

## ***The stateless (ad)vantage?***

### ***Resistance, land and rootedness in the Israeli-Occupied Syrian Golan Heights***

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#### **Abstract**

Can statelessness embolden political resistance? Exploring the political geography of resistance amongst stateless farmers in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights, this paper positions itself within the context of a more refined understanding of the politics of statelessness and citizenship, whilst recognizing the continued role and power of the state. We argue that despite Israel's material power over the control of resources and bodies in the Golan Heights it has been far less successful in exercising ideological control. This stems from the occupied Syrians' combined condition as territorially and culturally rooted to the land alongside their stateless condition, which affords them an important vantage from which they negotiate their inclusion and exclusion from the states of both Syria and Israel. The empirical material draws from extended participant observation among Golani Syrians (in Syria and the Golan) and interviews with Golani farmers. We explain how and why the Druze, specifically, remained with their land after the occupation. We demonstrate their significant resistance efforts, and their conflicts with Israel, over and through their claims to a legitimate presence in the material and ideational landscape. In doing so we challenge common assumptions that stateless, Druze, and rural communities are particularly susceptible to state agendas.

#### **Key Words**

**Statelessness, landscape, Druze, Israel, Syria, Jacob Sheep**

## 1. Introduction: Laissez passer

It is 2009 in Damascus, Syria, and a group of university friends are making good company. One is an indigenous Syrian from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Having refused Israeli citizenship (like the majority of Syrians in the Golan) he does not have a passport, only a 'laissez passer' travel document in which nationality is listed as 'undefined'. He is internationally recognised among the world's estimated 10 million stateless persons and deprived of many of the traditional freedoms and rights associated with citizenship. He has only been allowed to travel to Syria for educational purposes under a special agreement between Israel and Syria and must return for good after his studies. He is, in many ways, a political prisoner of the Israeli state. Yet among his friends he relays the following allegory:

The Syrian *moukhabarat* (secret security) put two people in prison: one is a pimp, the other a revolutionary. So, the pimp complains to the revolutionary that his body is not free to enjoy sex. And the revolutionary replies 'my mind has never been as free as now in prison!'

In this paper we consider how this passing but poignant allegory, derived from ethnographic fieldwork in pre-war Syria, can be used to help understand the surprising political resistance of the stateless indigenous Syrian population of the Occupied Golan Heights (SOGH). We say surprising because of three common assumptions associated with the SOGH's condition as stateless, Druze, and rural: i) Stateless persons are typically understood as among the most vulnerable and powerless on the planet (e.g. Bhabha, 2009); ii) Members of the Druze faith (which the majority of SOGH follow) are typically represented as deferential to state power (see Firro, 2001); iii) Rural populations are often portrayed as politically malleable in the face of populist, sectarian and nationalist propaganda from state powers (e.g. Scoones et al., 2018).

Not only have the SOGH fiercely resisted Israeli occupation, they have also avoided the sectarian identity politics fueled by eight horrific years of war in Syria. To understand this political agency, despite the above assumptions and in the face of incredible duress, we, like the Golani student, suggest that statelessness – in some ways, and in this context – provides a certain political emancipatory advantage. However, we can only fully understand the resolve and resistance of the SOGH by considering their material, cultural and cosmological rootedness to the land.

It is not our intention to suggest statelessness to be a desirable condition, nor that the SOGH do not remain in a position of abject subordination to the Israeli State. What we do wish to emphasise, however, is how, despite substantial Israeli efforts to undermine them, the SOGHs retain a strong and legitimate claim to the land.

That claim is a genuine one that will continue to be put both to the international community and to Israeli citizens who are the target of much Israeli propaganda that aims to 'normalise' (Long, 2009; Ram, 2014; Handel et al., 2015) the Golan into the Israeli territory and national psyche. Our findings, hence, push emerging debates about statelessness to cast new light on the geographies of political resistance. Part of the only long-term ethnographic study among the Syrian Druze community, this work probes the complex and dynamic interplay of religion, culture and politics in the Middle East.

Specifically, our aim is to demonstrate that (contrary to the above assumptions) being stateless, Druze and rural are the characteristics that motivate, reinforce and legitimise SOGH political resistance. We argue that, whilst sometimes expressed in relation to Syrian nationalism, the form of rootedness to land evident among the SOGH is not contingent upon affinity with a nation or a state. Statelessness in this case, therefore, is not antithetical to territorially mediated belonging but instead opens up a counter-hegemonic space for political resistance precisely because it elides the patronage of a state and its ideological apparatus. To navigate this argument the empirical material demonstrates the unique specificities of rootedness in the Golan and how this in turn motivates and legitimates material and symbolic resistance to the occupying force. It evidences how being *between* states also renders the SOGH in many ways *beyond* the more nefarious trappings of the state and how and why this is made possible by a form of rootedness that transcends space, time and the state form itself.

## **2. The Golan Heights, Statelessness and Land Politics**

The rural, mountainous landscape of the Golan Heights is verdant and fertile, internationally renowned for its apples, cherries and vines. It has a rich supply of freshwater and recently discovered oil and gas reserves. With an average altitude around 1200 metres it connects Syria, Lebanon and Israel and can literally be considered a vantage point on the Middle East. Indeed, among other factors, its altitude defines its military and geo-political importance, and its position as a site of ongoing conflict and contestation. Occupied by Israel since the 1967 war with Syria, the Golan Heights were illegally and unilaterally annexed to Israel in 1981. The Israeli occupation displaced, forcefully transferred and affected a total Syrian population of 126,879, destroying 340 villages and farms. Internationally considered as under foreign occupation, Israel often breaches the human rights of the SOGH, who are supposed to retain sovereignty over their resources (Al-Haq and Al-Marsad, 2019). Today only five Syrian villages remain in the Golan Heights, with a (predominantly stateless) population of 24,505.<sup>1</sup> The Golan Heights are now also

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<sup>1</sup> For the most up-to-date compilation of affected villages, people and farms, see Brik, N. (2017). 'Map of Syrian villages and farms destroyed by Israel, and the Israeli settlements built in their place, in the Occupied Syrian Golan', URL: <http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Map-english-24.1-2.compressed.pdf> (Accessed 18/1/2018); also see Murphy & Gannon (2008).

home to 22,204 Israelis dispersed across 34 settlements. Agriculture, and increasingly tourism are the mainstay of the economy.

Prior to Israeli occupation, the Golan Heights were home to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious mixture of Syrians (Mara'i and Halabi, 1992); however, most of the stateless Syrians living there today belong to the Druze faith. Dispersed in the Levant, the Druze are an esoteric, endogamous, and non-proselytising religious community (Kastrinou, 2016). With roots dating to the 11th century Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, they are estimated to be a million people worldwide, mainly in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Their strong religious adherence does not translate into transnational uniformity in their political affiliations. On the contrary, the Druze are lauded as nationalists within their respective nation-states: for example, as leaders of the nationalist Syrian revolt against the French Mandate in 1925, as the only Arabs to be trusted to serve in the Israeli army, and as the 'kingmakers' in the confessional politics of Lebanon. Yet as nation-states erode, frontiers shift and new populist religious politics rupture the normative dictatorial grasp of entrenched regimes and fragile Middle Eastern states, the Druze, like other religious minorities, find themselves paradoxically situated between the promise of authoritarian protection and the threat of majoritarian marginalisation. For the stateless Syrian Druze in the Golan Heights, this means that they find themselves torn between their identities as Syrian and as Druze (Section 4).

Much academic work on statelessness continues (rightly) to emphasise the plight and vulnerability of the majority of stateless persons, who typically live in precarity, are deprived of basic human rights, and subject to violence and coercion with little recourse to legal protection (Bates et al., 2002; Bhabha, 2009; Parekh, 2014). Moreover, statelessness is associated with displaced populations who find themselves uprooted and *lacking* the protection of any state (Soguk, 1999). However, as far back as Arendt's seminal work on statelessness, the potential strategic benefits of statelessness have been identified. Arendt (1945) showed how refugees displaced during the Great Wars in Europe often opted for statelessness to avoid deportation as a result of the re-drawing of state boundaries. More recent scholarly work has sought to challenge the very opposition between dire statelessness on the one hand and the benefits of territorially attached citizenship on the other. Ong (2006) lays challenge to Agamben's (1998) separation of the People (as a political body with the rights of citizenship) from the people (as excluded bodies occupying the zone of indistinction) by emphasising the contemporary disarticulation of the very dimensions of citizenship (rights, entitlements, a state, territoriality etc.) and their re-articulation through market- or rights-based universalising norms (Ong, 2006: 500). At the same time, she goes on to argue:

"...diverse mobile populations (expatriates, refugees, migrant workers) can claim rights and benefits associated with citizenship, even as many citizens come to have limited or contingent protections within their own countries.

Thus the (re)combinations of globalizing forces and situated elements produce distinctive environments in which citizens, foreigners, and asylum-seekers make political claims through pre-existing political membership as well as on the grounds of universalizing criteria” (ibid.).

Arguments such as this allow for greater contingency and complexity of interpretation in the relationships among citizenship, territory, state and nation in different geo-political contexts, and allow us to consider the political agency of stateless groups as well as the means by which they contest and secure their legal and cultural rights. We share, however, McConnell’s (2013) concern that the post-nationalist argument of Ong and others problematically ignores the power of the state to mobilise essentialising identity politics in pursuit of their own agendas (McConnell, 2013: 968).

This more nuanced interpretation is well-illustrated by Eliassi (2016) who explores the situation of Kurds and their European diaspora. Eliassi argues that the achievement of nationality/citizenship by Kurds (whether in the Middle East or Europe) cannot be considered the solution to statelessness when it does not address their political claims for national self-determination, political autonomy and sovereignty. Moreover, the achievement of citizenship does little to protect the Kurds from marginalisation, discrimination and disadvantage resulting from the technologies and cultural politics of their host states. In a similar vein the SOGH are not deprived of the opportunity for citizenship. They can accept Israeli citizenship or they can relocate to Syria. Citizenship, in itself, is clearly not the answer to their precarious and stateless condition. Indeed, unlike many stateless peoples they are not deprived of a nation (they are dislocated from it) and they have not been physically uprooted. Indeed, rootedness itself is at the heart of the cultural and political missions of both the Israeli state and the SOGH, as well as the conflicts between them. We argue that the unique condition of the SOGH as both stateless and politically, materially, and culturally rooted to their land affords them a potent form of political agency which helps us understand how they have defied and resisted Israeli material and symbolic aggression for so long. While the symbolic trope of rootedness has previously been explored in geographically localized studies of Israeli occupied territories and resistance (e.g. Braverman, 2009; Long, 2009; Egoz, 2011; McKee, 2014; Mason and Dajani, 2019) we argue that its political potency is enhanced by its implication in the global geo-politics of statelessness. Our study is therefore located in the context of a more refined understanding of the politics of statelessness and citizenship (Ong, 2006) alongside an appreciation of the continued role and power of both the Israeli and Syrian states.

Statelessness, moreover, offers an analytical vantage point on the state itself. Neocleous’ (2003) work on the historical formation of the state identifies the creation of the first stateless people — bandits and pirates — as an important auxiliary of the creation of the state. Lacking the loyalty to belong to, as well as lacking the need for protection from the state, bandits and pirates were transformed

from reliable imperial mercenaries to threatening adversaries: statelessness, thus, also became 'inherently dangerous to the state' (Neocleous, 2003: 109). In a state-dominated global order, what vantage does statelessness afford, and could stateless peoples, like the SOGH, be both vulnerable and *threatening* to existing nationalist and sectarian state ideologies?

Whilst the plight and vantage of the SOGH must be understood in terms of their global and regional geo-political situation, their everyday geo-political struggles need to be understood through the lens of landscape. For, at the local level, landscape is precisely where geography and politics collide. Landscape cannot be understood solely as a symbolic and abstract political representation (e.g. Cosgrove, 1984), nor can it be understood solely as a depoliticised canvas for phenomenological enquiry and experiential interpretation (e.g. Arnason et al., 2012). Instead, it must be seen as a combined site of material and ideational struggle (e.g. Bender, 2002), one where politics informs experience and experience informs politics (Emery and Carrithers, 2016).

The technologies and powers of the state make it relatively straightforward to monopolise control over material resources to the detriment of an occupied community. And close interlinkages mean that control over material resources might, under some circumstances, facilitate control over the idea of landscape. Yet control cannot be equated with legitimacy. A growing body of literature has explored how Israel attempts to *legitimise* control over its occupied territories by manufacturing a particular landscape idea that seeks to normalise it as Israeli territory (Long 2009; Ram 2014, 2015; Gordon and Ram, 2016) and, specifically, lays claim for a long-standing rootedness of Israeli Jews in the land (Egoz, 2011; McKee, 2014; Handel et al., 2015). Such efforts are well-aligned with a wider body of literature that has aptly demonstrated the importance of rural landscapes to nationalist discourses and agendas (Gramsci, 1973, cited in Pratt, 1996, p. 76; Lowenthal, 1991; Zimmer, 1998; Sorlin, 1999). However, we seek to challenge the relatively recent idea that rural landscapes' association with nationalist agendas necessarily renders such areas hotbeds of right-wing and nationalist political support (e.g. Scoones et al., 2018: 3). Work on Israel and its occupied territories, for instance, has highlighted how rural landscapes, in combination with peasant production, have propagated alternative nationalisms and emancipatory political subjectivities (Swedenburg, 1990; Cohen and Kliot, 1992; Ram, 2014).

In the material that follows we present further evidence of Israeli efforts to legitimise control over the Golan Heights. Our focus, however, is on the ability of the SOGH to resist and defy such efforts on the basis of their material and cultural rootedness to the land. We argue that their intimate experience of the landscape informs and legitimises their political claims vis-à-vis the Israeli state and lends support to literatures that evidence the role of indigenous groups in unsettling, and therefore shaping, settler colonial geographies (e.g. Joronen, 2017; Plonski, 2018).

## **1. Methodology and Ethics**

The views and arguments expressed in this paper result from a collaboration among a local activist and researcher (Fakher El-Deen), a political anthropologist (Kastrinou) and a rural geographer (Emery). The work is based primarily on 10 interviews conducted by Fakher El-Deen, but also draws on Kastrinou's ethnographic fieldwork, testimonies collected by Al-Marsad, and media examples that exemplify the ideational struggle over the rural Golan landscape.

The selection of interviewees was made by Fakher El-Deen, following deliberations regarding the aims of the research. In this way, our sampling was not 'random' but relied on Fakher El-Deen's intimate local knowledge. Most of the Syrians in the occupied villages own some land, but there is huge variety: from individual gardens (1-2 dunums)<sup>2</sup> to larger agricultural holdings (30 dunums). Most of our interviewees (6) were active farmers and members of agricultural cooperatives, some of whom had been partially dispossessed by the occupation. Only two had no family land, while two had smaller pieces of family land used for subsistence and recreation. Interviewees are residents of Majdal Shams (9) and Buqata (1). All had first-hand memories of the 1967 war and subsequent occupation; their ages ranged from 50-80 years. Thus, their views reported here reflect both a specific generation and its particular connection to farming and the landscape; more work, beyond the scope of this paper, is necessary to describe and analyse the vantage of younger SOGH. All interviews proceeded on the basis of informed consent and the names used here are pseudonyms, with utmost care taken to protect our research interlocutors.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted on both sides of the Syrian border at various times between 2008 and 2015, and included more than 30 interviews conducted in Majdal Shams in November 2015. Insights from this ethnographic research have been indispensable in contextualising, embedding and analysing the interview material within historical, cultural and socio-political contexts.

Respecting the wishes of our interlocutors upon whose time, trust and rapport our research is based, we avoid reference to the stateless Syrians as, generally, 'Druze.' Most of our interlocutors choose to self-identify as native Syrians, pointing out that this designation is part of the sectarian propaganda, critically interrogated herein. In respecting their wishes, and for reasons of clarity and consistency, we will refer to them as Syrians of the Occupied Golan Heights (SOGH). However, when talking specifically about the religious group, and its cultural history, we will furnish the acronym with a 'D' - SDOGH.

### **1. Rootedness, Resistance, and Statelessness**

In this section we explore the politicization and contestation of the Golan land and landscape by both the Israeli government and the SOGH through specific examples relating primarily to agricultural production. We outline the historical, material and

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<sup>2</sup> One dunum is equal to 0.1 Hectare.

cultural specificities of rootedness that have motivated resistance to Israeli occupation and how agriculture, in particular, has become a key battleground in the Golani landscape in the opposing efforts of Israel and the SOGH, respectively, to control, discipline and normalize on the one hand, and to resist, defy and emancipate on the other. Finally we show how the political agency of the SOGH cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of the practical and ideological benefits they derive from their stateless condition.

#### **4.1 Historical and cultural rootedness**

At first, we thought the invasion would last a couple of days or months and that we would soon be back to our Syrian homeland.... We prefer to die than to leave our land ... Great credit also has to go to the Druze religious elders who went out into the street and insisted that everyone should not leave their homes.

Saida recounts this story in a matter-of-fact fashion. At 69, she is fiercely youthful, and one of the first female organisers of the local resistance to occupation. Her life has been embroiled in politics; which makes her statement regarding the significance of the religious shaykhs more stark. This brings to the fore an intimate ethnographic connection between land (*ard*) and honour (*'ird*): 'he who has no land cannot protect his honour and he who has no honour has no religion' (Khuri 2004: 55). Culturally, land is a central tenet for the continuation of the Druze community, connecting the complex cultural category of honour (*'ird*) — referring to the protection of close female relations — to land, which itself then becomes engendered in the rich social milieu of protection, kinship, solidarity and shame (Kastrinou 2016; Khuri, 2004).

Historically, the collective memory of the French colonial retaliation for siding with Pasha Atrash's forces in 1925, resulting in the destruction of the village of Majdal Shams, was mentioned in all of our interviews as a main reason for staying during the 1967 and 1973 invasions. Economy played a role, as well, since before the Israeli invasion, the majority of land in the Golan Heights was farmed under tenancy arrangements or involved pastoralism on state-owned common lands (*musha'*) (Wingfield, 2013). In contrast to both Bedouin and other Syrian newcomers to the area, the majority of the SDOGH were private landowners, as a result of their labour investment in terracing and improving mountainous state lands since arriving from Lebanon in 1860 (Firro, 1990: 159). The Druze villages of the Golan thus had something economically tangible to lose by fleeing to Syria as a result of the occupation.

In contemporary everyday life, connectivity to land manifests itself in normative values and expectations in human-land relations. Selling one's land is considered shameful and, according to our informants, is very rare. Moreover, it is socially embarrassing to be seen as, or labelled as 'lazy' (*kazoul*) (a value in the work ethic



found among many agricultural communities, see Emery, 2014; Davidson, 2009). In the Golan Heights, farmers are bestowed with praise when, for example, 'he only changed out of his work clothes to go to his daughter's wedding!' More widely, connectivity to the land is sanctified through the purity of associated financial transactions: 'Only the money that comes directly from the land is *halal* (clean) to them,' Sami told us, going on to explain how very religious, pious families or individuals (usually shaykhs) consider money derived from doing business to be 'dirty' (*wasih*) and prohibited (*haram*). This contrasts with money derived directly from personal work on the land, and most such families in the Golan have a small parcel of land for household subsistence, as well as land with apples or cherries for selling at the market. Thus, connection to land is *embodied*, whilst the dangers of potential contamination are of grave religious significance. 'Dirty' money is used for keeping their house (bills, maintenance, etc.), whereas 'clean' money is used to buy foodstuffs the family cannot produce for itself. The embodiment of Druzeness itself, then, is inextricably linked to accessing, working and returning to the land.

Druze belief in reincarnation (*taqamus*) (Bennett, 2006), as well as spiritual markers, such as shrines (*maqamat*) and places of prayer (*khalwat*) (see Fartacek, 2012), further bind the SDOGH to their land. Sharing many aspects of other egalitarian reincarnation discourses (Kastrinou and Layton, 2016), the Druze believe that all human souls were created at the same time, human souls only reincarnate into human bodies, and, specifically, Druze souls only reincarnate into Druze bodies. The relationship between land and the divine is similar to that between Druze bodies and souls: in the same way that Druze souls are given permanence in bodies, land is the place where the divine manifests itself, and indeed where the Druze community is given permanence. Belief in reincarnation is very widespread, with only two of our interlocutors openly rejecting it. Even interlocutors who self-identified as secularist believed in reincarnation: 'I believe in the unity of the universe... Everything comes and goes back to earth' said Ahmad, 68, who is a teacher and a farmer and described himself as a communist.

Reincarnation provides a discourse through which a generalised eternal interconnection between people and land can be made. Kastrinou & Layton (2016) discuss reincarnation as a *politics of time*, as a contemporary discourse that provides a narrative rootedness to the land that is not contingent upon the realisation of nationalist territorial claims. This helps to understand why the SDOGH in particular have felt less threatened, and in some ways emboldened, by their stateless condition: regardless of whether they have found themselves a minority group within or without a state, their claim to space through time has remained a consistent political strategy and source of reassurance. In this way, Druze theology has been used to transcend the state/nation dichotomy and thus statelessness in itself does not hold any existential danger (Aboultaif, 2015; Kastrinou, 2016; Khuri, 2004).

## **4.2 From Rootedness to Resistance: Material and ideational struggles over the Golani landscape**

### *4.2.1 Land Expropriations and Restrictions*

Although the SDOGH were spared the worst of the forced evictions and dispossessions inflicted by the Israeli army on other members of the indigenous population, they were and have been subject to significant expropriations of land, human rights violations and discrimination by the legislative apparatus of the Israeli state (Halabi, 1992; Murphy & Gannon, 2008; O Cuinn, 2011; Hanlon, 2012). While the majority of the SDOGH with land title retained their private holdings (see Section 4.1), the community as a whole was deprived of access to common grazing lands:

Whilst the Syrian government respected the ownership of each village's common land, Israel considers all land that is not under private ownership to be 'state land' [Thiab, 68 yrs old, civil engineer and farmer]

There are no more cows and goats among the Syrians, only a few animals to remember! What parts of the common are still cultivated have all turned into little farms and there is a specific Israeli agri-environmental law which restricts grazing on the common land [Salman, 71 yrs old, farmer]

The Israeli state refused to accept community ownership of common grazing lands that had hitherto been respected by the Syrian government, and subsequently introduced legal restrictions on grazing practices through environmental designations and laws. Davis (1983) reports that agricultural production was flourishing in the Golan prior to the 1967 invasion, with 64% of the population employed in food production. Molony et al. (2009: 57-63), meanwhile, argue that the vast reduction in livestock-keeping following the occupation was not only an indirect consequence of the appropriation of land but an intentional policy designed to deprive the SOGH of their local land-based private economies. As Yiftachel and Segal (1998: 501) point out, these environmental appropriations serve the same general purpose as military appropriations, which emphasize the Israeli state as the absolute power holder in the control of lands. By rejecting Israeli citizenship since 1982, the SOGH have suffered further restrictions and discrimination relating to agricultural practices relative to settler farmers:

We have had to adapt our farming based purely on our abilities and experiences. We have received no support for agricultural development whilst the settlers receive scientific expertise, equipment, infrastructure, financial aid and irrigation. The settlers have more than double the area of agricultural land as us, receive a larger quota of water and pay less for it. [Yusef, 75, owner of large farm]

We have been prevented from reclaiming land and developing our own irrigation systems. Meanwhile Israel took control of Ram Lake, the largest

water body in the Golan, and stopped us from using it ... The settlers get triple the quota of water and pay half as much as us. This hugely affects the amount and type of production we can engage in and means we cannot compete - you cannot compare the two situations. [Ahmad, 68]

#### 4.2.2 Resistance and land autonomy

Autonomy is an important expression of Druze piety because those who are able to sustain themselves from their own work in the land have a greater degree of independence from worldly, selfishness-driven profiteering. In the Golan Heights, land autonomy has gained the additional political layer of resisting dependence upon Israel. This ethic of resistance derived from rootedness to the land was expressed by many of our respondents:

Our home is the most sacred thing to us, we did not leave our land to find home, we wish that the homeland [Syria] comes back to us, so we resist the occupation... Your land is your honour, your home, you have to defend it. For me, homeland is the mother of man, the big house which protects everyone ... we have not once said that we are Israelis, we are Syrian Arabs under occupation and we want our homeland to be a secular democratic state.  
[Saida]

Our connection with mother earth is so deep and strong, we can't leave our homeland ... The principle is to keep our land, our homeland and Arabism.  
[Ghali, 61 yrs old, large farm owner]

Despite religious and cultural connotations, the political discourse expressed in the above quotes is one that eschews sectarian identity politics, evidencing counter-state hegemony in the adoption of secularism and Arabism as opposed to Druze sectarian particularism (see Section 4.3). Many of our respondents also reported that despite the Israeli ingresses, the size of their holdings actually increased in the years immediately after the 1967 and 1973 wars. This can be explained by one of the most famous acts of resistance undertaken by the SOGH. Recognising the Israeli government's likely claim to the commons the community occupied, divided up and enclosed large areas of formerly rough common and improved it for apple cultivation. As O Cuinn (2011) reports, the apple trees are a potent symbol for the SOGH and were as much an affirmation of the community's rightful connection and rootedness to the land as they were indicative of direct struggles over land and resources.

This cultivation and use of the commons remains highly contested between the SOGH and the Israeli government, with respective rounds of planting and uprooting being highly symbolic of this struggle over claims to, and connection with, the land. Beyond the internal and external symbolism of produce, many of the SOGH implicitly connect farming and 'developing the land as a matter of steadfastness (*sumud*)' (Sami). *Sumud* has been explored widely as a form of resistance among

Palestinian farmers (e.g. Swedenburg, 1990; Braverman, 2009) and considered recently in the Golan as a strategy of non-violent resistance against the injustice of misrecognition imposed by the Israeli state (Mason and Dajani, 2019). In another famous example, the SOGH responded to the confiscation of, and discriminatory charging for, indigenous water resources by developing their own irrigation systems and installing rainwater collection tanks on their lands. This remains an area of ongoing contestation and struggle with the Israeli authorities (see Molony et al, 2009: 71-80), representative of the SOGH's determination to retain sovereignty over their resources and to resist dependency on Israel for the provision of their basic needs.

#### 4.2.3 Contesting the Landscape Idea

A deep, symbolic and cultural connection to the land among agriculturalists has been widely reported to explain why farming, farm work and the rural landscapes they produce are considered not only as material economic activities and artefacts but at the heart of the maintenance and reproduction of identities (e.g. Cohen 1985, Emery, 2014, Ingold 1984). This is also very much associated with the conveyance of a claimed right to the landscape on account of a historic and/or continued relationship between a particular community/nation and the land it works (Egoz et al., 2011). It is on these terms that we can understand the nature of the conflict between the Israeli government and the SOGH as much as an issue of symbolism, ideas and identities as one of resource allocation. Moreover, in this context, the Golan landscape is not just a multifariously interpreted curiosity, but an ideological battleground over competing nationalist claims.

Establishing a working and agricultural connection between Israelis and the land (whilst simultaneously depriving others to do likewise) has been central to the Israeli government in their quest for establishing legitimate claims to the land. Egoz (2011) argues that land, and farming landscapes in particular, became symbolically central to Zionism's efforts to promote the creation of a homeland by inventing a stereotype of '*the New Jew*' as attached and rooted to territory as opposed to the stereotype of the '*exilic wandering Jew* that has no roots' (p. 167, italics in original). This need to establish a 'settlement myth' through the ideological loading of the landscape (Kellerman, 1996) has been explored in relation to Israeli agricultural settlements by Handel et al. (2015). The point of these myths, they point out, is to normalise the Israeli control of the territories; they are primarily aimed at the secular Israeli citizen, rather than the occupied communities or the international community (see also Long, 2009; Ram, 2014, 2015; Gordon and Ram, 2016). Handel et al. show how the Israeli wine industry (mis)uses the concept of *terroir* to manufacture an association among land, soil, weather, people and rooted connectivity in the so-called 'Wine Country' of the Golan Heights. Long (2009), meanwhile, shows how diasporic tree-planting in occupied Palestine serves a similar

function of creating a physical, and deep, connectedness or rootedness to the land. More specifically in the Golan Heights, Molony et al. (2009, p.50) have reported that settler communities have taken to importing and planting mature trees to give the impression of longevity and permanent rootedness in the landscape.

While the manufactured idea of *terroir* and tree-planting can act as physical claims of future rootedness to a territory, they lack historical legitimacy. How, then, can the Israeli government and the Zionist movement link agricultural connectedness to the land with a long historical pedigree in its settlement myths and normalisation efforts? To answer this question we look at the example of the Jacob Sheep, which have been proposed to be 'reintroduced' to the Golan Heights as the living embodiment of Israel's historic claims to the holy land. While biblical species have previously been re-introduced under the auspices of conservation (Mendelssohn, 1993), the agricultural connection here serves a particularly potent means of rooting Israeli settlers to occupied land. The historical legitimacy of a relationship among stock, people, and place has been explored by anthropologists through recourse to the 'genetic metaphor' (Gray, 1998). This suggests that just as livestock are bred to be suited to live in particular environments, so too are the herders and farmers who tend them.

The story began in Canada with the happenstance acquisition of four Jacob sheep by Israeli ex-pat Gil and South African Jenna Lewinsky and was reported in *The Times of Israel* in December 2015 (Lidman, 2015). The article reports how the couple became fascinated by the history of the breed and their connection to Judaism and the Middle East. They became motivated by a desire to 'repatriate' the sheep to Israel, and specifically to the Golan Heights. The sheep are described as one of the oldest 'heritage breeds' in the world, linked to Judaism through the book of Genesis, in which Jacob (after whom the breed is named) is recorded as tending a flock of sheep with 'spots and speckles'. The Lewinskys thus describe the sheep as 'biblical' and Jewish:

"What drew us to the Jacob sheep is that the story parallels the story of the Jewish people ... Jews have been wandering for 2,000 years, and the sheep have a similar story, from Canaan to Canada today. It's a full journey."

The couple lament the fact that whilst the 'exilic' Jews have returned to their homeland, the Jacob sheep have not. It is clear from the narrative of the story, however, that the sheep are to be used as much as a justification for the 'return' of a Jewish population to the land and occupied territories of Israel, as the nation is to be used as a justification for the 'return' of the sheep. The reason the sheep can perform this function so well, is because of the historical legitimacy they give to the Jewish people and the claimed territories of Israel:

The Lewinskys point out that sheep have always been intricately woven into the history of Judaism, from the wool used for ritual garments like the *tallit* to the sacrificial pascal lamb. "Moses was a shepherd. He saw the burning bush

when he was running after sheep,” said Gil Lewinsky. “Attending to livestock is a core profession of our people, and an important part of our roots.”

Hence the sheep, through their association with the Jewish people, and their association with occupied territories provide a legitimacy for a Jewish presence. But it is a legitimacy that can only be upheld if the Jewish people and their sheep are reunited on ‘their lands.’ This mutuality of the Jacob sheep and the Jewish people, and their associated right to the land, is extended through a potent use of the genetic metaphor. The article reports a desire to establish a heritage farm in the Golan Heights because ‘the mineral rich soils mean they won’t have to provide supplemental minerals like farmers do in other parts of the world’ (Lidman, 2015). This could be interpreted as evidence of the sheep’s, and by extension their Jewish shepherds’, right to the Golan landscape through the concept of being ‘bred to’ the land (Gray, 1998). More explicitly, the article also reports that the sheep share a ‘uniquely Jewish’ genetic disorder: Tay-Sachs disease, which affects Ashkenazi Jews. This powerful ethnogenetic narrative thus asserts that the Sheep and the Jewish people are genetically bound to one another, and to the land to which they lay claim.

The effectiveness of this nationalist rhetoric is evidenced by the fact that the Lewinskys were able to overcome legal and bureaucratic hurdles to successfully transport a flock of Jacob Sheep to Israel in January 2017. This was a result of high level support for the ‘beautiful story’ by the Israeli Embassy in Canada and a crowd-sourcing campaign to cover the transportation costs and taxes. Now in Israel, the Lewinskys are also campaigning for the Jacob sheep to be recognised as the national animal and to be afforded special conservation status.

Whilst this ideational work, through agricultural connectedness to the land, continues to gain momentum, the Israeli government’s aspiration to populate the Golan Heights with settler farmers has fallen short of targets. They been hugely successful, both ideationally and materially, however, in their claim to the Golan Heights as an Israeli tourist destination. Such claims are primarily targeted at secular, middle-class Israelis (Handel et al., 2015) and Ram (2014) has illustrated how the development of the ski resort at Mount Hermon is part of an effort to normalise the landscape through spatial mimicry. The development, in physical appearance as well as in marketing, mimics a European Alpine ski resort, with the intention to render the militarily important mountain a site of passive fun and entertainment. Moreover, representations of the resort mobilise a discourse of whiteness which, argues Ram (2014), serves to set the snow-capped mountain apart from its Middle Eastern setting.

Ram (2014, 2015) also argues, however, that the normalisation process never entirely succeeds because the military history remains all too present in the contemporary landscape. These cracks are exploited by the Arab Centre for Human Rights in the Golan Heights (Al-Marsad), which has launched its own ‘alternative

tourism' service. With this service, Al-Marsad aims to challenge the Israeli tourist narrative that seeks to 'normalise the occupation' and cover up 'the injustices committed against the native Syrian population' (Al-Marsad, n.d.). That narrative constructs the Golan not only as a benign site of recreational fun, but also as an apolitical site of natural beauty mandating the oppressive use of development control and conservation restrictions against the SOGH (Yiftachel & Segal, 1998). Instead, the alternative tourist experience gives the 'local Syrian population a voice to speak about their experiences under the occupation' and shows 'the beauty of the Golan through a human rights lens' (Al-Marsad, n.d.). Activities offered include touring indigenous towns, destroyed villages and Israeli settlements alongside more conventional activities such as hiking, kayaking and swimming in hot springs. What Al-Marsad is able to do, then, is to appropriate the development and portrayal of the Golan (by Israel) as a tourist destination (founded on its natural beauty and recreation) while simultaneously bringing to the fore the very human rights violations and struggles that conventional Israeli tourism tries to hide. An example of what Joronen (2017, following Agamben) has referred to as 'destituent resistance' to the Israeli settler colonial project, the indigenous Syrians are able to consolidate their political narrative around the landscape's entire symbolic repertoire, while the Israelis are necessarily more limited, and thus have to be more creative, in their quest for legitimacy and ideological claims to the land.

In the following section we show how the specificities of SOGH resistance can not be understood in terms of rootedness alone. We must also consider the political empowerment and benefits arising from their stateless condition.

#### **4.3 The Stateless Advantage: Between and beyond particularism and sectarianism**

*I do not exist on the ID card  
A string and a piece of wood are my gunpowder  
Laissez passer, TootArd*

'Laissez passer' is the name of a song and the title of TootArd's debut international album. The ensemble was founded by Hasan and Rami Nakhleh from the occupied Golan Heights. On the group's webpage, they state:

We're permanent residents in Israel, but not citizens. We have no travel documents. When we travel we need the laissez passer. With no nationality, we're officially 'undefined.' But in statelessness, the five-piece has discovered musical freedom. TootArd grew up understanding that borders are something imposed by governments, lines that only exist on a map.  
(<https://tootard.com/bio>)

The radical political realisation of the arbitrariness of borders and their manipulation, coupled with the embodied reality of statelessness, offers 'musical freedom' to the group. The group has found affinity with, and been inspired by, other stateless music, landscapes and political conditions, such as that of the

Tuareg of North Africa. This notion of freedom in chains echoes the prison allegory relayed at the start of our paper. Indeed, we frequently heard people emphasising their political exceptionalism by saying that people here are 'more Syrian than Syrians in Syria', or that 'after the fall of communism, the Golan is the only place that communism is on the rise' – the joke is not literal but serves to emphasise the progressive left-leaning tendencies of its people. Is it possible that the historical experience of occupation and the condition of statelessness have offered the SOGH a flavour of not only musical but also political freedom?

#### *4.3.1 Eschewing Israeli propaganda*

The parameters of rootedness outlined in Section 4.1 provide firm explanations as to why the Druze chose to stay in the Golan following the war and occupation. But, of course, it was not entirely their choice to stay. As Said, a geography teacher, explains, religious belonging and Druzeness were to become potent tools of sectarian identity politics within Israel's broader ideological project:

The village residents stayed for a number of reasons: the memory of the 1925 revolution, the fact that Mount Hermon did not witness any acts of war. We later found out, however, that the Israeli government had an interest in keeping the Druze as a protected minority to propagate divisions between Arabs in other parts of their occupied territory.

Claims to population-targeting amounting to ethnic cleansing during the Israeli occupation are widely acknowledged (Taiseer Maray in Murphy & Gannon, 2008: 26). It was not the first time, and it would not be the last, that Israel would use outright sectarianism to divide and sub-divide. Through the propagation of 'Druze particularism' (the construction of cultural, religious, social, and even genetic difference between the Druze and other Arabs in Palestine (Firro, 2005, 2001, 1999)), the Israeli state attempts to 'define' and control both the Druze community that live in northern Israel and have Israeli citizenship, and the Syrian Druze who are stateless. The myth of the Jew-Druze blood covenant, in which Jethro/Shu'ayb, who is considered one of the Druze prophets, married his daughter to Moses, has been used as early as 1948 to produce and instrumentalise a political affinity between the Jewish state and the Druze (Firro, 2005: 227). State propaganda of this 'natural' affinity is expressed in multiple ways. For example, to reinforce Druze separateness from Muslims and other Palestinians Israel had, by 1977, created a completely separate education curriculum teaching Druze religion (as separate to Islam), folklore, as well as 'Israeli-Druze consciousness' (Firro, 2001: 50; Firro, 1999; Tarabieh, 1995). Israeli Druzes serve mandatory conscription, unlike other Arabs that are exempt (Hajjar, 2000; Kanaaneh, 2008). Moreover, Israeli state-funded propaganda has produced a substantial body of academic and lay knowledge on 'the Druze', which serves to essentialise and exoticise them (see Firro, 1999, 2001). This is nowhere more evident than in the fascination of Israeli scholars with the Druze concept of '*taqiyya*', which translates as 'dissimulation.' This is a concept



derived from Shia Islam, which permits adherents of the faith to disguise their beliefs when the preservation of the community is at stake (Makārim, 1974). For Israeli scholars and state officials, *taqiyya* is used to explain and to construct the Druze as deferential to power, or, to explain (away) the refusal of the SDOGH to accept Israeli citizenship (Firro, 2001: 48). The Israeli state instrumentalises this scholarship in order to suggest that Syrian nationalism among the SOGH is motivated by continued deference to Syria and the fear of repercussions should the Golan territory return to Syria, as opposed to a genuine sense of belonging and national affinity.

However, this particularist propaganda has not gone unchallenged among the SOGH. On the contrary, the SOGH's lack of deference to *either* the Syrian or the Israeli state can be explained, at least in part, by their stateless condition. Below, we examine two important means of collective resistance to Israeli particularism that were emboldened by statelessness; the strike of 1982 and cross-ceasefire line higher education.

When the Israeli Knesset passed the annexation of the Golan Heights on 14 December 1981, the SOGH responded with an initial three-day general strike. However, on 14 February, and after Israel detained four community leaders, a general strike was declared that lasted six months (Mara'i and Halabi, 1992: 83). Israel responded by imposing a curfew and eventually a full blockade. Electricity and water were cut, while crops and livestock either were deliberately destroyed or perished. Villagers responded with mass demonstrations and curfew violations to harvest crops (Kennedy, 1984: 53). Moreover, they seized the opportunity to collectivise and 'strike-in-reverse' by creating new agricultural cooperatives, distributing food among the community, sharing work and even completing a major sewer project (Kennedy 1984: 54). In the following quote, Saida, who along with her husband had an active role in organising the resistance, recalls the time of the strike:

Firstly, they [IDF] blockaded the villages ... During the period of the siege it was forbidden to go out, forbidden to see your neighbour, forbidden to stand at the window! The strike was difficult! The [Israeli] soldiers distributed identities to people, but people threw them! ... Then, delegations came from the Arabs in Palestine, in solidarity with us and this was a sweet life... there was interaction with the people of Palestine, Arab members of the Knesset, even Jewish members of the Knesset, who were against this decision. We always had guests, who brought material and moral and financial aid. But then Israel stopped people entering our area, and cut off the milk for the kids, so they brought milk, and food... We made a committee responsible for the distribution [of food], to fulfil the needs of everyone in the village. People with shops [contributed], those who had cows were distributing milk for children. But what did they [IDF] do? They burned the wheat that feeds the cows! When something like that happened, people went to give him [the affected farmer] wheat, which they had in their homes, or run during the night to extinguish the

fire... You feel unity at that time, that all people are one fist... If you come to my house I do not care that I do not have meat to cook, six months like this... no beef to cook, and there is no open shop. But we store in our house the supply of food, so can eat food from home one full year without the need to buy something ... this is something sweet. Ah, the strike. We were happy.

The strike finished, somewhat abruptly, when Israel invaded Lebanon in July 1982. Its main achievement was that the SOGH were not forced to take Israeli citizenship, and they showed that they would not simply be deferential to Israeli state power, in either the short or longer term. Their solidarity with and from other Palestinians is also clear evidence of the SOGH's refusal to particularise themselves as Druze; preferring to struggle collectively rather than accept the (relatively) privileged position of the Druze in Israel (see 4.3.2). Although the strike did not spare the SOGH from human rights violations, to this day it continues to inform political resistance and the rejection of citizenship, as well as economic cooperation among Syrian farmers and the establishment of a range of institutions (e.g. trade associations, community-owned medical centre, theatre), which challenged the political and economic authority of the occupation and compete with the Israeli-imposed municipal functions and infrastructure.

Although all primary and secondary education in the occupied villages is centrally administered by Israel (Tarabieh, 1995), university education is one of the main fields of resistance and continuity between the SOGH and Syria. While also having access to Israeli universities, almost 1,500 students from the Golan have received higher education in Syria from 1976-1981 and 1994-2012 (Phillips, 2015: 9). The process of crossing the ceasefire line is administered by the International Committee of the Red Cross. This initiative was undertaken by Golani residents who used their connections with the Israeli Communist Party to broker a deal between Syria and Israel through the Soviet Union. The Syrian state offered generous fellowships as well as free choice of enrolment for SOGH in academic programmes. SOGH who studied in Syria and spent their formative years there were able to maintain kinship ties, build significant friendships and strengthen emotional connections with the 'motherland' (see Kastrinou, 2016: 164-169). Most of our interlocutors who had been to university in Damascus described it as a dream come true. Moreover, they were able to improve their socio-economic condition considerably: 'There are more teachers and doctors here than anywhere else in Israel' explained Salam, a dentist who studied in Syria: a view repeated many times over. It is important to make clear that this level of educational opportunity (the freedom of choice and the generous financial support for their studies) is unrivalled when compared to the Druze (or citizens more generally) in either Syria or Israel, and while viewed as a means of reaffirming affinities with Syria, it did little to extend or reinforce Syrian state ideology into the Golan. On the contrary, it tended to foster the politicisation of young Golani students into the rebel politics of the Syrian uprising.

The example of university education demonstrates that, contrary to Israeli propaganda, the SOGH's Druzeness is not antithetical to their Syrian belonging. The nationalist and economic processes outlined here have actually helped to increase the political cleavage between the stateless Druze in the GH and the Druze in Northern Israel, who are Israeli citizens and conscripts to the Israeli army. The SOGH's collective struggle against occupation has created an acute understanding of the politics of 'Druzeness', indicative of which is the language of indigeneity that is used by the local human rights NGO, Al-Marsad. Nowhere in their published documents and reports do they mention the Druze religion of the stateless Syrians; there is a clear privileging of secular national identity precisely because of Druze particularism within Israel, along with a narrative distancing of the two Druze communities. It is, therefore, important to note that not only has the stateless condition emboldened resistance vis-a-vis the Druze in Israel in practical terms, but also that the SOGH have instrumentalised their stateless identity against and beyond particularist renditions of 'Druzeness'.

#### *4.3.2 Syrian nationalism beyond the statist grasp*

The condition of statelessness has been fundamental in providing a political, ideological and rooted space beyond the grasp of the state (be it Syria or Israel). The SOGH have been able to turn 'dire' statelessness into collective and individual forms of resistance against occupation, and, simultaneously, to embody and perform their own Syrian nationalism. By studying the cultural politics of state-representation in folklore festivals, Kastrinou argued that pre-war Syrian state rhetoric was surprisingly cosmopolitan, in that it manipulated a depoliticised form of cultural heterogeneity in order to establish itself as the guarantor of harmony and social peace (Kastrinou, 2016). This is an 'imperial' form of sectarianism, because the state uses an imperial rather than 'nationalist' ideology that emphasises state-sanctioned difference rather than national homogeneity (Kastrinou, 2018). Remarkably, this rhetoric, which permeated all the state's consent-building cultural policies and has been relatively successful, was antithetical to a secular, homogenised, national identity. Instead, it helped valorise a state-sanctioned cultural 'sectarianism' under the hegemony of the President whose role is to be, ironically, the 'guarantor of harmony.' As the war brutally demonstrated, this was also a precarious harmony that could readily be undone; transforming a benign and celebrated cultural heterogeneity into outright (albeit equally fictitious) religious sectarianism.

The ethnographic vignette below, taken from a longer life history of one of the community's revolutionary leaders, serves to illustrate how the condition of statelessness led the SOGH to develop their own Syrian nationalism — outside and beyond the state-sanctioned imperial sectarianism of the Syrian state.

We are enjoying a long breakfast in Sami's house, I have finally managed to get a few hours with him for a long interview. We speak about his childhood memories before the occupation, how his father, who was a trader, would take

him along to his travels in Damascus. He did not like school, 'I was wild' he says with a cheeky nod. 'The teachers would try to influence us [to resist the occupation]. But I did not understand this at that time. Only when I saw most of them in prison! 'By the second war, in 1973, we were beginning to wake up to politics and geopolitics.' He did not finish school, because he was detained, for the first time, in Israeli prison in 1974 for 5 years. 'This was the best school for me.' In prison, Sami met Palestinian revolutionaries: 'It was the most intellectual time and we would have big discussions with the Palestinians, about communism, socialism and the Soviet Union. The Israeli prison really educated us, made us understand, and brought us closer to the Palestinian liberation struggle.'

In prison, people from the Golan Heights started building informal and formal relationships with the Palestinian movement. This process created a critical distancing from state-controlled narratives in two ways: firstly, SOGH resistance was not to follow the political trajectories of Syrian parties (which, from the late 70s until mid-80s were either purged or made conformist); secondly, they became critical of the Syrian Ba'th party and government. Indeed, many SOGH questioned whether the Syrian state had purposely left the Golan undefended during the Israeli invasions of 1967 and 1973. For Sami, who had worked clandestinely with the Syrian authorities to transmit sensitive information over the ceasefire line, his connection to the Palestinian movement meant the start of a radical questioning of the motives and strategies of the Syrian state. Sami became connected to PLFP, others maintained their Ba'th connections, while other political associations, such as Nasserism and Arab socialism, are still visible in people's businesses and homes today. Although political opinions among the SOGH are diverse, the political realliance that happened through links with the Palestinian movement within and beyond the prison has had a significant impact on SOGH. This theme merits its own research but for our purposes here it is important to state that the particularities of their stateless condition opened up this field of politics.

The war in Syria led towards a new sectarianisation of political identities (Hinnebusch, 2016), ushered in new forms of populist struggle (Proudfoot, 2017), and marked a new era of proxy conflict in the imperialist struggle for Syria. In a sense, it has made the differences across the ceasefire line much more pronounced. The Druze in Syria have found themselves in a difficult position, between battlegrounds of regime and opposition forces (Kastrinou, 2018). They have attempted to remain as neutral as possible in the conflict, often juggling a social peace with neighbours alongside ensuring regime protection. Yet, in Syria they have not been able to avoid the sectarianisation of the conflict and political discourses used in the decade-long war. For the Druze in Jaramana, Damascus, this has meant that especially since 2013 voices of political opposition and neutrality have progressively been muted, or undermined by the power of an alliance between sectarian and nationalist (the social nationalist party) militia. As a result, what used to be a liberal and multicultural Damascene suburb has become more sectarian,

and more Druze. In this form, sectarianism has been a result of the Syrian war, not its cause.

For the SOGH, the war in Syria has had repercussions in both their everyday lives and their politics. Occasional spillovers at the border have taken many forms: from rockets and shrapnel to Israel's use of military facilities in the Golan Heights to attack Syria, and collective crossings into the Golan Heights. Their statelessness, though, has spared them both the dire consequences of war felt by the entire (including Druze) population of Syria and the divisive and often bloody consequences of mandatory conscription into either the Syrian or Israeli army. Conscription in Syria made it virtually impossible to remain neutral in the war, with conscripts and their families forced to choose to fight with or against Assad and with or against what were often close neighbours and friends of other faiths. Statelessness allowed the SOGH to engage in the wider politics of the war, without themselves being bloodily embroiled. In 2011 and 2012, internal Syrian politics reached the Golan Heights: an anti-Assad campaign, small but important, set out to 'decouple Syrian patriotism from support for the regime' (Phillips, 2015: 12). To the activists of this campaign, many of whom had been university students in Damascus, Syrian belonging meant partaking in the uprising against the Syrian government. Phillips (2015: 15) refers to this re-imagining of Syrian nationalism as 'schizophrenic,' namely protesting against the Syrian regime, whilst affirming Syrian national belonging and resisting Israeli occupation. Such a characterisation implicitly assumes the inherent coupling of state and nation, and overlooks the long and nuanced history of rootedness, resistance and statelessness that we have explored. Even more significant than the explicitly anti-Assad minority is the collective insistence on being Syrian in spite of the Syrian state, as succinctly demonstrated in what a middle-aged man sternly said during a casual fieldwork encounter: 'Even if Syria ceases to exist, we will *always* be Syrian!'

The diversity of political views within the Golan Heights illustrates, moreover, a lack of deference to either state and the failure of populist state ideologies to encapsulate this rural population. Rooted and collective forms of resistance, connections to the Palestinian struggle, avoiding conscription in both Syrian and Israeli armies, and unique educational arrangements have allowed the SOGH to turn statelessness to their advantage; in many ways their 'betweenness' has allowed them to rise above and beyond the particularist and sectarian ideologies which have proved successful forms of control over the population in Israel and Syria. Today, the SOGH are still rejecting Israeli citizenship and opting to remain stateless, contrary to many Israeli media claims. While there has been an upward trend in the acquisition of Israeli citizenship in recent years, there are only 2,908 Israeli citizens in the four occupied villages, or 12% of the total population, most of which boycotted the recent Israeli municipal elections (Delforno, 2019: 17, 27).

### **3. Under house arrest: Stateless but rooted**

We began this paper with an allegory of the revolutionary who, in prison, has a freer mind than when not incarcerated. This allegory has special significance for the stateless Syrians living under occupation in the Golan Heights. It aptly demonstrates how the political consciousness of the population has remained free, and perhaps become more so, on account of their stateless condition. The SOGH remain Syrian despite the military might of Israel, despite the 'sectarianisation' that the war in Syria has caused, despite Druze particularism in Israel and even despite the global trend of conservatism among rural populations. In this respect, the example of the SOGH helps us to see why statelessness should not always be seen as dire but must be considered within its wider geohistorical and cultural context (Ong, 2006). Yet the prison anecdote is important in another way, for it reminds us of the continued omnipresence and power of the state (McConnell, 2013) and justifies our interest in looking at the intersection of the material and ideational struggle over land and resources in the Golan Heights. While we are arguing that statelessness can be seen as advantageous at the level of raising political consciousness and distancing from state ideology, it is important to reiterate that this is not a strategic choice by the SOGH. They have chosen statelessness from a limited range of options. Ultimately, Israel remains the occupying force, with raw power and violence at its disposal.

In spite of this, contrary to the assumptions laid out at the beginning of this paper, it is precisely their statelessness, their Druzeness, and their rural rootedness that strengthens, rather than weakens, the political resolve of the SOGH. For this reason, the metaphor of the revolutionary in prison does not fully explain the political motivation and legitimacy of the SOGH. To do so it would be better to think of the revolutionary under house arrest for we have demonstrated that it is the SOGH's condition as stateless, while remaining materially and culturally rooted to the land, that informs and emboldens their political claims. We have evidenced how the idea of the land and the landscape is heavily contested in the claim-making of both Israel and the SOGH. We have shown that, clearly, the physical appropriation and control of resources is not sufficient for (and can indeed work against) Israel's political mission to normalize and legitimize its occupancy of the Golani territory among its own people. We have illustrated that, in many ways, the SOGH have been more successful in employing the land and landscape in their political claim-making. Despite the Israeli government's efforts to erase evidence of Syrian inhabitation from the Golan landscape, that landscape, in all its variety, remains a historically and symbolically rich resource upon which the indigenous population bases its political claims. The Israeli government has exercised its power to control Golan resources, land and residents *materially*, but has notably failed to achieve the same *ideologically*.

Through the perspectives and practices of the stateless Syrian Druze farmers in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, this paper has probed a nuanced understanding of statelessness; one that goes against simplistic renditions of statelessness as a dire condition. Moreover, we have argued against the essentialised notion of Druze

deference, and also against the representation of rural populations as susceptible to, or propagators of, nationalist and populist political discourses. Indeed, rural spaces are fertile political grounds for nationalist discourses. But they are inherently contested. Precisely because rural populations have the political material of landscape close to hand they are able to demystify dominant ideological appropriations and pursue their own emancipatory political agendas (Emery and Carrithers, 2016). These insights into stateless resistance are all the more relevant in the current conjuncture where Israeli aggression and incursion into Syrian and Palestinian territories are continuing with increasing zeal and invisibility, and when the USA has (since March 2019) recognized the occupied Syrian Golan Heights as Israeli territory. It is our expectation, however, that mounting external pressures, just like at the time of the great strike, will have the effect of emboldening rather than undermining the collective resistance efforts of the stateless Syrians of the Golan Heights.

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