

Returning the Golan Heights to Syria

by Kermit Zarley 1/26/2005

If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ever gets settled, it would be best if it was part of a comprehensive settlement involving Israel's dispute with Syria over its possession of the Golan Heights. In the past, however, Israel has opposed the concept of a comprehensive settlement, alleging that it is too difficult to achieve and therefore unrealistic. Where are the Golan Heights? And how did Israel come to possess them?

Israel's three foremost Arab neighbors attacked it in 1967. In one of the great victories of military history, Israel overwhelmingly won the war in only six days. That's why it became known as "the Six-Day War." In winning this war, Israel took possession of four parcels of land that became known as "the occupied territories" due to UN definitions. Israel took the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt; Israel took the Golan Heights from Syria; Israel took the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from the Palestinians. While the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had been the homeland of the Palestinians, on their behalf Jordan had administered the West Bank and Egypt had administered the Gaza Strip.

Only one of these four occupied territories was ever returned to its previous owners. Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1979. As a consequence, Israel returned possession of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in 1981. To this day, Israel still continues to possess the occupied territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, however, has unilaterally announced that Israel will dismantle all twenty-one Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip. Israel will remove those settlers to either the West Bank or Israel, remove all of its military outposts in the Gaza Strip and turn it over to the Palestinians. This project is scheduled to begin in mid-2005 and be completed before the year ends.

Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel, but Syria does not because Israel still retains possession of the Golan Heights. This territory is located west of the Jordan River and Israel's Lake Huleh to the north and Israel's Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) to the south. These Golan Heights are shaped somewhat rectangularly, with its southern extremity located on the entire eastern shoreline of Lake Kinneret. The Golan Heights is strategically important because these hills overlook Israel, and this region is also quite agriculturally productive.

Israel has not returned the Golan Heights to Syria because of what was happening there prior to the Six-Day War. Terrorists constantly fired rockets from the Golan Heights as they overlook Lake Kinneret, and they landed on the other side of Lake Kinneret among Jewish settlements. Israel had great difficulty defending itself against these attacks because of strategic position of the elevated Golan Heights.

But there have always been serious questions posed to Israel about its continuing refusal to negotiate a settlement with Syria concerning the Golan Heights. In the Six-Day War, Israel had taken possession of a much larger region of the Golan Heights than was strategically necessary for Israel to keep.

Interestingly, one of the several border descriptions of the land that God promised to the Israelites to possess and indwell includes mention of Lake Kinneret. All major modern versions of the English Bible state in Numbers 34.11 that God outlined part of the eastern border of the Promised Land to include “the slope on the east side of the Sea of Chinnereth” (NASB) or “the eastern slope of the sea of Chinnereth” (NRSV). Thus, the Promised Land, as set forth in this passage, did not include all of the Golan Heights.

Military experts have agreed that Israel could return most of the Golan Heights back to Syria without jeopardizing its security. And in the past, Israel and Syria have held negotiations in which this point was discussed.

Thus, a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ought to be comprehensive. It would include a settlement between Syria and Israel, in which Israel would return most of the Golan Heights to Syria and only retain the slopes descending to Lake Kinneret and perhaps slightly beyond them.