Trump recognises Israeli sovereignty over Syria's Golan Heights

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Ending years of official US neutrality, President Donald Trump tweeted a message Thursday recognising Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

Trump tweeted, "After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!"

Trump's tweet violates international law outlawing the acquisition of territory by force. Such annexations were declared illegal under the Geneva Conventions enacted in the wake of the Second World War to prevent the repetition of actions like those carried out by Germany's Nazi regime.

Along with his decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Trump has effectively repudiated the entire post-World War II international order and signaled that militarism, territorial aggrandisement and colonialism are the order of the day.

Israel captured the Golan Heights, which occupies an important strategic position overlooking the Galilee, from Syria during the June 1967 war, forcing 100,000 residents to flee and destroying most of the 200 villages. It soon began constructing settlements and, in 1981, effectively annexed the region by bringing it under Israeli law and administration.

The United Nations Security Council condemned the move. Its Resolution 497 states, "The Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction, and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect," while Resolution 242 stresses "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war."

The Golan is a crucial source of water in an arid region, with rainwater from its catchment feeding into the River Jordan and providing a third of Israel's water supply. It may also contain important energy reserves. In 2016, the Israeli authorities gave Afek, an Israeli subsidiary of the US firm Genie Energy, approval to conduct more drilling in the Golan, following the discovery of an oil reservoir.

The Israeli-occupied Golan is now home to some 20,000 Syrians, mainly members of the Druze community, and 20,000 settlers.

Trump's decision was met with near universal condemnation from Washington's allies and foes alike.

While the State Department insisted the wording-change did not mean a policy change, it is no aberration. The move has been at the top of the agenda in diplomatic talks between Washington and Tel-Aviv. Days earlier, the US dropped its customary "Israeli-occupied" designation of the Golan in its annual human rights report.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the announcement, which came ahead of an official visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Israel. "President Trump has just made history," Netanyahu stated. "I called him. I thanked him on behalf of the people of Israel. He did it again. The message that President Trump has given the world is that America stands by Israel."

Trump's decision and Pompeo's visit are intended to shore up the position of Netanyahu, who is fighting for his political life, as well as his freedom, in the elections scheduled for April 9.

Netanyahu, mired in corruption, faces multiple charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He is confronting an unexpectedly stiff opposition from a new electoral alliance, Blue and White (a reference to the Israeli flag), made up of former chief of staff Benny Gantz's electoral vehicle Resilience Party, Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid, former Likud Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon's Telem, and former chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi.

All of Netanyahu's opponents have also hailed the US decision.

Trump has signaled his support for the election of a neo-fascist government headed by Netanyahu, who has brokered a merger between the fascist Otzma Yehudit

(Jewish Power) party and the more established right-wing party of religious Zionists, Jewish Home. Netanyahu's aim is to secure enough support from the ultra-nationalist and religious parties to form another Likud-led coalition. He has thereby legitimized an organization that traces its roots to the long-outlawed Kach Party of Meir Kahane, which the US declared a terrorist organization.

Otzma Yehudit, like Jewish Home, encourages violence against Palestinians, calls for the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories, and advocates a ban on intermarriage or sex between Jews and Arabs. This fascistic outfit could, following its electoral alliance with Jewish Home, win seats in the Knesset and become part of the next government.

Two of Otzma Yehudit's leaders—Michael Ben Ari and Itamar Ben Gvir—are cofounders of a group implicated in a 2014 arson attack on a school for Jewish and Arab children in Jerusalem. Ben Ari was denied a visa to the US in 2012 as a member of a terrorist organization. Ben Gvir has acknowledged having a picture in his home of Baruch Goldstein, the Kahane supporter who murdered 29 Palestinians at a mosque in Hebron in 1994.

Last week, the Supreme Court disqualified Ben Ari from contesting the election, overturning an earlier decision by the electoral committee, because of his "incitement to racism." This provoked a storm of criticism from Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked of the newly formed Hayamin Hehadash party, who has pledged to pass a far-reaching policy package giving the Ministry of Justice the power to nominate judges for approval by legislators, aimed at ending the independency of the judiciary. Shaked provoked international outrage after appearing in an election ad in sultry poses promoting a fictional perfume called Fascism. Satirising attacks on her ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism, she opens the bottle and sniffs its content, saying, "To me, it smells like democracy."

A Netanyahu-led government that would likely include Shaked would accelerate the expansion and creation of new Zionist settlements, escalate the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from East Jerusalem and sanction the outright annexation of the Palestinian land known as Area C, which constitutes 60 percent of the occupied West Bank.

Trump's decision on the Golan Heights follows a series of measures in support of his regional attack dog: the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem; the closure of the Palestine Liberation Organisation office in Washington; the ending of US aid to Palestinians, estimated, according to OECD data, at nearly $7.3 billion

between 1993 and 2017; the enactment of US laws that prohibit providing funds to the families of Palestinian political prisoners and individuals killed by Israel, under the pretext of "fighting terrorism"; and moves to brand any form of criticism of Israel, including the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, as anti-Semitic. The US left the UN Human Rights Council in protest against its scrutiny of Israel's policies.

Trump's naked interference in the Israeli elections is bound up with broader aims of US imperialism to escalate its military intervention in the Middle East, particularly to roll back Iranian influence in the wake of the successive debacles suffered by Washington in Iraq, Libya and Syria.

With Israel long claiming that the continued threat from Iran, Syria and their Lebanese ally Hezbollah makes it vital for its security to maintain control of the Golan, it is clear that US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, coming in the aftermath of Washington's unilateral exit from the international nuclear deal with Iran and the supposed pullout of US military forces from Syria, is aimed at Iran.

According to *Ha'aretz*, two weeks ago, the Israel Defence force released its "Golan File" supposedly revealing that, unknown to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a "Hezbollah terror cell" was planning to infiltrate a village on the Syrian side. This would, the newspaper reported, necessitate a military response from Israel unless Assad distanced himself from Hezbollah and Iran.