

Trump on Golan Heights

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump recently said that the U.S. should back Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967.

What is the significance?

- In December 2017, Trump decided to recognise [Jerusalem as the capital of Israel](#) and to move the US Embassy to the city.
- This was welcomed by the Israel but was offensive to Palestinians and many Arab political and religious leaders.
- The Golan announcement now much reflects the Jerusalem decision.
- This is likely to further complicate Trump's long-awaited plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What is the Golan Heights?

- The Golan Heights is a hilly 1,200 square kilometre plateau that overlooks Lebanon and borders Jordan.
- The claim over the Golan Heights is disputed between Israel and Syria.
- More than 40,000 people live on the Israeli-occupied Golan, and more than half of them are Druze residents.
- The Druze are an Arab minority who practice an offshoot of Islam.
- Many of its adherents in Syria have long been loyal to the Assad regime in Syria.



Why is the Golan area contentious?

- The Golan Heights were part of Syria until 1967.
- In 1967, Israel captured most of the area in the Six Day War, occupying it and annexing it in 1981.
- After annexing the Golan, Israel gave the Druze the option of citizenship, but most rejected it and still identify them as Syrians.
- About another 20,000 Israeli settlers also live there, many of them working in farming and tourism.
- The unilateral annexation by Israel was not recognised internationally, and Syria demands the return of the territory.
- Syria tried to regain the Heights in the 1973 Middle East war, but the effort was thwarted.
- Israel and Syria signed a peace agreement in 1974 and the Golan had been relatively quiet since.
- In 2000, Israel and Syria held their highest-level talks over a possible return of the Golan and a peace agreement.
- But the negotiations collapsed and subsequent talks also failed.

Why do the countries claim Golan?

- Both sides covet the Golan's water resources and naturally fertile soil.
- Also, given the civil war in Syria, Israel considers the plateau as a buffer zone between Israeli towns and the instability in Syria.
- Israel also fears that Iran is seeking to establish itself permanently on the

Syrian side of the border in order to launch attacks on Israel.

- Iran is, notably, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.
- Syria, for its part, insists that the part of the Golan held by Israel remains an occupied territory and thus demands its return.

What is the current UN arrangement there?

- A United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) is stationed in camps and observation posts along the Golan.
- This is supported by military observers of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).
- Between the Israeli and Syrian armies is a 400-square-km “Area of Separation”.
- This is often called a demilitarized zone in which the two countries’ military forces are not permitted under the ceasefire arrangement.
- The Separation of Forces Agreement of 1974 created two lines of separation.
- Behind the Alpha Line to the west of the area of separation, Israeli military forces must remain.
- Behind the Bravo Line to the east of the area of separation, Syrian military forces must remain.
- Extending 25 km beyond the “Area of Separation” on both sides is an “Area of Limitation”.
- Here, there are restrictions on the number of troops and number and kinds of weapons that both sides can have.
- There is one crossing point between the Israeli and Syrian sides.
- Until the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, this was used mainly by UN forces, a limited number of Druze civilians and for the transportation of agricultural produce.



Who controls the Syrian side of the Golan?

- Before the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, there was an uneasy stand-off between Israeli and Syrian forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.
- But in 2014 anti-government Islamist rebels overran Quneitra province on the Syrian side.
- The rebels forced Assad's forces to withdraw and also attacked the US forces in the area, forcing them to pull back from some of their positions.
- The area remained under rebel control until the summer of 2018.
- Then, Assad's forces returned to the largely ruined city of Quneitra and the surrounding area following a Russian-backed offensive.
- A deal that allowed rebels to withdraw was made.

What is the current military situation?

- Assad's forces are now back in control of the Syrian side of the Quneitra crossing which reopened in October 2018.
- The United Nations forces are still carrying out restoration works in certain areas.
- Israel signalled that it would not impede the Syrian army's return to Quneitra.

- But it has repeatedly expressed concern that Assad may defy the U.N. armistice or let his Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah allies deploy there.

Source: Indian Express

