

March 5, 1993

## GOLAN: MORE THAN GEOGRAPHY

ON the eve of US Secretary of State Warren Christopher's visit to the Middle East, it was widely reported that the region's political scene was new to him. Christopher himself announced that his only objective was to listen and to learn.

He was taken on a study tour by helicopter and, apparently for the first time in his life, he was enabled to see the full extent of Israel within the "Green Line" and to assess the significance of the Golan Heights towering over Israel's Galilean plain. Coming away from his tour, he immediately gave voice to a confession with clearly far-reaching implications. "There is no question," he said, "that the geography complicates the matter, and changes the situation very greatly." (The Jerusalem Post, February 25) Christopher was manifestly surprised by what he had seen.

His exclamation demonstrates that the briefing he was given, and the assumptions he derived from existing US policy, were quite unrelated to the facts. Put more bluntly: US policy has been based on false or falsified premises. Put even more bluntly: what Israel would be stepping into, were it to accept US "advice" and succumb to US pressure to "withdraw" from Judea and Samaria and from the Golan Heights, has been described, even Abba Eban, Israel's foremost promoter of submissiveness, as "a death-trap." US policy, however, has ignored not only Palestine geography.

It has on a grand scale ignored Palestine history as well - first of all the history of our own generation. It is a history for which Israel, the repeated victim of aggression, has paid a heavy price over and over again. At its very birth, it was attacked by a coalition of Arab states - including Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq - for the sole reason that it existed.

The coalition's declared purpose was annihilation and genocide. Israel, with desperate resistance and at a cost in lives proportionately greater than the combined number of British and American lives lost in World War II, survived within the 1949 Armistice lines. The story since then of the Golan Heights - the current focus of American interest - is a simple one.

Between 1949 and 1967, in Syrian hands and sparsely populated, it was strongly fortified and built up as a huge base for attacking Israel. From the Heights, a campaign of almost continuous harassment by shot and shell descended on northern Galilee. Notably, the children of that period spent a large part of their lives in underground shelters.

In 1967, the second Syrian major aggression took place. This time, the Israeli army climbed the Heights and captured them. A third aggression, on Yom Kippur 1973, succeeded by its surprise in almost over-running the Heights, but was repulsed.

Since then, the front line established by the IDF is so near Damascus that it has deterred further aggression. Syria, nevertheless, manages to harass Israel by proxy, through terrorist attacks (by Hamas or Hizbullah) from its satellite, Lebanon. EVEN if the Heights had historically been a part of Syria, their retention by Israel, in the light of their specific function as a launching-pad for those aggressions, is legitimate, in absolute conformity with international practice.

The Heights, however, were not historically part of Syria. They are specifically part

of Palestine. Their Jewish affinity goes back to the Bible and to many hundreds of years of Jewish life.

They were naturally included within the borders of Palestine, in the territory of the Mandate conferred on Britain in 1922 with the object of facilitating the "reconstitution of the Jewish National Home." In one of its periodic betrayals of trust, the British government in 1924 (for reasons unrelated to Palestine) transferred the Golan to France. France was then the Mandatory for Syria. Thus, two decades later, the Golan became "Syrian territory." Syrian President Hafez Assad naturally subscribes to the claim that Palestine belongs to the Arab nation and, moreover, that all of it east and west of the Jordan is really a part of "Greater Syria." He also believes that the State of Israel must disappear.

Famous as a tyrannical dictator, wily as he is bloodthirsty, Assad has won particular repute throughout the world in recent years for his massacre of thousands of his opponents in the town of Homs. Yet successive US administrations have courted Assad, done him favors - and urged Israel to give him the Golan Heights. The shocking willingness of the Rabin government even to negotiate on the future of the Golan (which the Knesset decided years ago to incorporate, like Jerusalem, into Israel's sovereign territory) can be ascribed only to intense US pressure.

Since 1967, whatever the differences regarding Judea, Samaria and Gaza, an almost complete Israeli consensus has existed on the Golan: that it could never be returned to Syria. There can be little doubt that Rabin's somersault was performed in response to insistence by president George Bush that surrender of the Golan Heights would be one of the conditions for Israel's receiving the \$10 billion loan guarantee. For Bush had promised Assad he would "deliver" the Heights.

Moved as he evidently was by his discovery of Palestine geography, Christopher did not see, or he overlooked, another element in the landscape: people. In addition to a small and peaceful Druse community, there are 13,000 Jews living on the Golan Heights, and they have no intention of leaving. They came - as they write in a moving "Charter of the Golan" signed (with very few exceptions) by every one of the 4,000 adult residents - as young pioneers after 1967, in answer to the call of the government "to redeem the land from its desolation." "We have returned to the Golan," they declare, "to build and be rebuilt.

Every furrow of soil has been sanctified by the blood of our sons. In the basalt rocks we have anchored the foundations of our homes, and into the fertile soil we have set our roots. Here are our homes, and this is our legacy; we shall never forsake them." There is then much more than a "new" geography for a new Washington administration to learn about the Golan whose future will, after all, be decided only by the people of Israel.

Letter To the Editor

April 4, 1993

GOLAN HISTORY

Sir, - I am at least mildly sympathetic to Shmuel Katz's contention ("Golan: more

than geography," March 5) that the Golan is important to Israel for reasons other than security. But Mr Katz's contention that the Golan Heights were part of Palestine as of 1922 and were transferred to France on account of British "betrayal" in 1924 simply oozes error.

The facts are these: as of December 23, 1920 - not 1922 - the Anglo-French Convention included tentative borders between Palestine and Syria that included much of the northern Golan Heights. But these borders did not include the southern part of the heights, nor the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias, nor the area northeast of the Yarmuk Triangle that includes Ein Gev, Hamat Gader and Mevo Hama today, and that formed the southernmost of the three Israeli-Syrian "demilitarized zones" between 1949 and 1967. The Anglo-French Convention also specifically called for a border commission to determine the frontier, which indicates clearly that neither Paris nor London considered the December 23, 1920, lines as fully legal or final.

In the Newcombe-Paulet border commission's work, which was accepted in March 1923 - not 1924 - Britain basically traded a chunk of the northern Golan - the Emir Mahmud al-Fadi's land - to France for the entire shores of Lake Tiberias and the rich and strategic territory just northeast of the Yarmuk Triangle. Both the British and the Zionist movement at the time thought the swap was a good one - the former because it cared about railway running rights between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates, and the latter because it gained the water rights to all of Lake Tiberias. The notion that the British "betrayed" Zionism in 1923 is simply laughable.

If Mr Katz would read some history instead of trying to throw it, he would know that Britain had more sympathy with the Zionist Executive at that time than it did with the French governments of Millerand and Leygues when it came to Middle Eastern matters. All true authorities on Israel's borders today, like Professor Moshe Braver of Tel Aviv University, agree that the deal was a good one from the Zionist point of view. Rather, it was successive Syrian governments, in 1946, 1949, 1953 and thereafter, that questioned the legality of the border commission's changes from the 1920 lines.

Mr Katz thus finds himself not only in blatant historical error, but also in the company of some very strange bedfellows. ADAM GARFINKLE, Ra'anana.

Shmuel Katz replies: Mr Garfinkle's zeal in defending British post-World War I policy distorts his proper perception of its implication.

His letter also tends to obscure the central purpose of my article: to help disseminate the truth of the Jewish people's relationship, over the centuries, with the Golan - and to counter the Arabs' standard fiction that it had always belonged to them. Hence the necessity to explain how the Golan was included in Syria in the first place - by British cession to the French Mandatory, later replaced by an independent Syria. In their 1923 agreement with Syria (registered by the League of Nations in 1924), Britain executed a triple betrayal of trust.

Mr Garfinkle seems upset at the charge, but there's nothing I can suggest to assuage his pain. His comments, moreover, only tend to reaffirm the facts I cited. First, the British did give away territory designed to be part of the Jewish homeland under the Mandate of 1922.

Second, as Mr Garfinkle approvingly explains, the British benefited from the "trade-

off" because they cared about "railway running rights between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates." But they had, after all, not been granted the Mandate (of whose existence Garfinkle seems unaware) in order to pursue their imperial concerns, but to promote the "reconstitution" of the Jewish homeland. Third, the Mandate unequivocally obligates the Mandatory "to be responsible for seeing that no Palestine territory shall be ceded or leased for, or in any way placed under the control of the government of any foreign power." The earlier 1920 agreement with France was a major disaster for the Jewish cause - denying Palestine a good and legitimate border and crucial water resources. It was a grievous let-down, but it occurred two years before the promulgation of the Mandate, the circumstances were very different, and the degrees of responsibility of Britain and France remain a subject for speculation.

The story is long and fascinating (I have had occasion to deal with it in detail in another place) and the secret documents reveal that Lloyd George overrode his Foreign Office in signing the agreement. However, its impact on the Golan was secondary, and reciting it was not essential to the thrust of my article. The redrawing of the frontier south of the Golan was most welcome and most useful.

It had for years been part of the Zionist demands. To suggest, however, that the Zionists were happy at the "trade-off" is ludicrous. In order to get an idea of the gloom and the spirit of anger and frustration at British policy that permeated the Zionist movement that very year, it would do Mr Garfinkle no harm to read the Protocol of the Zionist Congress held in August of that year.

Indeed, it seems he has much to learn - though first of all the way of civic discourse. "Insolence," Disraeli once wrote, "is not invective."