

Creating a Peaceful Place of War: Revisiting the Golan Heights Border Region

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Abstract

Ever since its conquest from Syria in the 1967 War, the Golan Heights has held great importance within the Israeli national landscape. With its towering altitude and attractive scenery, this border region holds special significance that relates to its various exploitative potential on the one hand, and a meta-historical claim as the boundary of a Jewish homeland on the other. My paper will discuss the Zionist territorial discourse surrounding the assimilation process of the Golan Heights. By studying the merits of its inclusion into the Israeli territorial narrative one can locate an interesting dialectic: The Golan Heights plays a quintessential role in the Zionist aspiration to become a part of a “normal” Europe, but it is also a major iconic landmark in the regional conflict between Israel and Syria. Thus, it juxtaposes two geopolitical imaginations that epitomize Israel’s inherent paradox – a desire to be included in Europe and the engagement in a Middle Eastern conflict.

Introduction

The Golan Heights is an elevated plateau located on Israel’s northeastern borders with Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Occupied by Israel from Syria during the final stages of the 1967 War, the Heights have held great importance within the Israeli national landscape. After the Israeli occupation, the Golan Heights were transformed into an internationally illegal borderland region. Yet despite being a contested area, it has acquired a unique status in the eyes of many Israelis. Especially known for its cool climate, open spaces and natural tourist attractions such as Mount Hermon, Israel’s only ski resort, the Heights offer wide varieties of leisure activities, such as the “Golan trail” inaugurated in 2007 after it became clear that the state sponsored “Israel’s National Trail” would not include the Golan Heights. Those hiking along it are aware of the conspicuous characteristics of a battleground: anti-tank trenches, minefields, empty outposts and different kinds of fortifications, all ready to be instantly re-used. The Golan Heights therefore, is not just a border but is also a liminal boundary in a continuing conflict that is yet to be resolved. This inherent contradiction and the way it is managed, regulated and moderated is the main focus of this paper.

In comparison to the corresponding body of knowledge that deals with Israel’s control over the occupied Palestinian territories, critical investigation into Israel’s control over the Golan Heights

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since 1967 is minimal.¹ While the 1967 War was comprehensively portrayed² and reviewed,³ only a few scholars⁴ place special focus on the Golan Heights. Israel's colonization process has been substantively explored in regards to the Palestinian West Bank,⁵ while the status of the Golan Heights has scarcely been addressed. William Harris's (1980) review of Israel's presence in the Golan Heights until 1978; Uri Davis' (1983) research, David Newman's (1993) discussion of the political and social factors behind the settlement of the Golan Heights and Muhammad Muslih's (1999) account of the Israeli-Syrian conflict that preceded the occupation, stand as rare examples of literature on a subject that has been largely neglected.⁶

¹ The list of works regarding Israel and the Palestinian territories is extremely wide. Provided here is a partial list: Ian Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1988); Ian Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Meron Benvenisti, *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1995); David Kretzmer, *The Occupation of Justice: The Supreme Court of Israel and the Occupied Territories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); James Ron, *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal (eds.), *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture* (London: Verso, 2003); Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); Lisa Hajjar, *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Elisha Efrat, *The West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Geography of Occupation and Disengagement* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal (eds.), *A Civilian Occupation: the Politics of Israeli Architecture* (London: Verso, 2003); Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (New York: Verso, 2007) Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *This Regime Which Is Not One: Occupation and Democracy Between the Sea and the River* (1967-) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

² Eric Hammel, *Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli War* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992); Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

³ Heather Bleaney, *The First Day of the Six Day War* (London: Dryad, 1990); Richard Parker (ed.), *The Six Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Aharon Bregman, *Israel's Wars, 1947-93* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 62-102; Ami Gluska, *Eshkol, Give the Order!* (Tel Aviv: Maarakhot, 2004) [in Hebrew].

⁴ Matitياهو Mayzel, *The Golan Heights Campaign* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Security, 2003) [in Hebrew]; Eyal Zisser, "June 1967: Israel's Capture of the Golan Heights," *Israel Studies* 7:1 (2002): 168-194.

⁵ Gideon Aran, *From Religious Zionism to a Zionist Religion: The Roots of Gush Emunim* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1987) [in Hebrew]; Peter Démant, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: Implications for the Mideast Conflict* (Jerusalem: IPCRI, 1995); David Ohana, "Kfar Etzion: The Community of Memory and the Myth of Return," *Israel Studies* 7(2) (2002): 145-174; David Newman, "Citizenship, Identity and Location: the Changing Discourse of Israeli Geopolitics," in *Geopolitical Traditions*, eds. Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson (London: Routledge, 2000); Idith Zertal and Akivah Eldar, *Lords of the Land: the War Over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007* (New York: Nation Books, 2007).

⁶ William Harris, *Taking Root: Israeli Settlement in the West bank, the Golan, and Gaza-Sinai, 1967-1980* (New York: Research Studies Press, 1980); Uri Davis, *The Golan Heights under Israeli Occupation, 1967-1981* (Durham: University of Durham: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1984); David Newman, "Social and Political Factors in the Golan Settlement," in *The Land of the Golan and the Hermon*, eds. Avi Dgani and Moshe Inbar (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Security, 1993) [in Hebrew]; Muhammad Muslih, *The Golan, The Road to*



Figure 1

Introspection into questions of space and place, a perspective which received due consideration in regards to Israel⁷ is almost completely missing in relation to the Golan Heights. Various accounts provide insightful details regarding the way the Golan Heights were initially settled and held as a geostrategic asset.⁸ Although extremely informative, such accounts discuss the Golan's inclusion as a "side effect" of the occupation, thus diminishing the Golan Heights' overall importance in Israel's territorial expansion post-1967. One important book which broadly meets the literary gap

Occupation (Washington: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1999).

⁷ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); Suzzane Slymovics, *The Object of Memory, Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Haim Yacobi, "Whose Order, Whose Planning?" in *Constructing a Sense of Place: Architecture and the Zionist Discourse*, ed. Haim Yacobi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Michael Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2009).

⁸ Reuven Pedatzur, *Triumph of Embarrassment: Israel and the Territories after the Six Day War* (Tel Aviv: Yad Tabenkin, 1996) [in Hebrew], 180-201; Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 70-73; Segev, 1967, 424-431, 427; 524-527, 551.

on the settlement of the Golan Heights is Yigal Kipnis's (2009) judicious investigation that offers a balanced observation of Israel's presence in the Golan Heights. It is a critically oriented, richly detailed historiographical work that provides useful data along with incisive comments regarding the border conflicts with Syria, the status of the Golan Heights in June 1967 and the settlement apparatus in the years that followed. Yet this work lacks any theoretical analysis of the state's role as an occupying force and the rationalities it employs in order to justify its control.⁹

The present work strives to meet this gap by locating the place of the Golan Heights within Israel's geopolitical discourse. The first part focuses on the way in which the Golan Heights was perceived as a specific threat and overviews the strategies through which it was conceived as a new open land to be settled, explored and exploited. Following this I will center on one important site within the Golan Heights, Mount Hermon, in order to evaluate the importance of the geopolitical gaze and the way it challenges the normalization discourse as it is presented here. By normalization I mainly refer to two aspects of the efforts to turn the Golan Heights into a conceived part of Israel's territory. The first is to make the space in question a familiar locus to most of the public with spatial characteristics which are unthreatening in nature. By this I mean a deliberate effort to downsize the Golan Heights militaristic attributes. The second effort, which directly relates to the way space was reformed in Israel after 1948, was to neutralize the former presence of a large Syrian population. One which was considered hostile to the main ethos of Israel's professed desire to establish a polity based on a Jewish majority. Finally I will juxtapose the normalization process of the Golan Heights to that of the West Bank which was occupied together with the Golan Heights during the June 1967 War.

From the Syrian Plateau to the Golan Heights

Stretching across some 1,500 square kilometers, the Golan Heights sits along Israel's borders with Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The Zionist movement claimed this area in the post World War I Peace Conference of 1919, but rather than emphasizing a historical connection between the Jewish people and this region, the justification for its appropriation stressed security concerns and access to water resources, noting both the need to prevent Bedouin tribes from infiltrating from the east and the necessity of providing a reliable irrigation source for the future Zionist state's agriculture. France and Britain, the war's victorious colonial superpowers, eventually placed the Golan Heights under French custodianship. The territory officially fell under Syrian rule with the republic's establishment in 1946.¹⁰ After the 1948 War, Syria and Israel signed an armistice accord (July 1949), but border skirmishes ensued revolving around three main issues: sovereignty over the enclaves; Israeli accusations that Syria was helping Palestinian militia fighters to infiltrate into Israel; and water

⁹ Yigal Kipnis, *The Mountain that was a Monster: The Golan between Israel and Syria* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 2009) [in Hebrew].

¹⁰ Several colonization attempts were made by Jewish settlers, including large land purchases of thousands of dunums (hundreds of acres), but all failed; see Gideon Bigger, *Land of many Boundaries, The First Hundred Years of the Delimitation of the new Boundaries of Palestine: Eretz Israel 1840-1947* (Sede Boker campus: Ben Gurion University Press, 2001) [in Hebrew], 135-187.

related disputes involving schemes on both sides of the border to divert rivers and disagreements over fishing rights in the Sea of Galilee.¹¹ Both Israel and Syria used military force in their efforts to impose their interests, with artillery fire, infantry raids, and aerial dogfights becoming routine occurrences along the border. The cycle of violence caused considerable casualties and widespread destruction of property.

One significant consequence of the ongoing clashes was the intensified militarization of the Golan Heights. Syria created bases on the plateau from which artillery fire was launched at Israeli settlements and outposts as part of the border wars between the two countries, causing casualties, damage, and anxiety on both sides. By June 1967, the entire region, still known in Israel as the Syrian Plateau, was riddled with bunkers, minefields, and army compounds.¹² At the same time, however, it was also populated by a considerable number of Syrian citizens. In 1966 its population reached 147,613, the majority of which (85%) were Arab Sunni Muslims and the rest belonged to a variety of ethnic groups such as Cherkassy, Turkmen, Maronite Christians, Bedouin, Alawites, Isma'ilis, and Druze. Some 15,000 of the region's inhabitants were Palestinian refugees who had relocated to the Golan Heights following the 1948 War. All in all, these civilians lived in 163 villages, 108 farms, and one central town, Quneitra, which served as the regional capital.¹³ Yet despite the area's civilian life, for Israeli Jews the Syrian Plateau came to represent, both figuratively and literally, a military threat to the state's territorial integrity. The conquest and takeover of the Golan Heights, as one popular Hebrew song referred to it, was a victory over the "mountain that turned into a monster."

Thus, more than anything else, the occupation of the Syrian Plateau, which was accomplished in the last stage of the June 1967 War, has been understood by Israel as part of an expansion strategy propelled by the perception (real or constructed) of a concrete menace.¹⁴ For that reason, subsequent actions of control and appropriation in the newly occupied territory would have to be rationalized as necessary steps to prevent an escalation that might revive the emergency. Thus the worldview informed by the logic of preventing another catastrophe, or in other words, the conception of the Golan Heights as a "monstrous" threat, created a dynamic of spatial transformation.

The idea that the Syrian plateau should be transformed into a pacified buffer zone became evident in the way that the Golan Heights were distinguished from most other territories Israel occupied in the war: the extent of its population decline. From June until December 1967 approximately 350,000 inhabitants of the various occupied territories fled or were expelled. Indeed, population decline became a widespread phenomenon in all the territories Israel occupied in the June 1967 War. In the West Bank alone the sheer number of refugees, about 200,000, exceeded the entire

¹¹ Muslih, *The Golan, The Road to Occupation* 5, 15-19; For a discussion regarding the DMZ and the effect of the border war between Israel and Syria on the communities who live in it, see Dan Rabinowitz and Sliman Khawalde, "Demilitarized, Then Dispossessed: The Kirad Bedouins of the Hula Valley in the Context of Syrian-Israeli Relations," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32:4 (2000): 511-530.

¹² Elisha Efrat, *The West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Geography of Occupation and Disengagement* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 78; Mayzel, *Golan Heights Campaign*, 127-151.

¹³ Sakr Abu Fakhr, "Voices from the Golan," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:4 (2000): 5-36; Davis, *The Golan Heights*, 2-3; 5, 12; Kipnis, *The Mountain*, 65, 73.

¹⁴ Harris, *Taking Root*, 59; Zisser, "Israel's Capture," 176; Segev, *1967*, 191-212.

population of the Golan Heights. From this perspective there is great resemblance in the tactics used in order to procure pacification in all territories that were occupied by Israel. Yet in the West Bank, Gaza and the Sinai the refugee numbers involved less than 25 per cent of the population; in the Golan Heights the desertion was almost total, encompassing between 100,000 to 130,000 residents who left their homes without any possibility of return. Only 6,400 residents remained and they were placed under the authority of a military government. Although Israel's professed desire to empty as much as possible of the occupied territories from its non-Jewish population, it could not employ a massive transfer of the almost one million Palestinian residents under the watchful eyes of the world. The Palestinian themselves, having suffered one national catastrophe in 1948 and with a long tradition of steadfastness have shown considerable resilience to most attempts.¹⁵ The Golan Heights's population on the other hand, had a core state to flee to and enjoyed the relative protection of the retreating Syrian military. Most of the forced exodus took place during the fighting and the Israeli policy mainly amounted to making sure that none would be allowed to return.¹⁶

Apart from this causality the intention of occupying the Golan Heights was more conspicuously shaped along the intent of fashioning a buffer zone rather than returning to a place which was considered as part of the Promised Land. This can be attested from a plan that was drafted in the early days of the occupation to turn the Golan Heights into a part of a puppet Druze state that would separate Israel from Syria and Lebanon under the aegis of the Israeli military,¹⁷ a tactic that was also contemplated during Israel's invasion into Lebanon. Schemes to "bufferize" the West Bank from Jordan existed and were partly fulfilled by the forced cleansing of the Jordan Valley but did not materialized in the West Bank due to the aforementioned resilience of the local population and the designation of the territory almost immediately as inseparable from Israel. Similar thoughts also prevailed in relation to other occupied territories that fell under Israel's control, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, although the Sinai was already quite vacant in relation to its vast territory breadth (almost triple the size of the entire Israeli state). Therefore the scheme to create a pacified border zone that was mainly performed in the Golan Heights resulted in a complete decline of its population.

This led to a somewhat unexpected result in the other territories occupied by Israel: the military government that was employed over a population of a million Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The governance of this considerably larger population was one of the main reasons for the failure of Israel to normalize the control over these territories.¹⁸ In the Golan Heights the local population amounted to no more than 6,500 people mainly from the Druze sect that was

¹⁵ William Harris "War and Settlement Change: The Golan Heights and the Jordan Rift," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series, Settlement and Conflict in the Mediterranean World* 3(3) (1978): 312-315; Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 103-136.

¹⁶ The major exception was the Druze population which was considered to be amiable and welcoming based on its minority behavior within Israel which was mostly cooperative and acknowledged state authority, Shimon Avivi, *The Copper Plate: Israel's Policy towards the Druz Sect, 1948-1967* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 2007) [in Hebrew].

¹⁷ Avivi, *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

considered as amiable to Israeli rule.

Therefore the Golan Heights became the occupied territory where the fortification of Israeli presence was implemented to the greatest extent. In comparison to the Palestinian occupied territories, the Golan Heights were now regarded as an undisturbed open landscape, ready to be explored. In the weeks that followed the war, several teams were sent to the Golan Heights in order to examine the potential embedded in the land. Civil engineers, veterinarians, botanists, agronomists, hydrologists, and land preservation experts went to the Golan Heights on a daily basis and toured it.¹⁹ In the absence of a large population that needed to be governed, Israel's control over the territory was manifested in the works of these seemingly apolitical, professional and scientific groups.

Alongside the work of these teams a systematic demolition of villages, farms and houses took place. Although executed by the military it was supervised by archeologists, architects and rural planners. Consequently, the space became "authenticated." Authentication here means that the borderland was considered as a space that has to be preserved as a cultural locus of exotic societies which the Israeli public can know (by tourist visits) and not for its geopolitical importance (Ram, forthcoming). These included schemes to establish "perseveration houses" in the Golan Heights, and to procure several abandoned settlements. During this course of action clear categories were determined: all structures were to be demolished with the exception of those having architectural, archeological or aesthetic significance.²⁰ The fear that Israel might relinquish its territorial conquests created a certain sense of emergency for the archeological surveys in all of the occupied territories. However, the Golan Heights and the Latrun enclave near Jerusalem were the only locations in which the process followed suite with what historian Aharon Shai designated as "documentation and destruction," meaning an inspection by archeologists which in turn decreed which villages would be spared and which would be demolished. By 1977 more than forty-four excavations were made and more than twenty ancient settlements were uncovered.²¹ The head of the archeological team in the Golan Heights was later appointed as a staff officer in the area's military government, attesting to the close relationship between the army and the various civil servants.²²

Importantly enough, the archeological survey within Israel was motivated by the fact that no

¹⁹ The budget for these teams was one million Israeli liras, yet the finance of the teams was disputed. Although the state was in charge of issuing them, half of the money came in fact from the settlement department of the Jewish agency. In some cases the state insisted that the official budget that was approved for military government was solely for the Druze population that remained. Donations by foreign governments were also allocated to the Druze but were transferred to buying products aimed at enhancing the productivity of the Druze farmers (such as tractors, ploughs, etc.). Israeli State Archive (ISA) Gal 4589/7.

²⁰ These three parameters are clearly stated in a report submitted to Israel's National Park Reserves Authority on September 19, 1968. ISA, Gal 8262/4.

²¹ Aharon Shai, "The Fate of Abandoned Arab Villages in Israel, 1965-1969," *History & Memory* 18:2 (2006): 101-102; for a survey see Epstein et al., *Yehudah, Shomron v'eha-Golan: Seker Arkhe'ologi bi-Shnat*, 1968 [Judea, Samaria and the Golan: Archaeological survey of 1968], (Jerusalem, 1972); for another report regarding the archeological inspection see ISA GAL 8255/3; By 1977 more than forty-four excavations were made and more than twenty ancient settlements were uncovered.

²² Letter, dated November 20, 1968, regarding the appointment of Dani Urman, the archeologist who supervised the Latrun demolition. ISA, Gal 8262/4.

act of demolition was legally possible before such a survey was conducted.²³ Yet in the Golan Heights, an occupied territory under martial law, this demand was perhaps more desirable rather than obligatory, in order to establish a law of norm. Therefore, the archeological survey in Golan Heights presents another junction point. While similar surveys were conducted in territories by Israel, only the one in the Golan Heights paralleled the efforts to erase the presence of former inhabitants as was done within Israel.²⁴

Watching over the Geo-body

Another way to inspect the role ascribed to the Golan Heights within Israel's geopolitical discourse is by assessing the (geo) politics of the gaze which became an important trope in the process whereby the Golan Heights was discussed as Israeli. A conspicuous element in the reasoning to occupy the Golan Heights was the question of the gaze, from the plateau and towards it, that acted as the reasoning for the occupation. The colonial gaze which rendered the Golan Heights as new open land can be discerned from Israel's then Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol who rejoiced in his first ascent to the plateau, exclaiming that the vast fields reminding him of the Ukraine from which he emigrated. The occupation of the Golan Heights was also articulated as presenting a present for the premier's wife by General David Elazar, the commander of Israel's northern front.²⁵

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, exemplified the view by which the Golan Heights was seen as a territory that differed in its importance from the other regions held by Israel. Following the war, Ben Gurion, now a private citizen yet a revered public figure, claimed that Israel should relinquish its control over all the territories it conquered with the exception of East Jerusalem. Shortly after that he was taken on a tour of the north. Upon return Ben Gurion had a change of heart. All the territories, he claimed, should be returned, *except* the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Three years later in a television interview, he explained his sudden change of heart:

I worked as an agricultural laborer for three years in the vicinity of the Golan Heights, yet for some reason I was never able to get there. I reached it on the seventh day of the Six Day War. My god, how did they [the Israeli settlements along the border] stay alive!? There is a situation whereby those who are sitting up there can do whatever they want with the people below, and the people who are below can do nothing in return.²⁶

Ben Gurion managed to capture the main motive through which the Golan Heights became a notable location for many Israelis: a well delimited border region that can be seen from afar as it

²³ Shai, "The Fate of Abandoned Arab Villages," 86.

²⁴ Ibid, 100-101.

²⁵ Segev, 1967, 574; Hanoch Bartov, *Daddo, Forty Eight Years and Twenty More Days* (Tel Aviv: Maariv Press, 1978) [in Hebrew].

²⁶ The Interview can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9CHPC_71e0, last accessed, March 1, 2012.

stands out physically and a “favored” location and an attractive site with a panoramic sight of potential danger. Yosef Weitz, a retired director of the Land and Forestation Department of the Jewish National Fund, an organization which played a key role in the acquiring of land for the Jewish pre-state political entity in mandatory Palestine, described after the 1967 War while standing next to the Syrian and Russian posts “we understood full well how important it is for the Golan Heights to be part of the country, for the security of the people, in the Hula Valley and Lake Tiberias.”²⁷

Indeed the securitization of the land has long been a primal strategy to control the territory, to pose land and to disenfranchise the population which was not conceived as an integral part of the Jewish majority.²⁸ Security thus became central in the rationalization discourse which occupied the actual occupation of the Golan Heights. This was also connected to the military conflict between Israel and Syria prior to the war in which each side used a considerable amount of violence in order to subdue the other. Remarkably enough, a growing body of knowledge which discusses this border conflict places a considerable weight on Israeli intentions to occupy the Golan Heights prior to the war both in order to provide a pacified border zone but also to accommodate expansionist policies of dominant political groups, mainly the labor, settling movements.²⁹

It was Mount Hermon, at the northern part of the Golan Heights that embodied the dual image of the Golan Heights as a place to expand to and a demarcation point for an enclosed border. Israel managed to occupy approximately 70 square kilometers of this mountain cluster during the very last stages of the June 1967 War. When the fighting abated, it was rapidly determined that the main potential for tourism in the Golan Heights was found in the Mount Hermon while most of the other territory was referred as no more than a “quite boring plateau with little attraction.”³⁰

It was the snow that became a major interest to the military and the civilian bodies who were entrusted with assessing the potential of the Golan Heights. As one of Israel’s Nature and Parks Authority’s officials explained to military commanders, snow made Mount Hermon “a unique site for the citizens of Israel” and an “exceptional treasure,” that cannot be found in any other place. A designated branch of the Authority, “the Hermon Authority,” was established. Placed under the military’s responsibility, it was composed of officials from the Ministry of Tourism, the Israel Land Administration, Israel’s Nature and Parks Authority, and from the World Zionist Organization’s Settlement Department. Its main roles were to regulate access to the mountain, to set a tariff for the public and to provide the desired conditions for private entrepreneurs to turn the mountain into a ski resort.³¹

State officials and military personal, who were accompanied by civilian volunteers from a newly established Israeli ski club, surveyed the site by aerial reconnaissance and hiking to determine

²⁷ Segev, 1967, 427.

²⁸ Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1983).

²⁹ Zisser, “Israel’s Capture.”

³⁰ A letter regarding the paving of a road to the military outpost on Mount Hermon, March 8, 1968. ISA Gal 11750/19.

³¹ Document entitled “Hermon Authority,” September 29, 1968, ISA, 2/8263.

which slopes were ideal for skiing. The military was also involved in various efforts oriented towards evaluating the duration of the ski season; assessing the capacity for traffic to the mountain; estimating the potential number of visitors; predicting climate conditions and amount of snow fall as well as determining where bases for winter sports centers could be situated. The road paved for the military outpost at the peak of Mount Hermon was also designated as the main access road for the Israelis who were expected to visit the ski resort, stressing the dual role of the mountain as an observation point and as a leisure attraction.

Whilst becoming an extremely popular location amongst thousands of Israelis, as it turned into Israel's only ski site, its importance as a strategic vantage point endured. In October 1973 Egypt and Syria managed to orchestrate a well-planned surprise attack on Israel. Mount Hermon became the paramount success of the Syrian invasion when it was recaptured from Israel. Only in the very last moments of the war, with considerable assistance from the United States, who provided an armament aerial train and diplomatic support, did Israel managed to regain control.

Immediately after the battle, an infantry soldier who participated in the fighting explained in a televised interview that for him and his comrades the mountain was as important as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem because it was "the eyes of the state," a phrase which became the main proverb through which the mountain, and the whole of the Golan Heights became known.³² It can be claimed that six years after it was "joined" to Israel, Mount Hermon and the Golan borderland had become regarded as vital organs of a national "geo-body."³³ "The eyes of the state" had literally embodied an Israeli geopolitical vision for the Golan Heights which was now sanctified as the place from which the nation holds a geostrategic gaze.

Geopolitical visions and knowledge are defined as "idea(s) concerning the relation between one's own and other places. Involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage,"³⁴ and can be produced as a form of an institutionalized strategic gaze. Tuathail claims that: "we can read...geopolitical knowledge production as a form of panopticonism, an institutionalized strategic gaze that examines, normalizes and judges states from a central observation point." The strategic gaze:

Simultaneously sites (i.e. places in a schema of global political space) and cites (i.e. summons before a court of knowledge and judgment) states. Its central point of observation and judgment is represented as detached and objective but its very functioning is dependent upon the naturalization of hegemonic ways of seeing, siting and citing.³⁵

³² The interview can be observed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsjyIGG8C7s> (in Hebrew), last accessed, March 2, 2013.

³³ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

³⁴ Gertjan Dijkink, *National Identity and Geopolitical Visions: Maps of Pride and Pain* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁵ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 264.

Here we can observe how the mountain was positioned in alignment to Israel's vision as being a western stronghold against the east. The idea that the Jewish state will serve as a buffer zone for western civilization against the encroachment of the east is deeply rooted in Zionism's ideological forefathers.³⁶ From this perspective the Golan Heights fitted into an aged discourse which places Israel as the geopolitical vanguard of western expansion eastward. The Golan Heights has become an important vantage point from which a geopolitical gaze is constantly maintained towards the east as a constant reassurance of potential danger and aspired might. This strategic vista locus providing a sight to danger from the east has also become a unique site of recreation (as a ski resort) that symbolizes an aspired European landscape and experience. It is important to clarify why and how the site came to be crafted as a distinct European locus. The distinct tendency of the professional planners entrusted with advancing the ski experience was oriented to Europe. Special advisors were invited from Switzerland and France. Building contracts were given to an Austrian contractor and enthusiastic entrepreneurs from North America showed genuine interest in the endeavor. Therefore, I do not suggest that it was as a European ski site because no other model existed but rather that it was crafted as a European site from a well professed desire to mimic a practice considered as "genuinely western."³⁷ This westernization also related to the way in which the Golan Heights, as an occupied territory, was normalized into the Israeli debate regarding the future of contested territories occupied by Israel.

The Only Normal Territory We Have Left

The future of the occupied territories controlled by Israel has become one of the most contested issues for its Jewish citizens. The occupied territories gained by Israel in the June 1967 War soon became the most controversial issue within Israeli society. The Israeli public became polarized over the question of whether these territories are indeed a symbol of divine intervention and proof of Zionism's manifested destiny or whether they are colonial enterprises destined to strip Israel from its morality.³⁸

Yet support for a continuing presence in the Golan Heights remains firm. In every public opinion poll since the 1970s, it has been regarded as an indispensable area, strongly favored by the public over the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, both of which Israel eventually relinquished, in 1982 and 2005 respectively.³⁹ Furthermore, out of all the territories occupied in the 1967 War, Israel applied its

³⁶ David Ohana, *The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canaanites nor Crusaders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁷ Moriel Ram, *The Eyes that Became a Gaze, Mount Hermon and its Place in the Israel's Geopolitical Discourse*. Masters Thesis submitted, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2009.

³⁸ Gorenberg, *Accidental Empire*; Zertal and Eldar, *Lords of the Land*.

³⁹ In 1974 a special poll conducted by Hebrew University found that 83% of the public supported the continuation of Israel's presence in the Golan Heights, while 74% approved of it in the Jordan Valley. The Sinai gained 69% of the public's support and Judea and Samaria received 62%. 86% thought that the government should finance the settlement of the Golan Heights while 66% supported a settlement scheme in Judea and Samaria. Israel Defense Force Archive, 492-1510-1989.

civilian law only in Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, in 1967 and 1981 respectively. In fact, most Israelis ranked the Golan Heights higher than the ancient biblical land of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and close to East Jerusalem. A poll conducted in 2008 found that about two-thirds of Israelis object to withdrawing from the Golan Heights even if by doing so peace with Syria would be achieved, a number greater than those who object to dividing Jerusalem.⁴⁰

Indeed it is remarkable that the Golan is regarded as being as valuable as Jerusalem, which is considered as being central not only to Israelis but also to Judaism in general. Yet recent polls reveal that in contrast to Jerusalem only 20.5% of Israeli Jews believe that the Golan Heights is a natural part of the national homeland. In fact most people felt that the military and strategic importance of the Golan Heights was the most significant attribute of the territory. When asked about the second most noteworthy reason to retain the Golan Heights, more people rated tourism, agricultural and industrial value ahead of national significance.⁴¹ In this regard Israeli writer Meir Shalev draws an interesting comparison between the territories in question:

The holy sites of the West Bank represent today the pinnacles of lunacy, evilness and stupidity and Jerusalem is becoming the asylum in which all of us eventually will be committed...The Golan, on the other hand, is the only normal territory we have left. It has no holy tombs, sites of religious frenzy or a large downtrodden and rebellious population.⁴²

I would like to stress three assumptions that can be discerned from Shalev's somewhat sarcastic words. The first assumption is that the territories Israel occupied in the 1967 War can be juxtaposed in order to assess assumed differences between them. The second is that the differences are found in variance from normality, and the third is that this normalcy has come to be evaluated in terms of the religious significance of the territory in question. More specifically, the fact that the Golan Heights seemingly lacks the theological, even messianic, aspects of the West Bank makes it, in Shalev's eyes, "normal."

In the words of Shlomo Gazit, the first Coordinator for Government Activities in the Occupied Territories, the June 1967 War enabled the capturing of symbols with "traditional, emotional and religious value and meaning for every Jew." "If that were not enough," Gazit continues, "places of utmost strategic importance, including Al-Arish...Gaza and the Golan Heights" were also occupied.⁴³ Moshe Dayan, Israel's security minister during the war, and Gazit's direct superior also shared this view, regarding the Golan Heights as precious, "but not like the cradle of our days."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Lily Galili, "Poll: More Israelis Object to Golan Accord than to Jerusalem Deal," *Ha'aretz*, May 22, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/poll-more-israelis-object-to-golan-accord-than-to-jerusalem-deal-1.246296>, last accessed, February 22, 2012.

⁴¹ See the "Peace Index" at http://www.peaceindex.org/files/peaceindex2008_5_9.pdf, last accessed June 29, 2012.

⁴² Meir Shalev, "My World Is as Narrow as a Merkava Tank," *Yediot Achronot*, September, 16, 1994.

⁴³ Shlomo Gazit, *Trapped Fools: Thirty Years of Israeli Policy in the Territories* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 6.

⁴⁴ Pedhatzur, *Triumph of Embarrassment*, 173 [in Hebrew].

These views attest to the distinction that was shaping between the Golan Heights and the West Bank. While the latter was more naturally included to the national territorial imagination the former was excluded as a threatening dangerous place. That the Golan Heights is perceived to be more Israeli because it is seemingly non-theological is intriguing. As a national ideology Zionism is based on a perspective in which the bond between the people and the territory is theological in nature.⁴⁵ Yet the Golan Heights was less integrated within the discourse of a natural “return” to a promised land and instead was perceived as an exterior area whose possession is imperative to the territorial integrity of the state.⁴⁶ In fact, the strategic factor led to the settling of the Golan which gained primary importance during the first decade following the June 1967 War because of that reason. Between 1967 and 1977, Israel established a total of 81 settlements in the territories it occupied, with 34 of them established across the West Bank, mainly in the Jordan Valley, and 24 in the Golan Heights – an area half the size of the West Bank.⁴⁷

Some felt that the Israeli government’s investment in the Golan Heights impeded the task of settling the West Bank. “We believe that Shechem [i.e., Nablus] and the Golan have the same value” complained one group in July 1969 in order to achieve governmental consent to establish a settlement near Nablus. “Just as the Golan is being settled, so it is a holy right [sic] to ascend and to settle Mount Shechem.”⁴⁸ This somewhat anecdotal grievance emphasized a central point of contention regarding Israel’s efforts to settle the Occupied Territories. While clashes between “Gush Emunim” (“The Block of the Faithful”) – a political movement with a messianic ideology that staunchly supported Jewish settlement of Palestinian Occupied Territories – and the government became the cornerstone of an ongoing debate, the settlers of the Golan Heights as well as the movements that supported them were considered by Israeli standards as being far more consensual.

Even more so, the importance of the Golan Heights as a secured buffer zone increased after the 1973 October War. The death toll, the somewhat mythical commemoration of a defeat and the distinct geo-strategic virtues, made the religious motivation for holding the area (as opposed to the territories of the West Bank), fairly redundant. It is notable that the infantry soldier who called the mountain “the eyes of the nation” explained that for him, as well as his comrades that Mount Hermon became as important as the Wailing Wall.

Yet, despite the favorable way in which the Golan Heights is perceived, its settlement efforts were not successful. By 1977 the Golan Heights was settled by 3,850 settlers and in the next ten years the Jewish population increased only to 9,600.⁴⁹ By then the West Bank was rapidly becoming the main target for Israel’s colonization efforts. Today, instead of an estimated 50,000 settlers, only

⁴⁵ David Newman, “Citizenship, Identity and Location,”; David Ohana, *Political Theologies in the Holy Land: Israeli Messianism and Its Critics* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁶ Yet according to some the Golan Heights could have been regarded as part of the ancient Israelite Kingdom. Some “whole land of Israel” supporters viewed the region as part of the historic domain of Eretz Israel, because it had intermittently come under Jewish control in biblical and Hashmonean times, Harris, *Taking Root*, 60.

⁴⁷ Kipnis, *The Mountain*, 177.

⁴⁸ Open ad published in the Israeli newspaper *Davar*, July, 13, 1969.

⁴⁹ Harris, *Taking Root*, 72.

20,000 people reside in 31 settlements in the Golan Heights.⁵⁰ In contrast more than 500,000 Jewish settlers now reside in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The main reason for the difference stems from the fact that the Golan Heights is indeed a border region, at a considerable distance from the coastal plain and the main population clusters. The vicinity of the Golan Heights together with its official designation as a rural area has curtailed the population expansion efforts. Most of the West Bank settlements in comparison are no more than a half-hour drive from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, attracting a considerable population of lower middle-class Israelis who are interested in low cost housing projects as well as considerable numbers of ultra-orthodox Jews who are one of Israel's most rapidly expanding sectors.⁵¹

The geographic distance which has had a decisive effect on the colonization of the Golan Heights has led to an interesting dynamic through which the area's "Israeliness" is ascribed. For while Israelis do not move to the Golan en masse they certainly visit it (between 1.5 to 3 million every year) and the practice of visiting together with the minimal presence of Israelis in the Golan Heights are rationalized through a discourse which strives to shun religious attributes and instead focuses on ecology and quality of life. An example of this rationalization can be discerned from an advertisement from 2001, a time in which Israel was engulfed in a brutal conflict with the Palestinians that invited Israelis to leave everything behind and to travel to the Golan Heights:

The Golan – the most European that it ever gets.

This winter you are going on a European holiday – leave your passport at home. Winter is the time to return to everything you love in Golan. To travel between the huge basalt rocks, meeting a surprised herd of deer by chance; and then there is the water – storming cascades that flow through hidden streams. The Golan is filled with water, flowers and silence. Yes, Israeli silence, without any disturbances.⁵²

We can see here the inherent contradiction whereby Israeli silence can only be achieved through having imagined European attributes. The Golan Heights is transformed into an area which is Israeli because it is foreign; because it enables Israelis to leave their passports at home and travel through a landscape that supposedly enables them to leave the borders of the state. Thus paradoxically, its Israeli nature is stressed as a space which is distinguished from the rest of the Israeli territory.⁵³ By creating the Golan Heights as a foreign space a contradictory border act becomes

⁵⁰ According to another account, in 1983 4,772 of a total 21,062 settlers were located in the Golan Heights. 14,838 resided at the time in the West bank, while 1,196 settled in the Jordan Valley and 256 in the Gaza Strip. In 1983, the Golan Heights had the second largest settler population in the occupied territories but only about 4,772 of a total 21,062 settlers. 14,838 resided at the time in the West Bank, while 1,196 settled in the Jordan Valley and 256 in the Gaza Strip. Kipnis, *The Mountain*, 188-190, 262-263; Gorenberg, *Accidental Empire*, 195.

⁵¹ Newman, "Social and Political Factors."

⁵² Tourist ad published in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, January 12, 2001.

⁵³ This claim posits an intriguing question in regards to a central debate within Israeli society that relates to the identity politics of immigrants who emigrated from Middle Eastern and North African countries and have been marginalized in Israeli society as their perceived identity, whether spatial or other, did not correlate with the

evident. Not just a confining boundary but paradoxically enough, a contested space which now becomes the only space in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict becomes marginal and a region which functions in a different political and social landscape. From this perspective the Golan Heights serves as a liminal space which possesses dual and conflicting designations. From the one hand an ultimate site for leisure and attraction that its features may resemble a landscape that is conceived as “western” (as a socially constructed notion) and from the other, a place that draws its legitimization to remain in Israeli hands from its cognitive construction as a conspicuous battleground located deep inside occupied enemy territory.

The liminal “normality” of the Golan Heights can also be discussed through the perspective of one of the attempts to solve the territorial dispute between Israel and Syria by designing a peace park inside the Golan Heights. This offer, which received considerable attention from some Israeli and U.S. policy makers, included the return of the territory to Syria along with complete demilitarization and the construction of “an area designated for research and production of renewable energy along with the development of a series of tourist-oriented activities and industries” on almost one third of the territory. The Golan Heights would then become openly accessible for Israelis to travel freely within “a land to which two and a half generations of Israelis have dedicated love, toil and creative energies.”⁵⁴ Although commendable for the effort to promote a peace plan, a critical introspection into the project reveals the problematic supposition of the Golan Heights as a space which is cleansed, free and unpopulated. These characteristics were created only after its occupation, inspired by the drive to shape the border as a buffer zone and led to it becoming a site for recreation.

One foreign reporter recently observed that the attractive scenery of the Golan Heights is “designed to appeal to Israeli yuppies by emphasizing cowboy hats over skullcaps.”⁵⁵ The Golan Heights becomes “Israeli” by the important distinctions that are envisioned between holy landscapes of the West Bank and the “normal” characteristics of the Golan Heights, i.e. a space which is purified not only from a threatening enemy but also from populations which are regarded by mainstream Israelis as being extreme. As a leading member of the Golan Heights regional council strategic team explained, “We don’t have to deal here with problematic sectors of Israeli society such as ultraorthodox Jews and [Israeli] Arabs.”⁵⁶

The success of the Golan Heights in being regarded as “normal” is also noticeable in the

normative drive to construct, perform and act in a particular “European” fashion. The way in which the Golan Heights was shaped as “Israeli,” a problematic definition at best, raises intriguing questions in regard to the location of such immigrants known in Israel as “Mizrahi” (Easterner) in the complex story of the Golan Heights forced transformation into a non-threatening locus. However, it is impossible to address these issues within the scope of this article.

⁵⁴ Yehuda Greenfield Gilat, *A Renewable Energy Peace Park in the Golan as a Framework to an Israeli-Syrian Agreement* (Washington: United State Institute for Peace, 2009).

⁵⁵ Scott Wilson, “Golan Heights Land, Lifestyle Lure Settlers,” *Washington Post Foreign Service Monday*, October 30, 2006.

⁵⁶ Interview with Yehuda Harel, April 28, 2011. Harel was also one of the first settlers arriving to the Golan Heights and became a conspicuous figure that represented the Golan’s settler community, even becoming a member of the Israeli parliament in the 1990s.

words of a young Israeli entrepreneur from an illegal outpost in the West Bank:

The Golan Heights became part of the Israeli consensus because people came and vacationed and saw that it was good, lovely [and] fun, and that it would be a shame to give it to the Arabs. The same thing could happen in Samaria... I don't talk about the land of our forefathers and ideology. I want people to come here, to love the views and to become unwilling to give them up.⁵⁷

The desire for the West Bank to become regarded in the same way as the Golan Heights was apparent in the latest government funded "explaining Israel" campaign. Besides stressing the meta-historical identity of the West Bank, a special importance is given to the West Bank being the most efficient tank barrier in the region which makes it: "The 'Golan Heights' of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Israel's coastal plain."⁵⁸ Thus the Golan Heights has become, both as a geostrategic asset and as an attractive destination, the normal alternative to which the West Bank is being compared. Normality in this case is articulated as a secular version of the West Bank. It is designed as a certain spatiality which is not religious in nature and combines the most conspicuous elements of the professed Israeli desire to be geopolitically affiliated with Europe or North America. The Golan Heights, in other words, becomes a borderline of secular space which is distinguished by its remoteness, its wilderness and its strategic importance.

Discussion

The main importance attributed to the occupation of the Golan Heights is related to its position as a boundary, whether it is as a buffer zone or as a remote location. As a closed border region the Golan maintains its importance to the core state that incorporates it and controls it. This continuing importance to the state attests to the remaining significance of borders and the various functions they are able to fulfill, even in a borderless world. In this case even when it is unable to serve as a site for passage and negotiation, the border was transformed into a well delimited frontier with advantages that exceeded the initial reasoning behind its conquest.

The process through which the Golan Heights was incorporated into Israel transcended the mere legal and political aspects of controlling a region under the rules of belligerent occupation and enables a discussion regarding the normalization process of contested territories. In this case the idea of "normal" came to reflect the basic themes and contradictions that characterize space formation within Israel.⁵⁹

The drive to envisage a foreign space with European characteristics; the dilemmas and

⁵⁷ Karni Eldad, "Settlers Set Up West Bank Tourism Ventures," *Haaretz*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/settlers-set-up-west-bank-tourism-ventures-1.284619>, last accessed June 19, 2012.

⁵⁸ Can be accessed from http://masbirim.gov.il/i_ayosh.html, last accessed June 19, 2012.

⁵⁹ Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2006); Erez Tzafadia and Haim Yacobi, *Rethinking Israeli Space, Periphery and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2012).

problems that the armed conflict has created; the questions regarding the future of the territories which are under occupation and the theological discourse which any attempt to articulate a claim for the land must address, whether by adaption or avoidance, are all remarkable in this case. All can be discussed through the investigation of the Golan Heights which has so far not received proper attention as an empiric test case.

In this point I would like to stress a notable landmark which came to be manifested as a central aspect of the process in which the Golan Heights became Israeli: the (geo) politics of the gaze. Being an elevated plateau meant that the desire to control the Golan Heights became entwined with a profess desire to observe in order to deter and to warn. The notion of the gaze, together with the remoteness of the territory from Israel's central regions, its delimited nature as a well demarked border and of course its contested status places any attempt to reshape the territory in an interesting ambivalence: a contested border region which is important because it poses a threat to its ability to observe and not because it is part of the biblical promised land. The foreign attributes of the Golan Heights make it an attractive landscape, but they also make it a detachable land from the national territory. The Golan Heights plays a quintessential role in the Zionist aspiration to become a part of a "normal" Europe, but it is also a major iconic landmark in the regional conflict between Israel and Syria. Thus, it juxtaposes two geopolitical imaginations that epitomize a contradiction between two subjective and constructed geopolitical imaginations. In the first role, the Golan Heights is construed as a contested territory, which became a borderland of a regional conflict. In the second role, it transforms into a foreign resort, one that was purified from elements considered hostile and threatening and now conceived "as the only normal territory, Israelis are left with."