

US criticized for recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights

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The United States came under sharp criticism from the 14 other Security Council nations Wednesday for its decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in violation of council resolutions.

Israeli soldiers stand on tanks near the Israeli side of the border with Syria in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Israel May 9, 2018. (Reuters Photo: Amir Cohen)

United Nations: The United States came under sharp criticism from the 14 other Security Council nations Wednesday for its decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in violation of council resolutions.

Speaker after speaker at the open meeting supported Syria's sovereignty over the strategic plateau and opposed Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and President Donald Trump's proclamation earlier this week.

As South Africa's UN Ambassador Jerry Matjila said, "this unilateral action does nothing to assist in finding a long-term peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East."

He and others pointed to resolutions calling for Israel to end its occupation of the Golan Heights, including a December 1981 Security Council resolution that called Israel's annexation of the strategic area "null and void and without international legal effect."

Syria's closest ally Russia urged governments to continue to view the Golan Heights as Israeli-occupied territory.

"If anybody feels any temptation to follow this poor example, we would urge them to refrain from this aggressive revision of international law," Russia's deputy ambassador Vladimir Safronkov said.

While Syria got support on its sovereignty over the Golan Heights, German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen and Britain's Ambassador Karen Pierce also used the meeting to criticize President Bashar Assad's government for bombing civilians, using chemical weapons and violating human rights violations during the ongoing eight-year civil war.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in 1981. A 1974 cease-fire agreement that officially ended the 1973 Mideast war led to the deployment of a U.N. peacekeeping force known as UNDOF on the Golan Heights.

Trump's proclamation that the Golan Heights are part of Israel raised questions about the future of UNDOF after its mandate expires on June 30.

U.S. political coordinator Rodney Hunter told the council UNDOF has "a vital role to play in preserving stability between Israel and Syria," an assurance that the Trump administration's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau won't affect its operation.

He said the force's mandate to ensure that the area of separation between Syria and Israel "is a buffer zone free from any military presence or activities" is of "critical strategic and security importance" to Israel, and "can contribute to the stability of the entire Middle East."

Hunter said U.S. recognition that the Golan Heights are part of Israel doesn't affect the 1974 cease-fire agreement,

“nor do we believe that it undermines UNDOF’s mandate in any way.”

He strongly criticized “the daily presence of the Syrian armed forces” in the area of separation, where UNDOF is the only military force allowed, calling their presence a violation of the 1974 cease-fire agreement.

The United States calls on Russia to use its influence with President Bashar Assad “to compel the Syrian forces to uphold their commitment” to the cease-fire agreement “and immediately withdraw from the area of separation,” Hunter said.

U.N. peacekeeping chief Jean Pierre Lacroix told the council there is “a continued significant threat” to UNDOF personnel from explosive remnants of war, “and from the possible presence of sleeper cells of armed groups including (U.N.) listed terrorist groups.”

Undersecretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo expressed hope that “the recent developments will not be used as an excuse by anyone to pursue actions that could undermine the relative stability of the situation on Golan and beyond.”

- AP