

# U.S. Troops on Golan “Quicksand”?

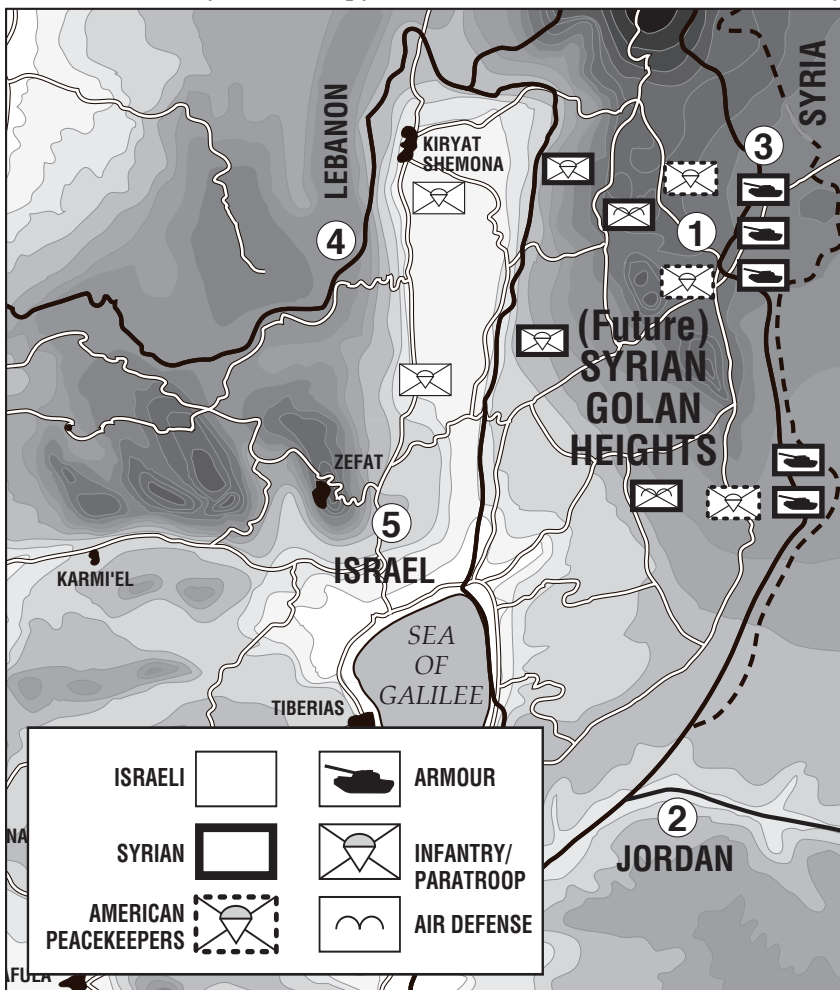
by Mark Langfan

The day after the historic signing of the Israel-Palestinian arrangement, Secretary of State Warren Christopher resolutely confirmed the Clinton Administration policy that America would deploy U.S. troops to the Golan Heights as part of a future Israeli-Syrian agreement to protect Israel.

While the Sinai and a Golan U.S. troops deployment share the same “political” risk that Egypt or Syria could fall to a “hostile” Muslim fundamentalist regime, the Golan’s special topographic and geographic characteristics, create additional “military” risks to a Golan deployment that the Sinai deployment does not have. In specific, the Sinai is huge and is open to the sea at virtually all points, while the Golan is roughly one tenth the size of the Sinai, and is landlocked by Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel (See Figure 1). In addition, the Sinai for the most part is a large flat desert with wide roads and easy access while the Golan is extremely mountainous and has a narrow and confined road network. Finally, the Sinai experiences bright desert sunshine for almost all the year compared to the cold snowy winters on the Golan. All of these physical, topographic, and geographic differences result in three “Golan-specific” military risks to a U.S. peacekeeping troop deployment.

## 1. U.S. troops may be exposed to “Intifida/ Beirut-style” terrorist attacks.

During the 1967 Six Day War roughly 80,000 Syrian “civilians” evacuated and fled from the hostilities to Syria. These “civilians” were mostly Syrian army personnel and their families. If Syria repossesses the Golan Heights, she will most likely “return” a significant number of “civilians” throughout the entire Golan Heights. The return and settlement of Syrian “civilians” to the Golan would be a logical Syrian strategic short-term objective because if Israel found it necessary to re-occupy the Golan, Israel would have “Gaza-style” civilian terrorist attacks against her troops.



The key point, however, is that because of the extremely confined and narrow road system, U.S. troops would likely come into close contact with the Syrian “civilians” which might expose U.S. troops to a Syrian Golan “Intifida.” Given a potentially hostile, indigenous Syrian “civilian” population, the difficulties and ambushes which the U.S. troops have been experiencing in Somalia may be indicative of what our troops may face in the Golan. Additionally, the host Syrian government could very well deny responsibility for the attacks and attribute them to radical Muslim fundamentalist elements in her population. Such radical Syrian “civilian” elements may conduct “deniable” terrorist attacks on U.S. personnel with either mines, remote controlled side-bombs, snipers, grenade launchers or even suicide “Beirut” type car bombs.

Figure 1. The diagrammatic topographical map of the Golan Heights with hypothetical U.S. peacekeeping positions (1), shows that the extremely steep and difficult terrain of the Golan only allows for small narrow roads. U.S. peacekeepers would have to operate in such narrow confines. Also, it is clear from the topography that the Golan Heights is a critical controlling military pivot point boxed in between Jordan (2), Syria (3), Lebanon (4) and Israel (5).

2. Hezbollah Katyusha Rocket / Israeli Retaliation Scenario.

Return to the status quo ante bellum of the pre-1967 Israel-Syria strategic balance will be impossible given the massive destabilization which South Lebanon has undergone since the 1970 Black September exodus of radical Palestinians to South Lebanon. Even if one assumes a complete and airtight cessation of transshipment of "Isfahan" Katyusha rockets from Iran through Syria to the Iranian backed Hezbollah of South Lebanon, Iran will still be able to easily smuggle the Isfahan Katyusha rockets to the Hezbollah through Lebanon's extremely porous Mediterranean coastline. Therefore, there is an extremely high probability that no matter what Syria does, Hezbollah will still carry out their Isfahan Katyusha rocket attacks on Israel's North. (See Figure 2).

In the event of a Katyusha attack from South Lebanon, the mountainous topography of Northern Israel, Southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights restricts an Israeli armored ground attack against Hezbollah through only two north-south axes: the coastline road and the Hula Valley road at the foot of the Golan Heights (See Figure 3). During any Israeli attack against the Hezbollah in South Lebanon, these two axes would be heavily mobilized with numerous Israeli troops and armor. Currently, Israeli control of the Golan Heights makes it impossible for the Syrians to easily threaten a large concentration of Israeli troops in the Hula Valley. However, should Syria regain control of the Golan Heights which tower over the Hula Valley, the highly mobilized Israeli troops in the Valley would easily be threatened by even a "lightly" armored Syrian Golan Force only two kilometers away on strategically high grounds (See Figure 4). In this regard, any U.S. troop deployment to the Golan Heights would pre-empt any Israel pre-emptive strike to neutralize a Syrian flanking attack.

Critically, any significant Israeli troops movements, albeit even though directed at the Hezbollah in South Lebanon, would appear extremely hostile to the Syrian troops occupying the former Israeli positions. Syria would reasonably not know whether the Israeli troops would attack north to South Lebanon or immediately east to retake the then Syrian-controlled Golan Heights. Such high armored concentrations of Israeli troops in extremely close proximity to "lightly armed" Syrian Golan front lines would be seen by the Syrians as a dramatic escalation of hostilities which would result in a Syrian high military alert. In turn, this would lead to Syria mobilizing and amassing troops on their own positions on the Golan as well as a "re-enforcing" of "lightly armed" Syrian front lines with heavy armor. The

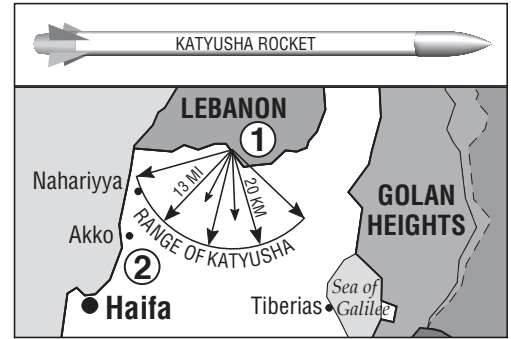
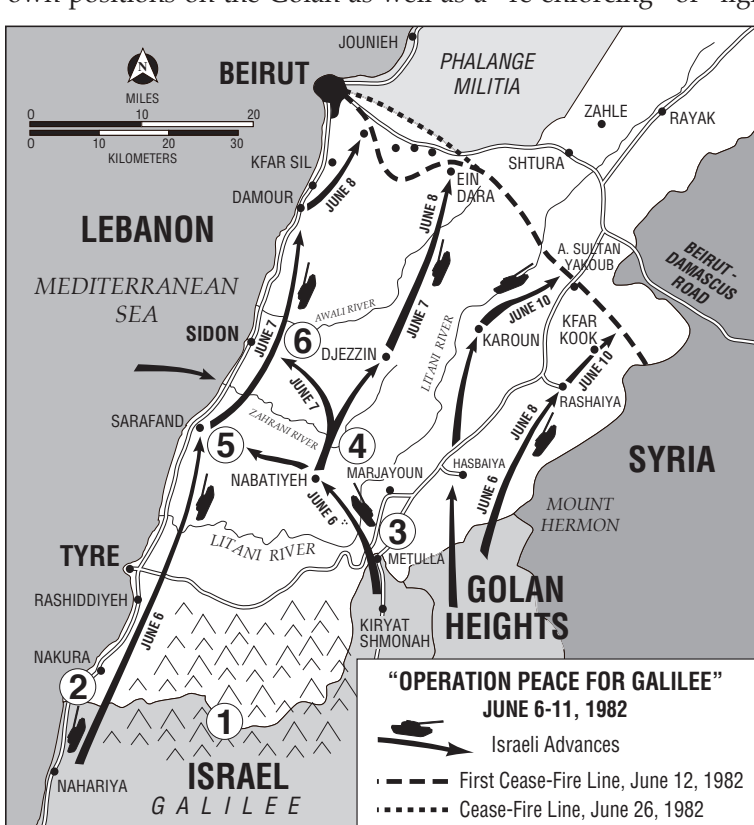


Figure 2. Unlike pre-1967 South Lebanon, any withdrawal from the Golan and South Lebanon must take in account the high probability of continued infiltration terror and Katyusha rocket attacks (1) from the Iranian and Syrian backed Muslim Fundamentalist Hezbollah into major Israeli population centers in the North (2).



U.S. troops stationed in the Golan Heights would thus, on a moment's notice, find themselves trapped on the ground on territory under a high military alert and sandwiched between two very sophisticated, powerful and hostile armies.

Therefore, since there exists a high probability of continued Hezbollah action against Israel. The following questions should be asked:

1. What will be the exact obligations and responsibilities of the American troops under such

Figure 3. The mountain topography of North Israel and South Lebanon (1) forces any Israeli armored advance through the two choke points of the Israel coastline (2) and the Hula Valley (3). In the armored attack of "Operation Peace for Galilee," the two-pronged attack (2) & (3) was critical to the successful Israeli armored attack because the Hula Valley armored prong (4) threatened to encircle the Palestinian defenders on the coastline (5) & (6). Faced with tactical entrapment by the Israelis, the Palestinian coastline defenders were not able to fight stubbornly and engage in orderly tactical withdrawal. But instead, the Palestinians had to hurriedly withdraw, thus saving many Israeli soldiers lives.

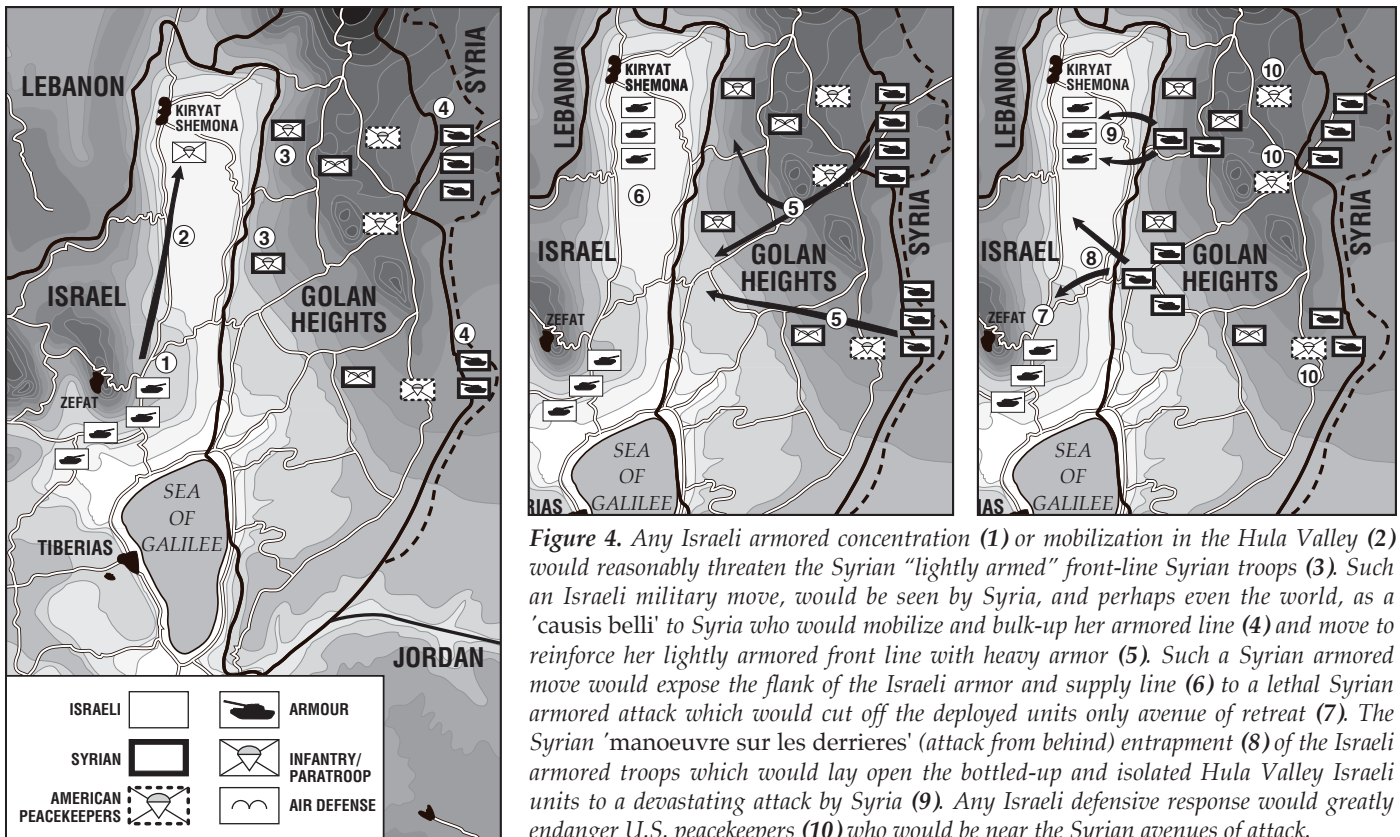


Figure 4. Any Israeli armored concentration (1) or mobilization in the Hula Valley (2) would reasonably threaten the Syrian "lightly armed" front-line Syrian troops (3). Such an Israeli military move, would be seen by Syria, and perhaps even the world, as a 'causis belli' to Syria who would mobilize and bulk-up her armored line (4) and move to reinforce her lightly armored front line with heavy armor (5). Such a Syrian armored move would expose the flank of the Israeli armor and supply line (6) to a lethal Syrian armored attack which would cut off the deployed units only avenue of retreat (7). The Syrian 'manoeuvre sur les derrieres' (attack from behind) entrapment (8) of the Israeli armored troops which would lay open the bottled-up and isolated Hula Valley Israeli units to a devastating attack by Syria (9). Any Israeli defensive response would greatly endanger U.S. peacekeepers (10) who would be near the Syrian avenues of attack.

a scenario? 2. Will the U.S. troops be required to inform Israel of Syrian counter-troop movements? 3. Will Syria view such U.S. intelligence gathering as a "belligerent" act of spying on behalf of Israel? 4. Will the U.S. troops have to forcibly or perhaps even violently obstruct any Syrian armored troops on their way through the Golan Heights in violation of a "demilitarization" agreement? 5. What degree of "discretion" will the President or Congress have to "raise" or "lower" the so-called "automatic tripwire"? 6. What type of congressional authorization would be required to activate "automatic tripwire" which would result in American forces attempting to violently stop the advancing armored Syrian troops? 7. Under a Syrian heavy armor reinforcement scenario, will the U.S. depend on Israel to logistically supply and physically protect the American troops that would be on the then "hostile" Syrian soil? Given the speed of events which may unfold on the ground in the Golan theatre, most likely, the American decision-making time-frame in Washington will greatly exceed the necessary Israeli military reaction time-frame. The Israelis may make military moves on the ground which expose American troops to lethal Syrian fire, crossfire or even Syrian "capture?" These questions represent the tip of the iceberg of impossibly difficult scenarios which would arise in real-time when events on the ground would move so rapidly that American decision makers in Washington would be depending on critical facts which, in minutes, would have changed in the Golan Battle theater.

### 3. "Taif style" Syrian armored violations into Northern Jordan and Southern Lebanon.

Israel's control of the Golan Heights gives Israel the ability to launch a defensive counter-attack similar to the 1973 Yom Kippur War counter-attack (See Figure 5). This Israeli defensive counter-attack threat currently neutralizes any substantive Syrian armored invasions or deployments into South Lebanon, the Beka Valley and especially into Israel's Achilles heel: the Northern Jordan River Valley or the Bet She'an Valley. Both these points were attacked in the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49 (See Figure 6).

As discussed earlier, American troop presence on the Golan will certainly preclude any pre-emptive strike by Israel through the Golan to Damascus given the high probability of U.S. troops getting caught in the crossfire. Further, since Syria is actively involved with Iran in the counterfeiting of billions of U.S. dollars, it would appear unlikely that the U.S. will have Syria on the "cash" leash the U.S. has on Egypt.

Hence, without the present Israel defense counter-attack threat to Damascus, there is a significant probability that Syria would "push the envelope" and attempt to deploy "Taif violation type" standing armored concentrations in either South Lebanon, the Beka Valley or North Jordan. These Syrian armored deployments can be made under a convenient cover of joint exercises or the guise of war games. Such Syrian armored deployments in either South Lebanon, the Beka or Jordan would undeniably represent a major existential threat to Israel.

Faced with such a standing armored Syrian threat, Israel would have to mobilize, deploy and possibly attack such

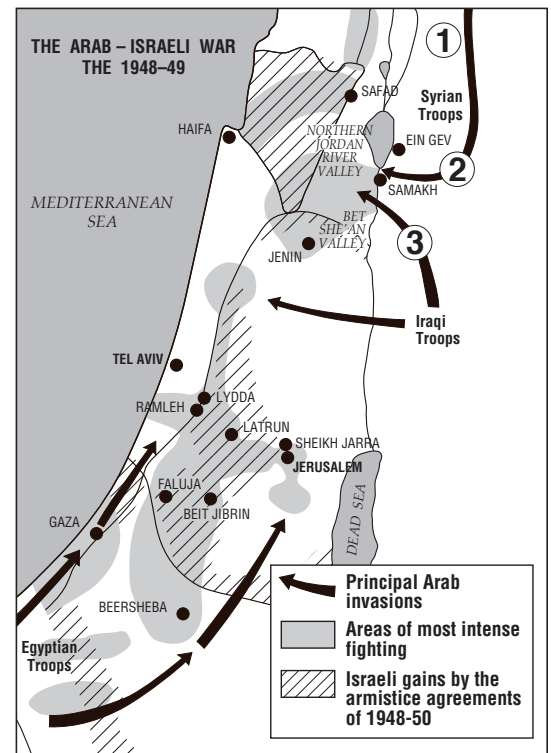
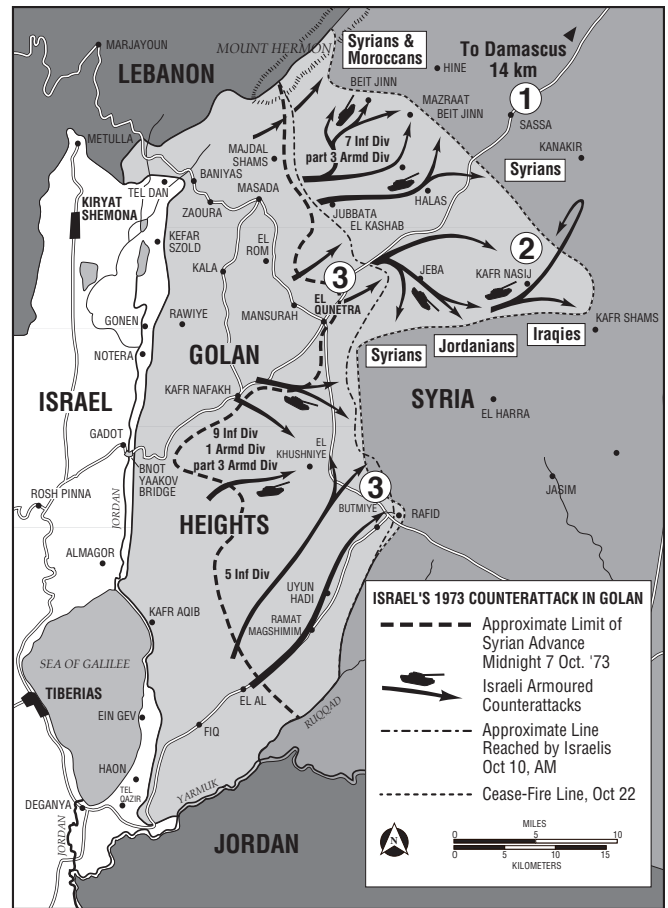


**Figure 5.** The 1973 Israeli strategic defensive Golan counterattack is tangible proof of the Israeli ability to threaten Damascus (1) if Syria engages Israel in battle in any theater or fires any Scud missiles. As Deputy Defense Minister Mordecai Gur, recently stated, "The Syrians must take into account that as soon as they launch a missile against us, we can move to Damascus." Critically, the Israeli armored threat through the Northern Golan "Valley of Tears" not only threatens Damascus, but cuts into the flank of any Syrian attacking force into the Southern Golan (2) or any Syrian attack through Northern Jordan into the Israeli Bet She'an Valley. Any American presence on the Golan Heights (3) would effectively neutralize any Israeli attack through the Golan and thus in effect protect Damascus. Therefore, Syria could fire her missiles while Israel's ground deterrent would be neutralized.

Syrian armored concentrations within 5-40 kilometers of Israeli front lines. Israeli pre-attack military deployments will surely be seen by Syria as a grave threat to her troops and position on the Golan Heights and consequently will set the entire area including the Golan Heights "in play." Such a Syrian interpretation of danger would surely place U.S. troops on the Golan in a "clear and present" danger. Such a scenario evokes the following questions: Would Israeli mobilization and deployment in Northern Israel to meet a Syrian, South Lebanon, Bekka Valley or Northern Jordan threat require an American approval? Would initiation of hostilities by Israel against such extra-Golan Syrian deployments require an American approval? What would the American-Golan troops do if Syria initiates hostilities not on the Golan itself but on these other fronts? What would America do, if Israel either significantly deploys or initiates hostilities without an American approval? And finally, what is the American "exit strategy" if the situation devolves to an "out of control" hot Israeli-Syrian war?

The obvious goal of any Peace agreement between Israel and Syria would be to create "greater stability." It appears that any Syria-Israel "peace" arrangement which requires U.S. peacekeeping forces to be placed on the Golan Heights would in fact be more "destabilizing" than the current status quo. Given the high risk to U.S. troops in these highly probable scenarios, U.S. policy makers would be well-advised to thoroughly and slowly work through future difficulties on paper before U.S. troops are risked on the ground.

**Figure 6.** With Damascus free from Israeli strategic counter-attack, Syria may "push the envelope" and threaten non-Golan Heights Israeli weak points (1) such as the Northern Jordan River Valley (2) where Syrian forces attacked in the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49. Any Syrian armored deployments in Northern Jordan, the Bekka Valley or Southern Lebanon would set the entire Northern Israeli/Golan Battle theatre "in play." Also the Bet She'an Valley is a strategic Israeli weak point and was attacked by Iraq in the 1948-49 War (3).



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