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Syria: no political solution in sight for Golan's displaced

Little international attention has been paid to the tens of thousands of Syrian Arabs displaced from the Golan Heights more than 38 years ago. They left their homes in disputed circumstances during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan Heights, a strategic narrow stretch of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The area was formally annexed by Israel in 1981. The annexation was not recognised internationally. The Syrian government estimates that around 305,000 people remain displaced today, a figure which includes the descendants of those displaced since 1967. Most of the internally displaced population have settled in the suburbs of Damascus and in Sweida, in the south of the country.

Return for the majority of the internally displaced has been impossible in the absence of an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement. Despite recent attempts to enter into dialogue by both Israel and Syria, formal peace talks have not resumed since 2000. Golan's displaced continue to face great difficulties in exercising their right to family life. Contact between tens of thousands of Syrian residents living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members remains nearly impossible, with the exception of specific cases, facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In a positive development in 2005 the government of Syria indicated that it may rebuild the town of Quneitra which was regained by Syria in 1974 but never rebuilt. In March 2005, the Syrian Prime Minister laid the foundation stones for the rebuilding of two villages near Quneitra that were destroyed in the 1967 war. It is estimated that some 50,000 people displaced from the town may be able to return if it is reconstructed.

Background and main causes

Displacement occurred during the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel seized the Golan Heights, a strategic narrow stretch of land overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The exact circumstances are subject to controversy, and Syrian and Israeli accounts differ. According to the Syrian government, Israeli forces physically expelled the inhabitants of the Golan and destroyed villages and farms, while the Israeli government maintains that these people fled following reports of violence (UN Human Rights Committee, 25 August 2000; Arnold, 1 February 2000). The Syrian government estimates that there were about 250 villages and farms and 160,000 Syrian inhabitants in 1967. Today five of these villages are still inhabited, with a population of 25,000 Syrians (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, para. 10; UNCHR, 16 March 2003).

Following the 1967 war, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242 calling for the Israeli armed forces' withdrawal from the occupied territories and for the respect and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of every state in the area (UNSC, 22 November 1967). Conflict broke out again in 1973 and Syria attempted to regain the Golan Heights, but failed. The 1973 war prompted the Security Council to adopt Resolution 338 urging Israel on the one side and Syria and Egypt on the other to agree to a ceasefire (UNSC, 22 October 1973).

An Israeli-Syrian ceasefire agreement was signed in 1974 ("Agreement on Disengagement"), which also allowed Syria to regain Quneitra, an area in the Golan Heights emptied of its 50,000 inhabitants

and left in ruins by the Israeli army (Schneider, 8 May 2001; Khawaja, M 2002). The agreement also provided for a UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to maintain the ceasefire along the UN demarcation line which separates the occupied Golan from the remaining Syrian territory (UNSC Resolution 350 (1974). There have been no major security incidents, yet the UN Secretary-General has renewed the mandate of UNDOF every six months given the absence of a Middle East peace agreement (See UNSC, 7 December 2004 and UNSC Resolution 338 (1974)).

Since December 1981, the Golan Heights have been annexed and administered under Israeli law. Despite this fact, people displaced from the Golan are considered internally displaced people (IDPs) since the demarcation line between the Israeli-occupied Golan and Syria is not an internationally recognised border. In 1981, the Security Council found that "the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan was null and void and without international legal effect" (UNSC Resolution 497, 17 December 1981). The UN has since reaffirmed this principle on numerous occasions and has regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced to return to their former homes and repossess their properties (UNCHR, 15 April 2004). The displaced living in Syria have much less clear legal status than those who were able to remain within the occupied Golan, who are protected under the Fourth Geneva Convention (ICRC, 12 April 2005).

Figures

Reports of the number of people displaced from the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day War vary according to the source. The Syrian government maintains that 130,000 persons were displaced from the Golan as a result of the conflict and that those displaced and their descendants now number 305,660 (Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN, October 2004). Israel says that only 70,000 were displaced from the Golan in 1967 (USCR 2002, Dammers 1998, p.189). Most of the displaced have resettled into villages close to the Golan. The majority are living in Jermana, a suburb of Damascus and in Sweida, in the south of Syria.

Prospects of return

Return of the displaced population to the Golan cannot be envisaged without a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. However, identifying the terms of a peace treaty is not only linked to the return of the Golan's original inhabitants but also involves finding solutions to key issues including disputed boundaries, access to water resources, security and the normalisation of bilateral relations (ICG, 16 July 2002).

At the end of 2003 and during 2004, there was some hope that peace discussions would reopen following calls by the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, but negotiations did not materialise (ICG, 11 February 2004; The Guardian, 8 May 2003). Syrian-Israeli negotiations had broken down in January 2000 when previous Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered to return the Golan Heights to

Syria in accordance with its pre-1967 border. However, the government of Syria has held to an unconditional Israeli withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 line, which would ensure its access to the Sea of Galilee (MEMRI, 23 Jan 2000; The Guardian, 8 May 2003, 17 July 2003). In turn, Israel also wishes to control access to the Sea of Galilee, and wants its security concerns addressed before agreeing to withdraw (Ben-Nahum Yonatan, 19 Dec 1995; MEMRI, 24 March 2000). Returning the Golan Heights would also mean that Israel would have to dismantle its settlements in the area (BBC, 10 October 2004; BBC, 31 December 2003). Some analysts suggest that increasing US pressure on Syria along with the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq may lead Syria to compromise its position. International political and economic pressure on Syria, mainly from the United States, increased in 2004 and 2005 based on allegations that the Syrian government was supporting rebel groups in Lebanon and Iraq, its purported efforts to develop chemical and biological weapons, and its military presence in Lebanon (HRW, 13 January 2005; ICG, 11 February 2004).

Prospects for the eventual rehabilitation of the Golan Heights, property repossession, and return of the displaced population are also complicated by the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in the area (UNHRC, 19 October 2004, p.3; BBC News, 31 December 2003; "Arutz 7", 11 December 2002). In 2004, Israel's Ministerial Committee on Settlement Affairs announced a decision to double investments in the Golan, including the construction of nine new settlements (UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, para.91; UNECS, 7 June 2004; UNHRC, 19 October 2004). Although

figures are not consistent, reports suggest that there are some 40 Israeli settlements with more than 15,000 Israelis living in the area. A public opinion poll in January 2004 suggests that a majority of Israelis opposed plans to hand back the Golan to Syria (BBC News, 10 October 2004).

In a positive development, some IDPs may be able to return in the foreseeable future to the Quneitra area which borders the occupied Golan. In mid-March, Syrian Prime Minister Naji Otri laid the foundation stones for the rebuilding of Adaniyeh and Asheh, two villages near Quneitra that were destroyed in the 1967 war. The prime minister also inaugurated a new hospital in Quneitra. The inhabitants of Quneitra, estimated at 50,000 people, were forced to flee during the 1967 war when the town was destroyed by Israeli forces. Although Syria regained control of the area in 1974, until recently the government had made little effort to rebuild Quneitra, keeping the ruins as a memento of the Israeli incursion and ongoing occupation of the remaining Golan Heights (Syria Today, March 2005; IHT, 23 October 2004). With regard to possible return, more than 100 people have approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with legal claims to ownership of land and buildings in Quneitra (ICRC, 21 March 2005).

Living conditions of the internally displaced

There is little available information on the living conditions of the internally displaced in Syria. They are apparently well treated by the Syrian government, and according to an American journalist who interviewed some of them in 2000 in

'new Bteha' – a village mirroring the old Bteha in the Golan – the displaced are given priority for public service jobs and university places by the government (Fecci, June 2000, Khawaja, M 2002). However, the country has been under a general "state of emergency" since 1963, under which there have been widespread restrictions of civil and political rights (HRW, 13 January 2005; AI, 8 March 2004).

An ongoing pressing human rights issue for the displaced is separation from their families. It continues to be almost impossible for most of Golan's IDPs to exercise their right to respect for family life. Family visits were authorised by the Israeli authorities until 1992. Since then, contact between tens of thousands of Syrians living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members is strictly restricted. There have been a few exceptions, including students, religious pilgrims and brides who were able to cross the separation line, under the auspices of the ICRC (ICRC, 21 March 2005 and 28 June 2004; Syria Today, 1 January 2005; UN Special Committee, 23 September 2004, Sect. B).

International response

The UN, and specifically the UN Commission on Human Rights, has regularly urged Israel to allow the internally displaced to return to their former homes and repossess their properties. In 2004, for example, the Commission adopted a resolution emphasising that the displaced population of the occupied Syrian Golan must be allowed to return to their homes and to recover their properties. It also reaffirmed the illegality of Israel's annex-

tion of the territory in 1981 and called on Israel to refrain from “changing the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure and legal status of the occupied Syrian Golan” (UNCHR, 15 April 2004).

The UN General Assembly has also established a “Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories” (UNGA Resolution 2443 (XXIII) 1968). The mandate of the Committee includes reporting to the Human Rights Commission on the human rights of Golan's IDPs, or “persons normally resident in the areas under occupation but who had left those areas because of hostilities” (See e.g. UNGA 59/33, 31 January 2005 and UNGA 59/125, 25 January 2005). However, since its establishment, the Committee has been denied access to the Golan, as well as cooperation from the Israeli government (UN Special Committee, 25 May 2004).

No UN agency has adopted a role in monitoring or providing assistance to the displaced in Syria. A number of UN agencies are present in Syria, mainly operating under a development framework adopted in 2001. The UN Development Assistance Framework notes the need for UN support in the event of the reintegration of the occupied areas (UN, 2001; UN Syria Office of the Resident Coordinator, December 2000). However, given the lack of a peace agreement, plans to support the return of the displaced population and rehabilitation of the Golan Heights have not been developed.

The ICRC is the only international organisation assisting the displaced, though

in many cases it is only able to do so minimally. It has operated in Syria since 1967, to restore family links that have been broken by Israel's occupation (ICRC, 28 June 2004; Arabic News, 14 November 2002; ICRC, 19 June 2003).

Note: This is a summary of the Global IDP Project's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Syria. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the Syria [List of Sources](#) page on our website.

About the Global IDP Project

The Global IDP Project, established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1996, is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Geneva-based Project contributes to protecting and assisting the 25 million people around the globe, who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Global IDP Project runs an online database providing comprehensive and frequently updated information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

It also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In addition, the Project actively advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

For more information, visit the Global IDP Project website and the database at www.idpproject.org.

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