Golan Heights: New flashpoint in Syria war?

Following clashes at the Quneitra crossing in the Golan Heights, Syrian residents say they fear a spillover of violence.

Patrick Strickland / Sep. 14, 2014

Quneitra crossing, occupied Golan Heights - In this area of Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Salman Fakheraldeen stood atop an empty military bunker and watched from afar as a battle raged between Syrian government military forces and anti-regime rebel fighters on the other side of a demarcation barrier.

"We have been hearing the bombing and the fighting for the last three years," said Fakheraldeen, a researcher at local human rights group, al-Marsad, on September 6. "But the last three weeks have been surreal. It has been constant. The fighting has never been this close [to the Golan Heights]."

A largely unarmed uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government broke out in March 2011, yet it wasn't long before the conflict spiralled into sectarian violence. The United Nations' latest estimates place the death toll at more than 191,000 people.

Born and raised in the nearby village of Majdal Shams, Fakheraldeen is one of the estimated 20,000 Syrians living in the 70 percent of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel during the 1967 war. Israel announced its annexation of the territory in 1981, but the international community and local Syrian residents reject this claim. The vast majority of Syrians in the Golan also turned down offers of Israeli citizenship, and instead, hold Israeli-issued travel documents.

Today, about 21,000 Israelis also live in dozens of state-subsidised settlements dotted throughout the mountainous terrain, located in the southwestern part of Syria.

"That hill over there and the far village are the last parts still under the [Syrian] regime's control," Fakheraldeen told Al Jazeera, gesturing into the distance as the sound of shelling rang out. Peering through binoculars, he was unfazed by the bright flashes, distant smoke pillars, and steady thudding of bombs.

Rebel forces, including fighters from the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, exhausted the Syrian military in much of the 30 percent of the Golan Heights that remains under Syrian control last week. The opposition fighters took charge of the Quneitra crossing between the zones under Israeli and Syrian control.

At least 44 United Nations peacekeeping soldiers were taken captive by Jabhat al-Nusra, and several dozen more were forced to flee their posts on August 29. More than 70 Filipino UN soldiers were later surrounded by Syrian rebels, but were able to flee to safety after a seven-hour gun battle.

The Philippines has decided to end its peacekeeping mission in the area. Irish soldiers narrowly escaped capture, according to Irish media reports, and Ireland is said to be re-evaluating its involvement in the UN peacekeeping forces in the Golan, which have manned the area since 1974. "We don't want to see Irish troops or the UN contingent being drawn into a Syrian civil war," Irish Foreign Minister Charlie Flanagan said.

While under the rule of President Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father and predecessor, Syria faced off in two wars against Israel, in 1967 and 1973. Negotiations between the two countries over control of the Golan Heights failed in January 2000 and have not been revived.

Sakher al-Makadhi, a British-Arab journalist and Syria analyst, explained that much of the regime's legitimacy depends on its grasp on the part of the Golan Heights still under Syrian control. Taking the area back from Israel as a result of US-brokered negotiations in 1974 "was a huge victory for Hafez al-Assad", al-Makadhi told Al Jazeera.

"Likewise, Syria's identity as a resistance state comes from the continued Israeli occupation of the rest of the Golan," he added. "For Jabhat al-Nusra to take the sliver of land that Assad won back undermines the very core of the regime."

Both the Israeli prime minister's office and the military spokesperson declined Al Jazeera's requests for comment. On September 1, however, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a US congressional delegation in Israel that the government was "closely following the events on the Golan Heights".

Dr. **Benedetta Berti**, a security analyst and research fellow at the Tel Aviv-based **Institute for National Security Studies**, said Israel would likely continue small scale operations on the Syrian side in response to mortar shelling and other cross-border violence. "But I think a larger military involvement on the Syrian side of the demarcation border against rebel groups is not an especially likely - or let alone desirable - option at the moment," she told Al Jazeera.

Israel is likely "to stick to its [present] Syria policy, which involves containing the threat by beefing up the border and by monitoring changes on the ground while seeking to avoid being dragged into the civil war", **Berti** added.

Since the fighting began in Syria, Israel has bombed the Syrian military positions several times. In June, Israel reportedly struck nine military positions after a rocket from Syria hit an Israeli government vehicle in the Golan Heights and killed a teenage boy.

"The fall of Quneitra is a significant defeat for the regime, as it was the last stronghold in the Golan," Carl Yonker, a researcher at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center, told Al Jazeera. "That said, losing Quneitra doesn't pose a threat to the survival of Assad's regime."

Despite the long-standing conflict, Yonker added that under Assad's rule, Israel enjoyed a "status quo that no longer exists" with Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel forces on the border. "The situation is of great concern to Israeli military and political leaders," he said. "Assad's regime is not a good option [for Israel], but it is better than having an al-Qaeda affiliated group or even possibly the Islamic State right on Israel's border."

Yet, it is not just the regional political power balance that is affected by the fighting on Syria's border, as local Golan Heights residents also feel the impact of the war. While residents are divided between supporting the Assad regime in Damascus and the opposition, many said they are united against groups like the Islamic State group and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Nazem Khatar, 64, is an apple farmer and retired school teacher from Majdal Shams. Walking through his field filling a burlap sack with apples, for which the Golan Heights is famous, he recalled a time when Syrians weren't as divided.

"When I was in high school in Qunietra in the early 1960s, we were in the same classes - Sunnis, Shias, Druze, Christians, and Kurds," he told Al Jazeera. "We were comfortable and happy together. My parents used to leave the house unlocked so neighbours could borrow things if they needed."

The daily sound of bombing "hurts my heart very much", Khatar added. "I want to stand there with my people and my President Bashar al-Assad because Islamic State terrorists are trying to destroy the country."

His brother Ahmed, however, supports the uprising against Assad. "But what's happening now is benefitting only Israel and western countries that have an interest in seeing the region divided," Ahmed told Al Jazeera. "The Assad regime was always good for Israel because it never challenged the occupation. The Islamic State is [Assad and Israel's] handiwork."

Shehadeh Nasrallah, 48, an agricultural engineer, said the largest concern for Syrians in the Golan Heights is the safety of their relatives and friends back in Syria. "There isn't a

home in the Golan that doesn't have relatives in Syria. We're all connected to this issue," he said, adding that he calls his two sisters in Damascus at least once daily.

Across town, five men sat in a circle, chain smoking, sipping coffee, and talking about the rise of the Islamic State group in Syria. "Every single development in Syria scares us," said Abu Firas, a 57-year-old former travel agent who didn't give Al Jazeera his full name. "We are very scared of what will happen in the future to our people, as well as the students from here that are in Syria right now."

Dozens of students from the Golan Heights are studying at Damascus University and other Syrian academic institutions. "Now that Jabhat al-Nusra is at the crossing, we don't know how they'll be able to return," Abu Firas said.

Meanwhile, Nasrallah said many locals are trying their best to completely avoid discussing the Syria violence. "Everyone worries that the Assad regime or the Islamic State will punish our relatives if we speak out. I am fearful that the killing in Syria won't stop for another 15 years."

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