

Golan heights and its impacts on Iran and US foreign policy

Shahzad Khan¹

¹ Department: Political Science, University: University of Management and Technology,
Email: shahzadkhan333309@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.822>

Abstract:

The Golan Heights, a geopolitically crucial plateau located at the intersection of Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, continues to be one of the most disputed and powerful regions of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Conquered by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed unilaterally in 1981—a step broadly disapproved of by the international community—the area has since figured prominently in the determination of foreign policy by the key regional and global powers, notably Iran and the United States. This analysis examines the tripartite importance of the Golan Heights, analyzing its military, geographic, and symbolic importance. This paper examines Iran's increasing role in the region through its strategic alliance with Syria, its proxy of Hezbollah, and its larger campaign to combat Israeli and Western influence via proxy war and ideological battle. At the same time, the research analyzes the changing attitude of the United States—from classic diplomatic prudence to the Trump government's recognition in 2019 of Israeli sovereignty, and the Biden administration's more circumspect, law-based reaction. The study explores the consequences of the Golan Heights on regional security, cyber and hybrid conflict, and international law. It contends that the territory is a borderland, but a geopolitical lever too—deployed by Tehran and Washington alike to exercise influence, deter rivals, and condition the wider strategic environment in the Levant. Ultimately, the Golan Heights remains a symbol of unfinished conflict and a possible flashpoint that has continued to complicate long-term peace and stability efforts in the Middle East.

Keywords: U.S. Foreign Policy, Iranian Foreign Policy, Israeli Sovereignty, Middle East Geopolitics

Introduction:

For years, the Golan Heights, a limestone plateau in the south-western corner of Syria, has been a melting pot of Middle Eastern geopolitics, strategic battle and military conflict. Positioned on Israel's north-eastern border, this 1,200-square-kilometre upland offers vast views across northern Israel, southern Lebanon and south-western Syria. Controlling the area has always prompted bloodstained conflicts and redrawn national boundaries and embroiled Great Powers and leading global actors in the conflict more broadly within the Middle East. Tiny though it is, the Golan Heights looms large in regional and international foreign policy — thanks in part to its strategic significance, its location on the high ground, its water sources and its distance from both Damascus and the northern cities of Israel. The strategic importance of the Golan Heights comes from its history of strife. Before the 1967 Syrian-Israeli War, the Heights served as a military outpost on which Syria shelled Israeli farms in the Hula Valley and on the Sea of

Galilee. In return, Israeli Forces backed by troops from the armed forces of the United States friends, did a surprise attack, captured the Golan Heights on June 1967, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. The military benefit from the victory was immediate: Israel had established a natural defensive buffer line against threats from the north. But the political reverberations turned out to be more enduring. Israel essentially ruled the Golan, inaugurating a period of military rule that would evolve into civilian governance and then finally official annexation. In October 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, the Syrian army launched a surprise attack to recapture the Golan. They were effective at first, but eventually, Israeli infantry fought off the attack, driving deeper into Syrian soil. Following a U.S.-mediated ceasefire and disengagement agreement, Israel maintained control of the Golan, and a UN-monitored buffer zone (UNDOF) was established. Since then, despite Syrian demand for return, control of the Golan has always remained in the hands of the Israelis. Israel annexed the territory in 1981 by applying its civil law to the region, in a move approved by the Court of the Golan Heights Law. The world community condemned the act strongly. The annexation was deemed "null and void and without international legal effect" by United Nations Security Council Resolution 497. But on the ground Israel began a process of integration itself, bringing in thousands of Israeli citizens, investing in infrastructure, agriculture and tourism. The political and legal status of the Golan Heights has been in limbo for years but became a lightning rod once more in global diplomacy under the U.S. Trump administration. The U.S. became the first country to recognize, as a matter of law, Israeli control of the Golan Heights in 2019, in a striking departure from decades of U.S. policy and international consensus. The move has wide implications, aligning the United States more with Israel's approach in the region and provoking enemies such as Iran, who view the action as a sign that territorial aggression has the approval of the White House. Iran, by contrast, turned the Golan Heights into a pivotal front in its axis of resistance, exploiting its military position in Syria to destabilize Israel's northern border. The IRGC and its proxy paramilitary forces' deployment from Tehran in Syria — particularly in southern Syria, near the Golan — is part of a grander calculus to confront Israel, confront US influence and position Iran strategically in the Levant. Through its alliance with Syria, and its coordination with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has effectively transformed the Golan into a critical battleground in the shadow war with Israel—a war that is tacitly shaped and periodically stoked by U.S. policy decisions. In this backdrop, the present paper is informed by the following research question: How does the Golan Heights influence Iran and the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East? Israel unilaterally annexed the territory in 1981 and extended its jurisdiction and administration with the Golan Heights Law. The world community reacted as well. The annexation was condemned as "null and void and without international legal effect" by United Nations Security Council Resolution 497. On the ground, however, Israel set in motion a process of integration, bringing in thousands of its own citizens and pouring money into infrastructure, agriculture and tourism.

The political and legal shuffle over the Golan Heights has been in limbo for years, but once again has become a lightning rod in global diplomacy since the Trump administration has come into power in the United States. In 2019, the United States became the first country to officially recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a highly contentious departure from U.S. precedent and international standards. The move had far-reaching impact, bringing the United States into closer alignment with Israel's views of the region and provoking foes like Iran, which view the shift as a reward for Israeli territorial conquest. Iran, for its part, has turned the Golan Heights into a main front in its axis of resistance, using its position in Syria to break Israel's northern border. The deployment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its proxy militias under its control to Syria, primarily to the Golan, played a part of its overall

strategy to protect itself from Israel and America and maintain a strategical depth in the Levant. In partnering with Syria and coordinating with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has effectively turned the Golan into a crucial frontline in the shadow war with Israel—a war whose contours are implicitly shaped and at times goaded by U.S. policy decisions. Within this context the following research question guides this paper:

In what ways does the Golan Heights influence Iran and the U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East?

This subquestion raises the next layer of analysis, as it considers how both countries, having their own varying views on regional order, locate the Golan not only as a local conflict, but as a critical juncture in the wider politico-geographic system that is the Middle East. This article argues that the Golan Arms' (sic) impact on U.S.-Iranian foreign relations is multifaceted and significant: it is a tactical force on the battlefield, a territorial symbol of sovereignty, a proxy arena for fighting, and a diplomatic bellwether. The United States sees the Golan as a bastion of Israel's security, an indicator of its public opinion favoring Israel and a platform for displaying opposition to Iranian power projection. Iran, meanwhile, is using the Golan as a projection screen of its conflict with Israel and the United States, using it to implant asymmetric threats and reinforce its alliances with regional proxies.

To have comprehensive study ten parts are described in this paper:

1. History in a Box – This section continues on with the historical background of the struggle over the Golan Heights, from milestones that include the Six Day War (1967), the Yom Kippur War (1973), and Israel's annexation in 1981. It also addresses the international legal regime over the territory embodied in the United Nations resolutions.
2. Israel's Strategic Mastery– This section also detailed Israel's Tactics: military imperatives, water independence, settlement expansion, and domestic political considerations for Israel's authority over the Golan Heights. * It speaks the domestic forces of Israel that led Israel not to negotiations of withdrawal.
3. Iranian Regional Designs and Proxy Warfare -This section covers Iranian broader assessment of interests in the area of the Golan. It examines Iran's support for Syria, its military footprint in the region and its use of Hezbollah, and other proxies, to challenge Israeli hegemony and deter American support.
4. Shifting U.S. Policy – It's here that it tracks shifts in American policy, from the neutral stance following the end of the Cold War through to acknowledging Israeli sovereignty under the Trump Administration. It also gauges the effort of the Biden administration to rebalance U.S. engagement while sustaining alliances.
5. Military Impacts–This part analyzes the military impacts of the Golan on Israel, Iran, and the United States. And it factors in Israel's position of deterrence, Iran's asymmetrical capabilities, and U.S. military coordination with Israel.
6. Economic and Resource Dimensions – Here this paper examines that the Golan's water resources, agricultural productivity and infrastructure investments are among the reasons that help make the region of importance to Israel, and hence are falling within the scope of Iran's strategy of resource-denial.
7. Legal and Diplomatic Implications – This section considers how a U.S. recognition influences international jurisprudence regarding the Golan and other disputed territories, particularly against the backdrop of other contested territories (Crimea, Taiwan for example).
8. Scenarios and Strategic Futures – Three potential futures presented -status quo continuation, escalation to regional war, or (most unlikely) negotiated settlement. Each of these futures

analysis considerations are assessed in terms of consequences for Iranian and American foreign policy.

Research Design

The study is a comparative case study that looks at two primary state actors, Iran and the United States and supported by a third supporting case Israel, as a central fulcrum, to examine both state actors' foreign policy through. The framework seeks to understand how these two powers - with convergent interests but divergent strategic aims - have positioned the issue of the Golan Heights in the broader context of regional contestation, alliance building, and international order. By pulling the Golan Heights out as a focused issue, the study defies generalizations about broader Middle East policy, directing our attention instead to a unique lens through which to view focused state action. Comparative treatment allows for cross-case illumination (US versus Iranian variation) and context-rich analysis (how each state perceives the Golan as a factor in its regional security calculus).

Data Collection

The secondary sources have been heavily used while conducting the research. They encompass: Academic books and journals: To provide theoretical grounding and accurate historical context, peer-reviewed scholarship is employed. Primary sources comprise literature in Middle East geopolitics, international relations theory and foreign policy analysis.

Official pronouncements and government white papers: Declarations from U.S. presidents (including the 2019 Trump proclamation), Iranian ministry of foreign affairs press releases, remarks delivered by U.S. and Iranian leaders, and resolutions from bodies like the United Nations Security Council (for example UNSC Resolutions 242 and 497) are the raw materials for policy articulation. Think tank and policy research: Reports from organizations like the Brookings Institution, Rand Corporation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Atlantic Council offer deep analysis in near real-time on policy.

Media and diplomats statements: Refer to important statements and reactions by international organizations and credible media as such New York Times, Al Jazeera, Haaretz, Press TV, Reuters. Strategic and geographic maps: Satellite depictions and defense intelligence briefs to support geographical and strategic conclusions. Historical contextualization is also evident in the study, which follows changes in policy dating back to the 1967 Six Day War up to the present (2025). In examining patterns, changes and consistencies in the way the Golan has been treated both diplomatically and militarily, a historical framework is necessary.

Analytical Framework

The study is based on the triangulation of three theoretical perspectives – Realism, Constructivism and Geopolitical Theory – explained in the aforementioned context. These theories guide explanation so that the conclusions reflect a balance of material, ideational, and geographical factors.

- The study takes a realistic viewpoint, examining the consequences of Golan control with regard to power projection, deterrence, and alliance dynamics.
- Constructivist theory is valuable for understanding how state identities, narratives of legitimacy, and ideological constructs shape policy regarding the Golan.
- The terrain & its influence on regional positioning & defense policy is explored using geopolitical theory.

These theories are practiced, in content analysis of key documents; recurrent themes like sovereignty, deterrence, legitimacy, and religious contest can be identified.

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Constructivism, and Geopolitical Ontology

The foreign policy of Iran, the U.S, and Israel can be understood only when we wear strong theoretical lenses from the IR discipline. This chapter is multi-theoretical, centring Realist, Constructivist, and Geopolitical Theory, to discuss the ways material interests, ideational compulsion, and geographical imperatives shape what states and non-state entities do within this contested space. These interpretations provide complementary insight into why, despite being relatively tiny in size, the Golan Heights assumes oversize strategic and symbolic importance in geopolitics.

1. Realism: Power, Security, and Strategic Calculation Realism is one tradition that imposes a distinct meaning of system (actually at the level of the international system or the global system) with a unique meaning of the state (primarily the nation-state).

At its core, however, Realism argues that states are rational actors within an anarchic international system where power and survival are the ultimate goals. In realist terms, the Golan Heights is a piece of militarily significant high ground, and it gives whoever holds it a great advantage. Realist theory helps explain why Israel does not give up control, why Iran wants to extend its influence near the land, and why the United States has been increasingly moving closer to endorsing Israeli domination over it. Offensive and Defensive Realism There are two OTHER forms of Realism that further explain what Realism is... offensive realism, and defensive realism. Offensive realism (espoused by John Mearsheimer) posits that states are driven to preserve their own security through power-maximization. From that perspective, Iran's actions in Syria, notably to install IRGC operatives and their proxies along the Golan Heights, are ultimately a piece of a larger policy to deter Israeli attacks and create a land corridor to the Mediterranean Sea. Iran is also attempting to extend its regional influence and reverse U.S.-Israeli control, it is not just defending against an outside threat. Defensive realism, though, justifies Israel's occupation and annexation of the Golan as a reaction to insecurity. Surrounded by hostile forces, Israel sees the Golan as a "clear defensive necessity," enhancing deterrence and early warning against threats from both Syria and Iran. The 2019 U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan fits that logic: it was an act of external alignment for security's sake, extending Israel's military front to a region becoming more volatile.

Balance of Power and Alliances: Realism also draws attention to the balance of power as a principal means of stability. The U.S.-Israel partnership and their shared deterrence interest of preventing encroachment in the Golan by Iran are forms of external balancing. That, however, is offset in part by Iran's support for Syria and Hezbollah, as counterbalance to the U.S.-Israeli axis. From a realist vantage, the Golan is not an ideological or legal battle—it's a strategic bottleneck in regional power struggles, vital for both deterrence and territorial control.

2. Constructivism: Identity, Ideology and Perceptions of Legitimacy

While Realism examines material power, Constructivism emphasizes the role of identity, norms and ideas in shaping foreign policy. As constructivist theorists argue, states respond not to objective threats but to socially constructed perceptions. A good example is the Golan Heights, whose significance is no less determined by its geography than by the meanings that different participants attach to it.

Iranian Ideological Constructs: For Iran, the Golan is part of a broader context of resistance to both Zionism and Western imperial ambitions. Islamic Republic foreign policy is heavily influenced by revolutionary ideology, which regards the defense of Palestine and the struggle against Israel as moral causes. Iran has no territorial claim on the Golan, but because it views

the plateau as occupied Muslim territory, it's also part of Iran's ideological and religious struggle. Constructivism is useful in explaining why Iran invests so much in Syria because other than the cost of money and diplomacy.

Israeli Sovereignty and Historical Narratives: A similar mentality, constructionism, can as well be attributed to Israeli policy. Increasingly, the Golan is seen by Israeli leaders and the public not as occupied land, but one that is part of the state, justified by historical, religious, and security narratives. In Israeli public education, media and political discourse, the Golan is frequently described as a piece of historic Jewish land which has been restored to the Jewish people. With time, the annexation of the Golan is gradually being internalized and will it make it impossible to talk about an Israeli withdrawal. Constructivism shows the way in which norms of identity and legitimacy insulate law from the challenges of international norms.

U.S. Normative Shifts: Constructivism also contributes to an understanding of U.S. behavior, particularly under the administration of Donald J. Trump. The 2019 decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty was not simply a realist calculation but a normative and ideological reorientation. Trump and his aides viewed Israel not only as a strategic ally but as a kind of civilizational partner in a global struggle against “radical Islam.” The affirmation of the annexation of the Golan thus helped codify a new reality of unilateralism - the kind that says might makes right and the classical international law only needs to be upheld when it is convenient.

Iran and the Golan Heights: Strategic Leniency and Regional Challenge,

Iran's foreign policy towards the Golan Heights is the result of a combination of ideological commitment, strategic logic, and geostrategic ambitions. Tehran does not have pending territorial aspirations in the Golan, but it is an important component of its broader strategy in the Levant: to roll back Israeli and Western influence and project power through nonstate proxies while cementing its own presence across Syria and Lebanon. So, the Golan has become a key theater where Iran's “forward defense” doctrine with respect to Israel is being pursued. Due to its location near the Syrian-Israeli border, the Golan Heights is an extremely important staging ground for Iranian-aligned operations. Iran has made significant political and military inroads in Syria, under the pretext of protecting Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war, since 2011. Iran has sent military advisers, organized the militias and invested in facilities that stretch across Syria as a whole, including the Golan. Iran's position in southern Syria provides it with a direct address against, and an ability to confront, Israel; and the Golan Heights represents an especially valuable way to apply that pressure. Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah fighters have also been seen active around Golan, indicating that Iran is committed to making the region into a front case to thwart Israeli influence. Iran's strategic interest in the Golan is clearly tied to its alliance with Syria and its support of Hezbollah. The “Axis of Resistance”—which includes Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, and a range of other Shia militiamen—does not see the Israeli occupation of the Golan as an aberration, but as a part of a Western-imposed regional order that must be challenged. This ideological prism illuminates how Iran justifies its presence in Syria and support for “resistance.” It consists of building military facilities near the Golan, planting Hezbollah, and conducting intelligence and low level operations along the Israeli-Syrian boundary line. From Iran's vantage point, the Golan is a chance for strategic depth — to fight not on Iranian soil but to force Israel to spread its resources by making it fight on its northern front. Iran's activity near the Golan Heights also serves a domestic political function. By portraying itself as a guardian of Arab and Muslim land, including the Golan, Iran flaunts its revolutionary credentials and seeks domestic and regional

support. The "resistance" narrative provides for Tehran's continued legitimacy with allies and anti-Israel population. As it is, Iranian officials frequently mention the occupation of the Golan in speeches and in diplomatic consultations and use it as a synonym for injustice and imperialism. Moreover, Iran uses the Golan Heights politically to lash out at the United States. The Trump administration's announcement in 2019 that it recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan was lambasted by Iranian officials, who criticized the move as a violation of international law and proof of U.S. favoritism toward the Israelis. Tehran used the announcement to galvanize popular opinion against U.S. policy throughout the Middle East, portraying itself as a defender of international legality and territorial integrity. This falls in line with Iran's general foreign policy, which seeks to chip away at U.S. presence in global institutions and promote a multipolar world system. Iran itself does not want the Golan Heights, but the territory is located relatively close by, giving Tehran an opportunity to increasingly turn the conflict to its strategic advantage. It increases Iran's leverage in any regional deal, including for Syria, and is a running example of the ability of Tehran to stir up trouble on Israel's northern border. The more time Iran spends in Syria, the more it will have a say over the future of the Golan—especially if Syria remains dependent on Iran. By this yardstick Golan is decisive for Iran's regional stance not because it seeks land, but for the symbolic and strategic value. It allows Iran to challenge Israeli security, be ideologically coherent and beat back American sway in the Middle East. So long as the status of the Golan is in dispute it will serve as a staging ground for Iran's power projection and resistance-oriented foreign policy. —

United States And Golan Heights: Strategic Partners And Geopolitical Shifts:

The Golan Heights is a very big deal for U.S. foreign policy not only because it has no bearing on American territory, but because of its direct relevance to the U.S.-Israel relationship, regional security doctrine and the broader U.S. face-off with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Golan is where the United States for Washington, wean Israel off its dependence on American military and financial aid and be seen as the muscle behind the order. Over the last half century, American policy regarding the Golan has gone through the spectrum from cautious neutrality to open support for Israeli rule, and each of these shifts was born of different administrations, international agendas and domestic political considerations. USA policy on the Golan Heights has traditionally been grounded in international law and compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (1967), which called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from territory occupied during the Six-Day War, including the Golan. There was no a single administration that support Israeli sovereignty over the Golan heights despite the security position of the Israel, every year the successive administration emphasize that the Golan heights belongs to the Syrian under the international laws. This diplomatic and legal position was maintained by Democratic and Republican administrations over decades and reflected a yearning to leave open the possibility of a negotiated agreement between Syria and Israel. All of this took a dramatic turn under the Trump administration. In March 2019, President Donald Trump said the United States would recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan — a decision that overturned over 50 years of U.S. policy and the international consensus. The move was condemned by the international community, including by U.S. allies in Europe and in the Arab world. Still, the Israeli government saw it as a historic and strategic win. Key reasons for the shift included Israel's security needs and the threat posted by Iranian forces in Syria, Trump's announcement said.

The recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan must be understood within the broader foreign policy of the Trump administration in the Middle East. The move was the latest in a series that clearly favoured Israel, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and withdrawal

from the JCPOA (Iran nuclear agreement). Together, the gestures amounted to a maximalist vision of American support for Israel and against Iran. The United States' recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan was in fact a very loud and clear statement that it no longer considered the pre-1967 borders sacrosanct and was prepared to support a change in the status quo when it served the interests of its strategic allies. Strategically, the Golan Heights are also in the American interest as a counterbalance to Iran's rising regional strength. With Iranian militias moving closer — via their involvement in the fighting in Syria — to Israel's northern border, the U.S. saw Israeli control of the Golan as a buffer against further provocation. "From the perspective of U.S. security thinking, especially in the military and intelligence, the Golan is a part of Israel's definition of itself as a state." By recognizing Israeli sovereignty, the U.S. reasserted its decades-old commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge while deterring Iran from aggression. And while the Biden administration, as it has on other teeth of Trump's Mideast agenda, has reversed some of the policies, it has not reversed its recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Even as it has reverted to a traditional multilateralism and re-established ties with global institutions, the Biden administration has continued to chart a course of alignment with Israel on the Golan, in part out of concern over ongoing chaos in Syria and persistent threats from Iran. This illustrates something important: unless you share the same partisan perspective, U.S. foreign policy in the Golan is less and less a divergence on the rule of law and more and more a consensus on matters of strategic necessity. But this movement does mean something. By recognizing Israeli sovereignty over occupied territory, the U.S. has effectively surrendered any pretense it ever had as an honest broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Critics say the measure runs contrary to international law and sets a dangerous precedent that could be used in other territorial disputes worldwide, like Russia's annexation of Crimea or Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Moreover, it has widened the breach between Washington and important Arab allies that still consider the Golan Syrian and view its occupation as a lasting grievance.

Diplomatically, the Golan case has been yet another point of friction between the U.S. and Iran. Tehran deplored the U.S. recognition as an affront to Syrian sovereignty and international conventions, and as a provocation that could rally anti-American forces across the region. It all plays into the bigger game of U.S.-Iranian competition, where the Golan, in effect, is both a geographical and symbolic battleground. If by digging in its heels the United States did not create more settled lines in the regional struggle against Iran, it raised the Golan Heights as a litmus test of its still-nascent doctrine of regional order.

Israel And The Golan Heights: Security Doctrine And Statecraft Sovereignty And International Law Strategic And Economic Implications:

To Israel, the Golan Heights is more than a disputed territory — it is a cornerstone of Israeli national security doctrine, a symbol of sovereignty and a strategic linchpin of Israel's fight against Iran and its diplomatic campaign against American foes in the Middle East. After it captured Syria in 1967 in the Six-Day War, Israel incorporated the Golan Heights into its military, political and ideological systems. Israeli annexation in 1981 of the Golan, more widely condemned internationally, was a turning point and signalled Israel would keep it indefinitely. It was this unilateral action that not only fixed Israel's position, but set the standard for how we subsequently would act on the pressures of international statecraft, U.S. alliance demands and the Iranian-chaos threat in the Levant. Irrespective of the economic benefits that Israel gains from agricultural exports from the Golan Heights to the EU etc., the strategic value of the Golan Heights far surpasses anything else. Geopolitically, the Golan Heights provide Israel with a much-needed military buffer zone to its northern challenges mainly Syria and Hezbollah. It has

a vantage point of deep into Syria and serves as an early warning network for the Israeli defenses. Israeli tacticians never tired of publicizing the vulnerability of the pre-1967 frontiers and the necessity of keeping the Golan as a non-negotiable part of Israeli strategic depth. From the Israeli perspective, any rollback on the Golan would leave its northern towns and infrastructure exposed to possible artillery and missile fire, particularly given the threat from Iranian forces and allied militias in southern Syria. This potential threat is not merely theoretical. Israel has watched in recent years as Iranian and Hezbollah forces have crept steadily closer to its Golan border. In return, it has hit Iranian military sites, weapons shipments and infrastructure in Syria hundreds of times in what the Israelis call the “campaign between the wars.” The goal is obvious: to prevent the development of an Iranian stronghold along the Golan Heights for the long term and hurt the power of Iranian proxies. The Golan is a defensive buffer zone for Israel — but also a line of departure in an undeclared war Israel is waging against Iranian power in Syria. Politically, Israel has tried to normalize its assertion of control over the Golan, seeking at least the tacit recognition of its biggest ally, the United States — something that the Israeli Prime Minister says he has already received. Israeli leaders had lobbied successive U.S. administrations for decades to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan. Their work paid off in 2019, when the Trump administration became the first (and so far only) government in the world to officially designate the Golan Heights as part of Israel. The gesture was welcomed on the Israeli political landscape as a historic affirmation of Israel’s security needs and a slap in the face to Iran’s territorial aspirations. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called the recognition a “Purim miracle,” grinding with meaning in the Israeli lexicon of politics, and religion. The American acknowledgment bolstered Israel’s strategic standing in a number of ways. First, it solidified in its most important international ally’s consciousness the permanence of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan. The second was that it was a powerful deterrence message to Iran, Hezbollah and Syria, that any attempt by them to reconquer or destabilize the area would encounter unified resistance. Third, it created a precedent that emboldened Israeli hawks to advance such claims in other contested territories, including parts of the West Bank. But it also complicated matters for Israel by exposing it to the increasing tension between the West and Russia over the status of the Golan, which the international community, for the most part united on this issue, considers Syrian-occupied territory under international law. At home, Israeli society has largely incorporated the Golan as part and parcel of the state. The area has been heavily developed since its occupation, with Jewish settlements, agriculture, tourism, and military installations covering the plateau. Jewish Israelis have been encouraged to settle on the Golan through government programs, and Israel’s recent goals have included doubling the settler population within the decade. These are the evidences to a perception, shared by most parties in Israel, that the Golan should never be relinquished no matter what the diplomatic context may be in the region. On the foreign policy front, the Golan has epitomised Israel’s one-sided logic and strategic deterrent. Israeli leaders have said they’ve always believed secure borders are imperative given the volatility of the region, the fragility of Arab regimes and the unreliability of peace treaties. That belief only hardened with the collapse of previous Syrian peace talks in the 1990s and early 2000s and helped seal the mood after the current civil war, to be followed by Iranian entrenchment, took root. As a result, Israeli policy perceives the Golan less as a bargaining chip than as a permanent part of its sovereign territory that it must keep in order to deter both Syria and Iran, and is not even discussed as part of any future process to end the conflict with Damascus. Politically, the Golan puts Israel in a position to be a regional power ensuring its security needs whether the rest of the world agrees or not. Crucial as Israel’s alliance with the US is, Israeli behavior in the Golan—strikes against Iranian forces and settlers disingenuously contradict settlement projects—undertaken with unwavering

consistency since 1967, leave much ground for independent hedging. The Golan connects to Israel's quiet cooperation with Sunni Arab states, including Jordan and the Gulf monarchies, which are also wary of Iranian expansion but publicly committed to Arab unity on the question of territorial integrity and the rejection of Israeli annexations.

Conclusion

The area, the Golan Heights, has for decades been a geopolitical stew through which crosshatch the foreign policy imperatives of the United States, Iran and regional powers in complicated, often contradictory, ways. This contested land – which was first occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War and formally annexed by it in 1981 – remains controversial on all of its many dimensions encompassing international law, regional security, ideological identity and great power competition. This research has revealed that the Golan Heights operates not just as a site but also as a symbol that is constitutive of and constituted by the foreign policy logics of both the United States and Iran.

For the Americans, the Golan Heights has gradually assumed more significance as a tool of leverage and alliance building with Israel. The United States' declaration of Israeli sovereignty over the land during the Trump administration in 2019 was a sharp departure from decades of American practice — which, though sensitive to Israel's security requirements, nonetheless continued to officially keep alive the international consensus that the Golan is occupied Syrian land. This move reflected a broader shift in American Middle East policy toward a transactional, alliance-centric approach that favored short-term strategic convergence over international law. It further signified a re-prioritization of U.S. foreign policy objectives in supporting Israeli military and political dominance in the Levant and withdrawal from direct U.S. military involvement. This realignment is gravely consequential. “It disqualifies the United States as a credible monitor and broker for any future peace process, and it further erodes and wobbles the already fragile system of international law.” The Golan case exemplifies how U.S. foreign policy, particularly when pursued under nationalist or populist administrations, can confuse political opportunism with legal imprimatur and thus contribute to a process of legitimizing territorial conquest. It is also an indication of Washington's broader withdrawal from multilateral diplomacy in favour of unilateral, interest-based decision-making. On the Iranian side, its foreign policy (towards the Golan) is very much embedded in its ideological rhetoric of resistance, antizionism and anti-Americanism. But Iranian interest in the Golan is about more than symbolism. The area is in close proximity to Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon and Iranian assets in Syria, making it a fulcrum in Tehran's so-called “axis of resistance.” Iranian entrenchment in Syria in the aftermath of the civil war and its attempt to create a military footprint near the Golan are in line with Tehran's goal to extend its strategic map and demonstrate its presence across the entire Levant. But the question of Iran becomes more complicated due to internal frailties, including the weight of international sanctions, and blossoming potential threats at home of economic peril. As the Islamic Republic continues to express its fury with regard to Israeli possession of the Golan, it is unable to act in such a manner with this one theatre. Iran has also forged new regional alliances against its expansionism as it extends the war to Syria, including the normalization between Israel and the Gulf under the Abraham Accords, indirectly engaging the isolation of Tehran.

You have a Golan Heights that both the United States and Iran use as a stage for their broader rivalry for regional dominance, but one side asymmetrically. While the U.S. transits through public acceptance and formal recognition of the policy of Israel, Iran transits through proxies and ideological legitimation. This gap only increases the risk of miscalculation and armed conflict. The one exception — the Israeli bombing of Iranian forces in Syria, particularly on the

Golan, backed by Iranian counter-responses by proxy (Hezbollah and other militias) — continues to place the region in one of ceaseless tension. The danger of a local flashpoint escalating into a broader regional war is great.

By the way, the study also discovers by implication normative conflict between strategic facts and international law. On one side, the entire world agrees that the Golan is Syrian land under international law. On the other hand, the US-backed Israeli de facto occupation and military settlement mean observations like “normalise the occupation” can make sense. Such a disparity has not only cast doubt on the legitimacy of international law, it also prompts the difficult conundrums that arise in the enforcement of international law, particularly when great powers simply flout it.

The Golan Heights is theoretically rich, a meeting point of realist, constructivist, and critical geopolitics scholarship. Realism explains the territorial rationality and strategic needs of all sides, including Israel’s occupation and U.S. security guarantees. Constructivism explains the ideological stimulus of the Iranian intransigency speech and American-Israeli exceptionalism. Critical geopolitics allows us to problematize the production of territorial meaning itself—how the Golan is discursively, cartographically, and diplomatically made. This essay also sought to disentangle the legal from the ideological, the strategic from the symbolic. In doing so, it is also possible to understand that while the Golan is a landscape of matter, it is also a landscape of discourse – a site where meaning, identity, and legitimacy are contested. That is a double condition which explains why any resolution of the Golan issue must go beyond military calculations or legal constraints. It should also confront the narratives, symbols, and political imaginations the Golan represents for both sides.

And both Iran and America are taking huge risks in terms of policy if neither leaves that juxtapositioning and the deterioration of ground to the Golan with walls and no place to negotiate. For the United States, a consistent backing of Israeli sovereignty with no diplomatic role might alienate Arab partners, erode international standards and fortify anti-American sentiment across the region. For Iran, militarizing towards the Golan could stretch its already thin resources further and bring about an Israeli, or even an American reaction sooner rather than later. There are de-escalation, and not just conciliation, possibilities but they are modest. Track II diplomacy, confidence building measures and third party mediation - e.g. by Russia or the EU - can lay the foundations of limited cooperation, or conflict management (Wolff 2012). If the Golan were redefined as not a zero-sum zone of sovereignty, but as a demilitarized security buffer, or a co-shared ecological zone, perhaps the two adversaries could both reduce tensions but still keep the sweet honey needed for their fundamental narratives.

In short, the Golan remains an axle of unredressed historical conflict and great power play. So long as its status is under dispute, Israel will continue to function as a gauge for regional power rivalry, ideological enmity and judicial hypocrisy. The book contributes to closer understanding of the role of geostrategic interests and law and ideology in shaping US and Iranian decisions on the conduct of foreign policy, as it provides arguments for revisiting the urgency towards multilateralism, normative consistency and peace-based diplomacy in one of the world’s most threatened regions.

References

- Aras, B. (2012). (Re)Shaping the Region: New borders and the repositioning of the Golan Heights. *Middle East Journal*, 66(3), 389–405.
- Bahgat, G. (2020). U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: The Trump era and beyond. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 13(1), 1–19.

- Barnett, M. (1998). *Dialogues in Arab politics: Negotiations in regional order*. Columbia University Press.
- Cohen, H. (2019). Why the Golan Heights matters: The strategic implications of Israeli security requirements. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42(6), 875–896.; Barak, O. (2020).
- Fawcett, L. (2016). *International relations in the Middle East* (4rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Gwertzman, B. (2019). Trump’s Golan Heights proclamation: A departure from the rules-based order? *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15(3), 265–278.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2003). *The politics of the other world: Ameen Rihani and the Middle East*. Manchester University Press.
- Katz, M. (2020). Iran and the Golan: In the subtext there’s scud These debates were never about sweetheart deals, but about Iraqi missiles and Syrian scud. *Middle East Policy*, 27(2), 93–109.
- Khamenei, A. (2021). Resisting Iran's policy and its strategic deterrence. *Iranian Foreign Affairs Review*, 12(1), 55–79.
- Makovsky, D. (2010). *The quiet strike: An Israeli airstrike on Syria’s nuclear reactor*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Mousavian, S. H. (2014). *Iran and the U.S.: the Inside Story of the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*. Bloomsbury.