Administration to:

- ✓ **Rule out foreign aid to Syria as a sweetener for a peace agreement.** To make it clear that no U.S. aid will be forthcoming to sweeten a Syrian-Israeli deal, Congress should pass a resolution opposing U.S. foreign aid to Syria. The reward for peace is peace, not billions of dollars of bribery. America's aid to Egypt, a country which did not launch terrorist attacks against Americans, came after the 1978 Camp David accords and in the context of the Cold War. Egypt switched sides and left the Soviet orbit to become a reliable American ally. Syria has no Soviet card to play. The U.S. must allocate its increasingly scarce foreign aid resources to long-term friends and not use foreign aid as a reward to Syria, a long-standing adversary.
- ✓ **Maintain pressure on Syria to halt its support of terrorism.** Damascus supports over one dozen terrorist groups, including many Palestinian groups opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The U.S. should push Syria relentlessly to expel these Palestinians from Syrian territory and Syrian-controlled Lebanese territory, crack down on Hezbollah in Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon, and cooperate with the U.S. in breaking the back of international terrorist groups. There can be no genuine peace as long as Syria maintains ties with terrorists. Congress should ensure that the war against terrorism remains a high priority of U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, Syria should not be removed from the State Department's list of states that sponsor terrorism unless Damascus halts its support for terrorism. Syria should not be removed from the list merely as a reward for signing a peace treaty with Israel.

CONCLUSION

An American peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights is not needed. It would not significantly reduce the military risks that Israel would run in returning the Golan to Syrian control. The U.S. cannot afford an open-ended deployment of first echelon combat troops in support of what is essentially a diplomatic gambit. Nor should it seek to downplay the significant military risks attendant on returning the Golan Heights to Syria. If Israel decides to do so, that is its prerogative, but it should do so without the implied com-

mitment represented by a U.S. tripwire on the Golan. There are many other nations that would be willing to provide peacekeeping forces, if that is necessary.

Congress must open debate on the Golan peacekeeping issue before it is presented with another *fait accompli* like Haiti or Bosnia. Now that Secretary of Defense Perry has confirmed that a U.S. commitment of some sort exists, it can no longer be deemed "premature" for Congress to discuss the issue.

The bottom line: Syria gets more out of a peace agreement with Israel than does the U.S. and therefore should be willing to pay more for it. Washington should push Assad to acquiesce to America's agenda and not get bogged down in more narrow peace negotiating issues. The U.S. must not jeopardize important national interests by committing U.S. troops to seal an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement that is potentially fragile and cosmetic.

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