

# *Syria condemns Israel's plan to double Golan Heights settlements*

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Damascus, December 28 (RHC)-- Syria says Israel's plans to double the number of settlers living in Israeli-annexed Golan Heights are "dangerous and unprecedented" and only perpetuate its occupation of the territory.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced a multimillion-dollar plan meant to double the number of settlers living in the region that Israel captured from Syria more than five decades ago. Nearly 7,300 additional housing units will be built on the strategic plateau, according to the blueprint approved by Israel's cabinet.

The U.S. recognized Israel's sovereignty over Golan Heights in 2019. The rest of the international community regards the occupation of the strategic territory to be illegal.

"Syria strongly condemns the dangerous and unprecedented escalation from the Israeli occupation forces in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights and its persistence in settlement policies and grave and

methodological violations that rise to the level of war crimes,” a Syrian foreign ministry statement said on Monday.

The statement said the Syrian government remains committed to the Syrians “who are steadfast in their resistance to the Israeli occupation and their rejection of the decision to annex the Golan.” The state-run SANA news agency reported on Monday that Damascus would seek to use all legally available means to retake the territory.

Syria has long demanded the return of the 1,200 sq-km (460 sq-mile) strip of land, which also overlooks Lebanon and borders Jordan. Entrenching Israeli control over the territory would complicate any future attempt to forge peace with Syria.

Bennett made his announcement during a special Cabinet meeting in the Golan Heights. His office said the government would invest some one billion shekels (more than \$300 million) into developing the Golan, including the establishment of two new settlements.

Israel captured the Golan Heights in the 1967 Middle East war and later annexed the territory. Bennett said Syria’s decade-long war has made the idea of Israeli control of the territory more acceptable to its international allies, adding that the alternative would be much worse.

Some 50,000 people live in the Golan Heights – roughly half of them Jewish Israelis and half in Druze Arab villages that formerly were part of Syria. Some of the Druze population opposes Israeli control.

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