

Israel says will double settlements in occupied Golan Heights

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An Israeli soldier rides an armoured vehicle during a drill at a training base in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights [File: Amir Cohen/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, December 26 (RHC)-- Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has said the country intends to double the number of settlers in the occupied Golan Heights with a multimillion-dollar plan meant to further consolidate Israel's hold on the territory it captured from Syria more than 50 years ago.

Bennett said the new investment in the region was prompted by the Trump administration's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the swath of land in 2019 and by the Biden administration's indication that it will

not soon challenge that decision.

“This is our moment. This is the moment of the Golan Heights,” Bennett said at a special Cabinet meeting in the Golan Heights on Sunday. “After long and static years in terms of the scope of settlement, our goal today is to double settlement in the Golan Heights,” he added.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed it in 1981. A vast majority of the international community considers the move illegal under international law. About 25,000 Israeli settlers live in the Golan Heights, along with some 23,000 Druze, who remained on the land after it was seized by Israel.

The United States was the first country to recognise Israel’s sovereignty over the territory. Bennett said the war in Syria made the idea of Israeli control of the territory more acceptable to its international allies, adding that the alternative would be much worse.

Israel has long argued that the strategically important area has, for all practical purposes, been fully integrated into Israel since it was captured from Syria – and that control of the strategic plateau is needed as protection from Iran and its allies in Syria.

Bennett, who leads an ideologically disparate eight-party coalition, needs cabinet approval before his Golan plan can move forward. Sunday’s meeting was temporarily delayed after the premier’s 14-year-old daughter tested positive for the coronavirus, sending Bennett into isolation, but a vote on the plan was still expected.

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