

Israel approves plan to surge settler population in occupied Golan Heights



Druze women walk near the fence leading to the buffer zone that separates Israeli and Syrian forces in the occupied Golan Heights [Jalaa Marey/AFP]

Tel Aviv, December 16 (RHC)-- Israel's government has approved a plan to increase the number of settlers in the illegally occupied Golan Heights, days after seizing more Syrian territory following the toppling of Syria's longtime leader Bashar al-Assad.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the government had "unanimously approved" the "demographic development" of the occupied territory, which would seek to double the Israeli population there.

The new plan is only for the portion of the Golan Heights that Israel has occupied since 1967. In 1981, Israel's Knesset moved to impose Israeli law over the territory, in an effective annexation.

The plan does not relate to the portion of Syrian land seized by Israel in the wake of al-Assad's toppling a week ago. The seized area, which had been demilitarised as part of an agreement reached after the 1973 war, also includes Mount Hermon overlooking the Syrian capital Damascus.

In a statement, Netanyahu praised the plan, which provides more than 40 million shekels (\$11 million) to increase the settler population.

There are about 31,000 Israeli settlers spread across dozens of illegal settlements in the Golan Heights already. They live alongside minority groups, including the Druze, who predominantly identify as Syrian.

"Strengthening the Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and it is especially important at this time," Netanyahu said. "We will continue to hold onto it, cause it to blossom, and settle in it."

Reporting from Amman, Jordan, Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh said the approval comes at what Israel views as an "opportune moment".

While Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights is illegal under international law, during his first term in office, from 2017 to 2021, US President-elect Donald Trump made the United States the first country in the world to officially recognise Israeli sovereignty over the area. Trump is set to retake office again on January 20 after winning the US presidential election in November.

"Netanyahu is using this moment to announce more settlement activity in order to entrench that occupation and make it permanent," Odeh said. "Much like he's doing in the occupied West Bank: land grab, settlements, permanent occupation."

Meanwhile, Netanyahu's office said he had discussed the situation in Syria during a phone call with Trump on Saturday. He also discussed efforts to reach a ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

Despite Israel launching hundreds of strikes on Syrian sites since opposition groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew al-Assad and moved to create a transitional government, Netanyahu said: "We have no interest in conflict with Syria." He said the attacks were to "thwart the potential threats from Syria and to prevent the takeover of terrorist elements near our border".

On Sunday, Saudi Arabia was among the first to condemn Israel's new plan to increase the number of settlers, while accusing Israeli leaders of seeking to sabotage Syria's fledgling transition.

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