

## THE SINAI PENINSULA AND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS: THEIR POLITICAL, GEOGRAPHIC, AND SECURITY VALUE, AND CRUCIALITY TO ISRAELI SECURITY

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**Abstract:** The Sinai Peninsula remains a vital security, strategic, and political focus of Israel. In addition to the Palestinian population residing there is Hamas, an Iran-backed militant group that actively commits acts of terror. Since 1979 and the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, peace returned to the peninsula after decades of conflict between the two nations over this territory; and since 2015, Israel has conducted air strikes in conjunction with Egypt against elements of the Islamic State in the Sinai. The Golan Heights remains of contemporary relevance for Israeli security, strategy, and politics. Seized by Israel from Syria in the closing stages of the 1967 Six-Day War, the territory is an important buffer zone against the terrorist group Hezbollah. Additionally, its relevance is daily displayed in the direction and consequences of the ongoing Syrian civil war, and recognition of the Golan Heights as under Israeli sovereignty by the Trump Administration in March 2019. The following paper is a case study of these two geographic areas and how both hold political, security and geographic value for Israel, offering justification for Israeli strategic and security actions within each.

### Introduction

In the contemporary discussion on issues of political and physical security in the Middle East, the State of Israel is one of the key players in the region. Since it proclaimed statehood on 14 May 1948, Israel has fought a series of wars against neighboring Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. It has also, over the past thirty-five years, various interactions of a limited scope with the Palestinians, which have resulted in ongoing disputes over territory and the status of refugees.<sup>1</sup> One constant variable in these conflicts with Egypt, Syria and the Palestinians has been territorial disputes over the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights, which are directly linked to Israeli politics and its national security.

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<sup>1</sup> Elath 2019.

These two cases of territorial disputes are analyzed because they represent vital interests of the Israeli state, signifying the need for constant attention by Israeli policymakers. Regarding the Sinai Peninsula, it is important to note that it was occupied by Israeli forces during the Six-Day War of June 1967 but was returned to Egypt in 1982 under the terms of the peace treaty known as the Camp David Accords, signed between the two in 1979. However, the strip of land connected to the Gaza Belt known as the Gaza Strip is home to a significant Palestinian population and Hamas, an Iran-backed militant group. The Sinai Peninsula remains a vital security, strategic and a political focus of Israel. To emphasize that point, since 2015 Israel has conducted strikes in conjunction with Egypt against elements of the Islamic State in the Sinai no fewer than one hundred times.<sup>2</sup> The Camp David Accords, which created peace in the Sinai region and cooperation between Israel and Egypt, remain a remarkable and important event in the Middle East, and indeed international politics.<sup>3</sup> However, while the peace resulting in the Sinai has been hard won, Gaza remains a threat to Israel, as does the Golan Heights.

The territory of the Golan Heights was seized by Israel from Syria in the closing stages of the 1967 Six-Day War, and it is disputed between Syria and Israel to this day. While Syria wants to secure the return of the Golan Heights as part of any peace deal, it is within the national security interests of Israel to maintain the Golan as a buffer zone between the two nations. The Golan Heights has been used by Hezbollah terrorists to launch attacks against Israel. Additionally, the Golan, under Israeli control since 1967, was in March 2019 recognized by the Trump Administration to be under the direct sovereignty of Israel<sup>4</sup> despite continued non-recognition from the rest of the international community. The national security interests of Israel in both the Sinai and Golan provide a starting point for further investigation, and this forms the basis of the research question: Do both the Sinai and the Golan Heights remain national security interests of Israel? To answer this a clear hypothesis is formed: Israel has conducted methodical foreign policy in reference to the historical, political, security and geographic value the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights provide, in order to preserve its vital interests, due to the inherent instability of the Middle East.

The following paper – while being in the discipline of history is not a typical piece for publication in *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* – elaborates through historical review the significance of political, security and geographic value, thereby enhancing interdisciplinary contributions to political science and security studies.

The analysis is divided into two case studies. Finally, the vital importance of the two areas for the security for the State of Israel will be shown, offering neither elaboration of nor justification for Israeli actions within the two territories, but instead understanding and explanation for political action.

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<sup>2</sup> Turjeman 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Telhami 2008: 32.

<sup>4</sup> Lubell 2019.

## 1. Analysis – The Sinai Peninsula

### 1.1. Geographical significance of the Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai Peninsula is a triangular peninsula linking Africa with Asia, occupying an area of 61,000 square kilometers. Since ancient times, the Sinai has served as a buffer separating Egypt from the peoples living to the east. This duality of the Sinai Peninsula, as both connecting and separating, has gained importance in the contemporary state of affairs, seeing as it draws a clear line for the region's majority Bedouin population, which shares closer historical and cultural ties to the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula than to the Egyptian mainland.<sup>5</sup>

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) captured the Sinai Peninsula during the Six-Day War in 1967. Separated from the Eastern Desert of Egypt by the Suez Canal, its significance as the boundary between two continents provided the Israelis, at the time surrounded by enemies, with significant strategic depth as well as negotiating power.<sup>6</sup> This strategic value was capitalized on in the Camp David Accords of 1978, which guaranteed the demilitarization of Sinai, leaving it as a buffer zone between Egypt and the Israeli interior.<sup>7</sup> The agreement stipulated the limiting of the presence of the Egyptian military in the peninsula. This unfolding of events limited the possibility of a repeated Egypt-Israel military standoff and paved the way for further political cooperation, easing Israel's position in the Middle East. Of note to the demilitarization of the Sinai is the fact that it secures Israel's port in the Gulf of Aqaba, which gives Israel its only outlet to the Red Sea.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the Sinai Peninsula represents a vital strategic interest for Egypt and its economic and security concerns on its eastern border. Spanning 6 percent of the country's territory and containing a long border with Israel of over 200 kilometers, the Sinai's strategic geographical importance lies in its overseeing of the Suez Canal, one of the most important waterways for international trade,<sup>9</sup> as more than 8 percent of global trade passes through the canal annually, including three percent of global oil supplies.<sup>10</sup> Besides the trade importance of the peninsula, its resources are of considerable economic importance. The Sinai Peninsula represents the main source of Egypt's mineral wealth, with several major oil wells having been found in the peninsula's western region.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the mineral resources of the Sinai, it also holds a significant area of cultivable land, which produces around 160,000 tonnes of fruit and around 70,000 bushels of grain annually.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the value of the Sinai Peninsula as a geographical buffer zone, a well of income from oil and minerals, farmlands, as well as a massive trade route, remains clear both for Israel and Egypt.

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<sup>5</sup> Laub 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Turjeman 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Laub 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Laub 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Sabry 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

## 1.2. Security value of the Sinai Peninsula

Between 1956 and 1973, Egypt and Israel fought three major wars over the Sinai Peninsula. The 1978 Camp David Accords, and the Egypt-Israel Peace treaty signed the following year, established the peninsula as a buffer zone between the two.<sup>13</sup> Now, four decades since the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli treaty which created a buffer zone to build trust and ensure peace, the buffer zone has transformed into a significant resurgent area of transnational crime and Islamist militancy,<sup>14</sup> affecting the security of the State of Israel and its citizens.

The roots of the resurgence of such activity in the Sinai date back to the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982, as foreseen under the Camp David Accords.<sup>15</sup> For over thirty years, in fact, unfair Egyptian security and social policies, worsening living conditions and complex relations between the Cairo government and local populations have made the peninsula more akin to a borderland rather than an integrated part of Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Such policies were mostly concentrated on the local Bedouin population in the north. Furthermore, the sparsely populated south of the Sinai saw tourism and energy development projects, whilst the north received almost no investment.<sup>17</sup> This has resulted in militant groups having a strong presence in the Sinai for decades, because of the alternatives to the central government in Cairo they offered to the disenfranchised people.

Various attacks have occurred, mostly on security personnel, but since the ouster of the autocratic President Hosni Mubarak in the 2011 Arab Spring and his replacement with Mohamed Morsi, militants have stepped up the frequency and intensity of the attacks.<sup>18</sup> The most prominent diplomatic issue stemming from this occurred on 18 August 2011, when Salafi Jihadists crossed the international border from the Sinai Peninsula and attacked an Israeli bus. Eight Salafi Jihadists were killed when the Israel Defense Forces engaged them in combat. The incident occurred when the IDF, during the pursuit of the terrorists and subsequent engagement, shot and killed several Egyptian border guards.<sup>19</sup> The political effects of this shall be discussed in a subsequent section of this paper. The point is to highlight that these attacks were not the first instance of terrorism stemming from the Sinai. Frequent bombings of expensive resorts in the south of the Sinai Peninsula occurred in years 2004–2006, Egyptian forces came increasingly under attack from the local Bedouin population, and Israeli citizens were warned against traveling to the region due to increased concerns of kidnapping.<sup>20</sup>

Besides these obvious security issues, where do Israeli interests in the Sinai Peninsula actually lie? First, militants in the Sinai Peninsula pose a direct threat towards Israeli citizens, as evidenced by the attack on the bus as well as by a directed suicide attack on

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<sup>13</sup> Gold 2013: 3.

<sup>14</sup> Laub 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Dentice 2018: 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Sabry 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Gold 2013: 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.

the Israeli city of Eilat from Egyptian territory in 2007.<sup>21</sup> Second, there is a strong correspondence between the highly prolific activities of Hamas in the Gaza strip and the militants present in the Sinai. This requires extensive cooperation between Israel and Egypt and has resulted in cooperation in fighting against smuggling, armaments, as well as obtaining supplies both for the needs of the local population as well as terrorist activities.

Accordingly, after the replacement of Morsi as President of Egypt in 2013, under the new President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi the Egyptian army launched a massive military operation against Sinai-based militants. Moreover in January 2015, the Egyptian government set up a 1,000-kilometer buffer zone along the border of Sinai and the Gaza Strip in order to curb militant cooperation, which is conducted by complex networks of tunnels that run under the border with Gaza and are used to smuggle weapons into Egypt.<sup>22</sup> Since this cooperation between militants directly endangers the State of Israel and its citizens, Israel is working with Egypt to solve this security threat.

By ensuring that the Sinai Peninsula does not serve as a threat to its territory, political and security leaders of the Israeli government generally voice approval of Egyptian efforts to maintain control in the area. In part, this is because Egyptian and Israeli security and intelligence cooperation are currently stronger than they have ever been, and some would even go as far as to call them interdependent on each other for successful operations.<sup>23</sup> The sharing of Egyptian and Israeli intelligence enables them to stop most attempts at heavy terrorist attacks. An example of this are the rocket attacks against Eilat<sup>24</sup> – while border incidents such as the one in 2011 saw Israel trespassing over international borders with its military, which violates Egyptian sovereignty, potentially causing another diplomatic incident, it has not. However, while rockets do pose a serious threat, for Israeli policy makers a return to a state of war with Egypt is far graver. Because of this, Israeli leaders praise Egyptian leaders for their cooperation and they themselves strive towards maintaining good relations with Egypt.<sup>25</sup> This affirms the fact that Israeli-Egyptian major interests to secure that part of the border via extended cooperation against militants in Egypt, solidifies the ruling governments in both nations. The connection of the militants in the Sinai Peninsula with Hamas in the Gaza Strip also serves to showcase the way radical Islam shapes people against varying societies in the Middle East, but in a highly destructive manner against the State of Israel.

### *1.3. Political importance of the Sinai Peninsula*

The combined geographical and security value of the Sinai Peninsula cannot serve Israel well if it is not safeguarded in a political manner. Accordingly, with the evolution of the political state in Egypt, the removal of Morsi and the subsequent rise of the Sisi government, Israel has found itself in a situation where it has to lend increased support to its Egyptian political contemporaries. Israeli policymakers and policy experts have watched with concern the deteriorating security situation in the Sinai Peninsula and have therefore

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Sabry 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Gold 2013: 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

supported the above-mentioned military operations conducted by the Egyptian government.<sup>26</sup> From this, it can be concluded that the Egyptian campaigns in the Sinai Peninsula are extremely significant to Israel due to their political and operational nature.

In recent years, Israel has sought to facilitate this objective by agreeing to temporary modifications of the Camp David security arrangements, which requires significant goodwill from both parties. Since 2012, the government in Cairo has repeatedly asked for permission to deploy large-scale armed forces in the peninsula, and Israel has generally assented, granting extensions to these treaty exceptions as needed.<sup>27</sup> These developments show that both Israel and Egypt are willing to cooperate and to grant political concessions to each other in order to further their aims against combating militants. This increase also finds its reasoning behind the looming presence of the Islamic State as a third political actor between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula. Despite the losses the Islamic State has suffered in the Middle East in recent developments, it has not receded in influence nor in control of resources within the Sinai, and as such, remains a vital political and military enemy which Israel rallies against.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the political cooperation of Israel and Egypt not only benefits Israel and Israeli interests but guarantees continued peace between the two.

Furthermore, because Egypt requires assistance it can accordingly be said that Israel is acting as a major facilitator of positive dialogue between the United States, who is a major contributor to security in the Middle East, and Egypt.<sup>29</sup> This is very important for Egypt because the Camp David Accords reduced the chance of war between them. As a result, Egypt regained control of the Sinai, but was expelled from the Arab League and lost economic aid from Arab states,<sup>30</sup> a heavy price at that time.

The scope of political cooperation between Egypt and Israel, albeit very broad, remains unsurprisingly fragile. One case in point is the above-mentioned pursuit of militants from Israel to Egypt, which resulted in the deaths of Egyptian border guards. It culminated in such public outrage in Cairo that protesters forcefully entered the Israeli embassy and pillaged it, with Egyptian special forces rescuing Israeli staff.<sup>31</sup> That incident barely avoided evolving into a full-fledged conflict and it solidified fears that a disruption of the Camp David Accords is a real possibility, despite the forty years of peace and cooperation it had provided beforehand.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that should this balance between Israel and Egypt, which has thus far kept the Sinai Peninsula under control, be upset, an escalation of lethal attacks against civilian and military targets in both the State of Israel and Egypt should be expected.<sup>33</sup> A more depressing perspective would be a return to a state of active hostility between Israel and Egypt, in contrast to the beneficial cooperation they have shared.

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<sup>26</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Turjeman 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Dentice 2018: 41.

<sup>29</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Telhami 2008: 32.

<sup>31</sup> Gold 2013: 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Dentice 2018: 42.

## 2. Analysis – The Golan Heights

### 2.1. Geographical significance of the Golan Heights

The Golan Heights is a hilly area of 1,800 square kilometers, overlooking the upper Jordan River Valley to the west. The area was once part of southwestern Syria until 1967, when it came under direct Israeli military control, and in December 1981 Israel unilaterally annexed the part of the Golan it held, comprising approximately 1,200 square kilometers. This is significant because this territory makes up less than one percent of Syria.<sup>34</sup> This move by the Israeli government was never recognized internationally, and as such, the UN Security Council has claimed that any Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction, and administration in the Golan Heights is null and void.<sup>35</sup> It remains to be seen what impact, if any, the decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty by the Americans will have.

About 40,000 people live in the Golan Heights, of which more than 20,000 are Druze Arabs, the rest being Israeli settlers.<sup>36</sup> The Druze Arabs, who practice an offshoot of Islam, still have strong elements within the population which are loyal to the Assad regime in Syria and, as such, pose a significant inconvenience to the establishment of direct Israeli sovereignty over the region, which was officially recognized on 21 March 2019 by US President Donald Trump, a move which was not supported by the international community.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that after annexing the Golan, Israel gave the Druze the option of citizenship, but most rejected it and still identify as Syrian.<sup>38</sup> The question of handing Israeli citizenship seems to be a major point of friction between the younger generation of the Druze, who see the advantages and readily accept Israeli citizenship, and the older generation, set in their anti-Israeli ways.

In addition to the questions of population and sovereignty, the Golan Heights is also widely discussed within the realms of economics in terms of its geographical characteristics. The highest area controlled by Israel is the “Snow Observation Post” at 2,224 meters a.s.l., while the average altitude of this area is about 1,000–1,200 meters a.s.l.<sup>39</sup> Being a relatively narrow territory, it provides Israel with invaluable defensive advantages because of its topography in terms of observation and fire control while simultaneously protecting Israeli land from possible Syrian attacks.<sup>40</sup> This means that the Golan Heights houses significant Israeli military installations, and that a sudden removal or displacement of them from such heights and difficult terrain would cost an estimated USD 20 billion. As a comparison, the Jewish military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip cost around USD 2.6 billion, keeping in mind that the installations on the Golan Heights are significantly more elaborate.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hauser 2018: 28.

<sup>35</sup> Fortin 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Lubell 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Badie 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Lubell 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Eiland 2009: 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Inbar 2011: 13.

The cruciality of the Golan Heights is also prominent when it comes to managing one of the most strategic commodities in the Middle East, water. The Baniyas, the most important tributary river of the Jordan River, originates in the Golan Heights. Moreover, the Golan Heights is part of the water basin of the Sea of Galilee, Israel's largest water reservoir. The lake is fed by waters running off the strategic plateau, which make up roughly half of all the water that flows in.<sup>42</sup> Israeli control of the Golan Heights secures the control of water resources which are necessary for growing populations and urbanization, which keeps placing an increasing strain on the scarce resource. While Israel is slowly developing desalinization, filtering and water recycling capabilities to meet growing demands, somewhat reducing the strategic importance of water, it still remains a viable strategic resource.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the geographical significance of the Golan Heights showcases several factors which place its importance high on the list of Israeli policies. Its population, military defensibility, and resource management all present areas of interest which require and will require constant attention, thus affirming its vital importance.

## 2.2. *Security value of the Golan Heights*

The abovementioned geographical reasons for the value of the Golan Heights intertwine with the security value of the area. The status quo in the Golan is primarily a result of Israel's military superiority and its deterrence capability, which mirror Israeli strengths from the 1967 war. As long as the power differential between Israel and Syria continues, there is little chance for a Syrian challenge towards the status quo, but this does not mean that Israel should become complacent when it comes to the protections of its interests.<sup>44</sup> Such a line of events does not seem likely however, because Syrian economic and military capabilities have been significantly reduced because of its ongoing civil war. Another point of the reasoning why Israel should not relax its stance towards the Golan Heights is due to Hezbollah activity in Lebanon aimed against Israel, and the uncertain aftermath of Syrian civil war, when the time arrives.

The collapse of Syria and the developments in Syria and in Iraq over the past six years have transformed the region into a minefield of hatred and hostility, guaranteeing the region will remain shrouded in uncertainty and instability.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Syrian discourse, despite the casualties numbering around 500,000 people as well as the displacement of about 8 million Syrians and widespread destruction of more than 75 per cent of its economy,<sup>46</sup> has not changed when it comes to its staunch stance towards the Golan Heights and its hostility towards Israel. This results in maximization of the relative advantages of the Golan Heights, that is a hardline stance by the IDF. The Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs evaluates that a possibility of war with Syria entails a war with Lebanon and, by proxy, Hezbollah. Furthermore, it facilitates the necessity of an optimal defense as well as engagement conditions of the Golan Heights which would allow Israel to both defend and attack rapidly with a relatively small force. The Centre highlights the

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 19.

<sup>45</sup> Hauser 2018: 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



importance of rapid strikes, deterrence tactics, maneuverability and armament superiority in order to achieve victory whilst allocating resources, in the form of the Iron Dome system, to protect Israeli territory from a massive attack by Syrian missiles.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the Golan Heights represents a significant risk for Israel. Still, the risk can be lowered significantly by Israeli military preparations and clear military resolve signalling Israel's intention not to relinquish the Golan Heights even under the prospect of war.<sup>48</sup>

If war is a point of discussion, however, then the military strength of Syria must be taken into consideration. Even exhausted by its civil war, Syria has developed a large missile arsenal and most of Israel has been within its range for over a decade. Its advanced chemical weapons arsenal, which was used during the civil war, is another deterrent against potential Israeli aggression. The fact remains that while said weapons do exist, drastic improvements in the accuracy of these missiles could turn them into an effective threat to Israeli strategic installations.<sup>49</sup> This improvement in military technology could very well occur, since Syria boasts support from Iran and Russia, who have assisted the Syrian government against the rebels and other terrorist groups. Another way Syria could extract a higher military and economic price from Israel would be to enlist the aid of groups hostile towards Israel, Hezbollah and Hamas, in a coordinated military effort against Israel. The Islamic Republic of Iran could be expected to lend its support, although it might hesitate to become directly involved in military operations. This is a scenario that Israel obviously has to prepare for.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the armies are separated by a 400 square kilometer zone, a demilitarized zone in all senses, and the armies of the two countries are not permitted under the ceasefire agreement.<sup>51</sup> Finally, in terms of security, a retreat from the Golan Heights by Israel for peace with Syria is not an option in the foreseeable future. There is the question of the significant number of Jewish settlers living there and their rights if the territory is relinquished. Moreover, a retreat from the Golan Heights would magnify the threat to the State of Israel, due to the instability in Syria as well as the hostility of the Assad regime. Simply put, the importance of the Golan Heights is deeply connected to self-defense and, therefore, Israel should not – and with the newest recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory by the United States, will not – relinquish the territory.<sup>52</sup> The latter point connects to why the Golan is of political importance.

### **3. Political importance of the Golan Heights**

Despite the obvious benefits the Golan Heights provides to Israel, and the challenges it poses, the political importance of the Golan for Israel is also a detriment on the international stage. Within the international scene it must be kept in mind that Israel has a multitude of enemies in the Middle East. Syria is a hostile regime propped up by the

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<sup>47</sup> Eiland 2009: 15.

<sup>48</sup> Inbar 2011: 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 21.

<sup>51</sup> Lubell 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Hauser 2018: 30.

Islamic Republic of Iran, which has publicly called for the destruction of Israel multiple times. Lebanon has significant issues with the Iranian-financed Hezbollah, which controls a part of the territory bordering Israel and as such is directly hostile. In addition to all this, there are numerous ISIS offshoots, radical militants in countries which have peace treaties with Israel, such as Egypt and Jordan.<sup>53</sup>

It must be mentioned that there is a current status quo between Israel and Syria, mostly due to the significant lack of the international community to pressure Syrian interests over the Golan Heights.<sup>54</sup> As such, even the recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory by the United States did not produce a hard-power based international decision. As well, due to the historical Sunni–Shia split in the Middle East, and the fact that the Assad regime in Syria is propped up by Iran, most Sunni Arab states see Israel as an ally of convenience in the onset of a possibly nuclear dominant Iran.<sup>55</sup> Even if it appears that Assad, with massive Russian-Iranian assistance, has regained his control over extensive regions in Syria, this situation is artificial and fragile, and it depends entirely on forces that are external to the Syrian territorial space.<sup>56</sup> This directly correlates with the Assad regime and its policy in Syria. Syria, once a champion of pan-Arabism, now carries little weight in the Middle East due to its internal issues and significant cooperation with Iran, but its dispute with State of Israel when it comes to the Golan Heights gives the regime legitimacy, by painting themselves as patriots of the Arab cause.<sup>57</sup>

It is evident that Israel is defending their cause in the Golan Heights not by increasing their own strength, but by eroding the strength of alliances of its enemies. The civil war in Syria has assisted Israel from a long-term political viewpoint, and the smaller cells produced by the war, such as Hezbollah, Iranian units, Shiite militia and the ruling Alawites in Syria, do not present such a formidable danger to Israel as would one politically united Arabic front.<sup>58</sup> As such, the emphasis on the Golan Heights is indeed of military significance, but even more so in the political arena. Keeping in mind its economic, geographic and military benefits, it is one of the regions Israel must retain in order to preserve itself. The inherent instability of the Middle East proves to be playing into Israeli hands when it comes to this issue and, consequently, Israel can approach individual Arab states instead of a united Arab world.

## Conclusion

The importance of both the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights is apparent to Israel. The value of the Sinai Peninsula as a geographical buffer zone, as a source of income from oil and minerals and farmlands, and as a significant trade route, remains clear to both Israel and its neighbors. Furthermore, it serves as the focal point in which the cooperation between Israel and Egypt takes place. This cooperation serves in the fight

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Inbar 2011: 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 22.

<sup>56</sup> Hauser 2018: 41.

<sup>57</sup> Inbar 2011: 23.

<sup>58</sup> Hauser 2018: 39.

against militants in the Sinai Peninsula, the Islamic State, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, it is important that this alliance between Israel and Egypt continues to keep the Sinai Peninsula under control. If it is not managed, an escalation of attacks against both civilian and military targets is predicted, while any break in the cooperation would result in the looming possibility of war between the two. Hence, maintaining this cooperation in the Sinai Peninsula is vital for Israel.

The Golan Heights features several factors that place its importance high on the list of Israeli policy and priorities. Population, military defensibility as well as resource management all present areas of interest which require and will require constant attention, thus affirming its vitality. A military retreat from the Golan Heights by Israel currently does not present a feasible future move. The economic cost of such a decision as well as the impact on the local Jewish population which has settled there would be extremely high. Keeping in mind the continued hostility of the Assad regime and its ongoing cooperation with Iran, which is the main anti-Israel proponent in the Middle East, Israel should not relinquish its control over the Golan Heights because of its unique defensive position. Furthermore, with the added political instability in the Middle East, Israel can use both the strategic position, which the Golan Heights provides, as well as its anti-Iranian political capital in order to lessen the hostilities with other Arab states.

This paper has resolved the research question of whether both the Sinai and the Golan Heights remain national security interests of Israel. Methodical foreign policy by Israel highlights not only the historical importance but the political, security and geographic values that affirms the stated hypothesis. To ensure that the Sinai Peninsula does not pose a threat to its territory, political and security leaders of the Israeli government generally voice approval of Egyptian efforts to maintain control in the area.

The vital importance of the Golan Heights is deeply connected to self-defense and is prominent when it comes to managing one of the most strategic commodities in the Middle East, water. These are a few of the important aspects elaborated upon in this paper. Therefore, to conclude, the emphasis on the Golan Heights and the Sinai reveals multiple significant features, some of which are of military, political, economic and geographic significance. These are the reasons why Israel should strive to keep both the regions under their envisioned foreign policy. The inherent instability of the Middle East serves as a stark contrast to the methodical foreign policy moves conducted by Israel in order to preserve its vital interests.

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