

Several countries slam Israeli plans to expand settlements in Syria's Golan

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**Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Syria as seen from Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights on December 15, 2024 [Jamal Awad/Reuters]
U.S. military says it kills ISIL fighters as EU warns that Iran and Russia should have 'no place' in Syria's future.**

Damascus, December 18 (RHC)-- Several countries have condemned Israel's plan to expand settlements in Syria's occupied Golan Heights after the ouster of former President Bashar al-Assad by opposition fighters.

Multiple Middle Eastern nations and Israel's ally Germany on Monday denounced Israel's decision to double the Israeli settler population in the illegally occupied Syrian territory.

The criticism comes amid a flurry of diplomatic activity in Syria after the ouster of al-Assad as the new caretaker government takes over. Israel approved the settlement expansion days after the Israeli military seized more Syrian territory after al-Assad's fall.

Syria has also been under intense Israeli bombardment with hundreds of attacks targeting military sites and research centres across the country. Several countries have denounced Israel's assaults on Syria.

This week, more countries criticised Israel's plans for the Golan:

Qatar rebuked the scheme as a "new episode in a series of Israeli aggressions on Syrian territories."

Jordan called it a "blatant violation of international law".

Turkiye denounced the move as a bid by Israel to "expand its borders".

Saudi Arabia slammed "continued sabotage of Syria's chances of restoring its security and stability."

Egypt condemned the plans as "a flagrant violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Germany said it is "perfectly clear under international law that this area controlled by Israel belongs to Syria."

Israel occupied the Golan in 1967 and subsequently annexed it in 1981 in a move that is seen as illegitimate by most of the international community.

The recently-announced Israeli plan will allocate more than 40 million shekels (\$11m) to increase the settler population. "Strengthening the Golan is strengthening the State of Israel, and it is especially important at this time. We will continue to hold onto it, cause it to blossom and settle in it," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday.

The new authorities in Syria have signalled that they do not seek confrontation with Israel.

Meanwhile, the United States said on Monday that its forces have conducted air strikes in Syria that killed 12 ISIL (ISIS) "terrorists."

"The strikes against the ISIS leaders, operatives, and camps were conducted as part of the ongoing mission to disrupt, degrade, and defeat ISIS, preventing the terrorist group from conducting external operations and to ensure that ISIS does not seek opportunities to reconstitute in central Syria," the US military said in a statement.

The U.S. attacks came as the European Union's top foreign policy official said the bloc's envoy to Syria has begun high-level talks with the country's new leaders and the EU will organise a fundraising conference to aid Syria's transition.

Kaja Kallas also told reporters after a meeting with European foreign ministers that Iran and Russia should have "no place" in Syria's future. "Many foreign ministers emphasised that it should be a condition for the new leadership to eliminate Russian influence [in Syria]," Kallas said.

Russia, which backed al-Assad with weapons and air strikes during the war, has military bases in Syria, whose future remains unclear.

Earlier on Monday, al-Assad issued his first statement since he was deposed, saying the country is “in the hands of terrorism.”

Opposition forces, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), launched a blistering offensive in November that toppled the former Syrian president on December 8th.

The Syrian war started as a largely unarmed, peaceful uprising against al-Assad in March 2011 but morphed into a full-blown war, which killed hundreds of thousands of people and turned millions into refugees.

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