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Edited by Muna Dajani,
Munir Fakher Eldin and Michael Mason

The Untold Story of the Golan Heights

Occupation, Colonization and Jawlani Resistance

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

“Inspiring, passionate and intellectually engaged, this collection of essays (some originally written in Arabic) focuses on the political and cultural agency of Syrian Arabs in the Occupied Jawlan (Arabic for Golan); their experience of everyday colonization by Israel of Jawlani society; and their determined, non-violent, ceaseless assertion against it. This book goes beyond the politics of the region, and speaks to the possibilities for democratic resistance everywhere, under fascism, majoritarianism and occupation.”

NIVEDITA MENON, *Jawaharlal Nehru University, India*

“This book, the outcome of a collaborative research project, tells the neglected story of the occupation of the Golan Heights, by focusing on the political and cultural agency of its inhabitants. Through considering the interplay between everyday colonization and the politics of the governed, the book offers an original and eclectic understanding of agency and power in prolonged settler colonial contexts, what it authors term lifeworld colonization. The book, with its sensitive prose, illustrations and its moving reflections, is vital for scholars interested in understanding dispossession and survival more broadly. More specifically, its critical approach is a unique contribution to the growing interdisciplinary field of Palestine Studies.”

DINA MATAR, *SOAS, University of London, UK*

“The Untold Story of the Golan Heights is one of very few books about this region. But what distinguishes this volume is the fact that it is a collaborative endeavor authored by Jawlanis and their allies, thereby giving readers a chance to learn from the truest of experts.”

LISA HAJJAR, *UC Santa Barbara, USA*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Jumanah Abbas is a Palestinian architect, writer and researcher from Safed. She holds a master's degree in Critical, Curatorial and Conceptual Practices from Columbia University.

Amal Aun is a Palestinian citizen of Israel and an independent researcher and holds a master's degree in Public Administration, with a focus on Human Rights, from Cornell University.

Ali Aweidat is a Syrian researcher and activist from the occupied Syrian Jawlan.

Muna Dajani is a senior research associate at Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, and a Palestinian researcher from Al-Quds (Jerusalem).

Munir Fakher Eldin is the Faculty of Arts Dean at Birzeit University and a Syrian academic from the occupied Syrian Jawlan.

Diaaeddin Horoub is a journalist and researcher interested in oral history and a master's student at Birzeit University.

Alaa Iktash is a Palestinian researcher from Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and a PhD student at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Yasser Khanjar is a poet from the occupied Syrian Jawlan.

Michael Mason is the director of the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

Nadine Musallam is a journalist and holds a master's degree in International Relations from Birzeit University.

Bassel Rizqallah is a master's student in Israeli Studies at Birzeit University.

Aram Abu Saleh is a Syrian writer and activist from the occupied Syrian Jawlan.

Wael Tarabieh is an artist from the occupied Syrian Jawlan and an activist in the field of culture and education.

Omar Tesdell is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography at Birzeit University.

Abdel Qader Thweib is a master's student at Birzeit University.

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Figure 2.2: Ruined Al-Kushniyah Mosque, 2019. Courtesy of Michael Mason.

Figure R1: Jawlanis discard Israeli ID cards, Ein Qiniya, 5 April 1982, by Yosi Elmakis © Israel State Archives. Courtesy of Dan Hadani Collection, The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection, The National Library of Israel.

Figure R3: One of the first Jawlani demonstrations in support of the Syrian revolution, Majdal Shams, March 2011, © Atef Al-Safadi. Courtesy of Atef Al-Safadi.

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Figure 4.3: Unnamed (2020) statue by Ayman Al-Halabi, June 2020, © Nabih Aweidat. Courtesy of Nabih Aweidat.

Figure 6.2: A view of the orchards of Majdal Shams and the Jabal al-Shaykh southern foothills, January 2021, © Wesam Sharaf. Courtesy of Wesam Sharaf.

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Thanks to Jumanah Abbas for permission to reproduce the following artwork and graphics:

- **Figure R2**: 'Solidarity with the Jawlan' (2021), by Jumanah Abbas.
- **Figure R6.1**: A perspectival map positioning and visualizing Jawlani sculptures in dialogue with each other (2021), by Jumanah Abbas.
- **Figure R6.2**: A map highlighting the Jawlani summer camps for young people (2021), by Jumanah Abbas.
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Particular thanks are extended to the Jawlani photographer Fares Al Welly, who has kindly permitted the reproduction of a number of photos from his personal archive:

- **Figure 2.1**: Israeli police disperse protestors opposing municipal elections, Majdal Shams, 30 October 2018. Photo by Fares Al Welly, © Fares Al Welly 2018.
- **Figure 3.1**: Protest march in Masʿada, 14 March 2004. Photo by Fares Al Welly, © Fares Al Welly 2004.
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- **Figure 5.1**: Protest march of Jawlani school students, Majdal Shams, March 1987. Photo by Faris Fares Al Welly, © Fares Al Welly 1987.
- **Figure 6.1**: Syrian-flagged Jawlani bulldozers reclaiming land, Masʿada, 2010. Photo by Fares Al Welly, © Fares Al Welly 2010.

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'As for Me', poem by Yasser Khanjar © Raya Publishing House 2014. Published in English translation from Arabic original with the permission of Raya Publishing House.

'Complementarity', poem by Yasser Khanjar © Al Mutawassit 2019. Published in English translation from Arabic original with the permission of Al Mutawassit.

'Dawn', poem by Yasser Khanjar © Al Mutawassit 2019. Published in English translation from Arabic original with the permission of Al Mutawassit.

Reflection 8 includes lyrics from a song by Samih Choukair (1990) *Zaher Al Rumman* ('Pomegranate Blossom'). Lyrics and music by Samih Choukair, extract used by permission of Samih Choukair.

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NOTE ON TEXT/ TRANSLATION

Readers will encounter several different terms referring to the territory covered in this book. Adoption of the term 'occupied Syrian Golan Heights' follows United Nations usage for the area of Syrian territory occupied by Israel since June 1967 (e.g. United Nations Security Council Resolution 497 (1981)). 'Occupied Golan' or 'occupied Golan Heights' is sometimes employed in the book as a shorthand for 'occupied Syrian Golan Heights'. The use of the term 'Jawlan' by contributors (from the Arabic for the 'Golan') signifies its adoption by the local Arab population, who identify as 'Jawlani', hence also the terms 'occupied Syrian Jawlan' or 'occupied Jawlan'. As discussed in the book, *Jawlani* is an identity adopted across a range of political, cultural and ecological practices to signify indigeneity. At the same time, this is a relational and dynamic identity – fusing place attachment, Arab Syrian nationality, the Druze faith and/or secular ideas – defined against its Israeli 'othering' as non-Jewish. The Israeli classification of the Golan as part of 'northern Israel' is a unilateral designation made in violation of the international legal principle prohibiting the acquisition of territory by force. The majority of Jawlanis have rejected Israeli citizenship, choosing to be 'non-citizen residents' of Israel despite the political and economic disenfranchisement that this entails.

Translators are credited at the start of chapters, reflections and other pieces originally written in Arabic. In the text, transliteration into English of Arabic terms follows the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Cambridge University Press. However, transliteration of Syrian place names (both existing and destroyed localities in the occupied Golan Heights) follows Jawlani pronunciation. Arabic sources in the bibliography are, for convenience of the reader, translated into English.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASD	Arab Society for Development
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
INPA	Israel Nature and Parks Authority
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
NIS	Israeli new shekel
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
UN	United Nations
UNDOF	United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
UNGEGN	The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

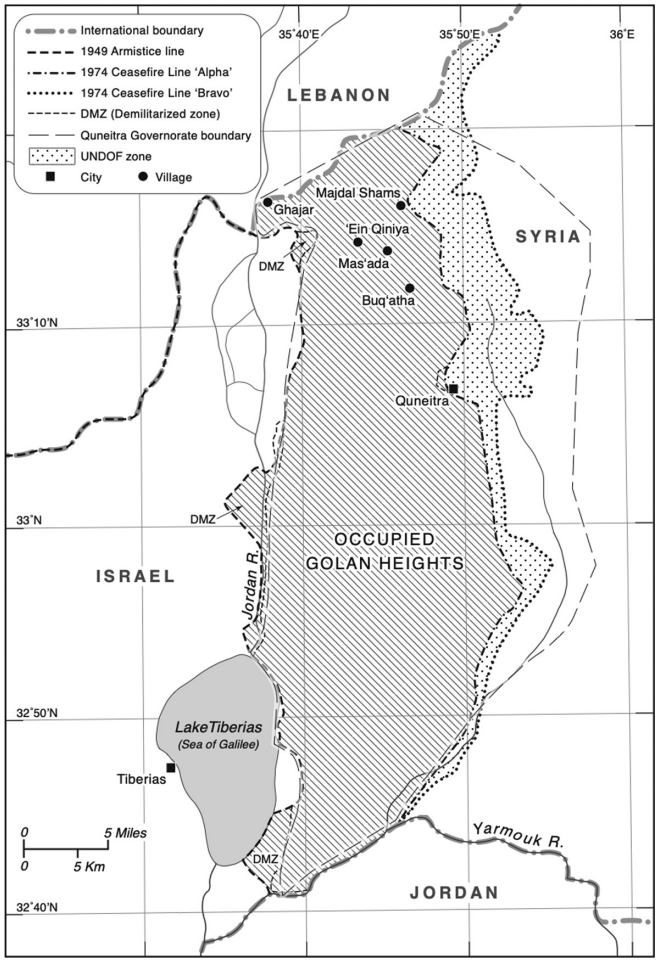
1 INTRODUCTION

REPRESENTING THE OCCUPIED JAWLAN/GOLAN

MUNA DAJANI, MUNIR FAKHER ELDIN AND MICHAEL MASON

The 'Shouting Hill'

The cover image of this book reproduces a painting – *Shouting Hill, the Jawlan* [Golan] – by Jawlani artist, Alaa Armoon. It depicts two women, in white headscarves, waving over the fortified fence that marks the United Nations (UN) Purple Line, the de facto border between Syria and Syrian territory occupied by Israel since the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The women are waving from the occupied Syrian Golan (Map 1.1). Israel occupied the western two-thirds (1,200 square kilometres) of the Golan Heights and, while capturing further Syrian territory during the October 1973 (Yom Kippur) war, a separation of forces agreement in May 1974 saw combatants pull back to the Purple Line, with a United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) established by UN Security Council Resolution 350 to maintain the ceasefire and supervise the disengagement of Israeli and Syrian forces along a buffer zone. UNDOF was established for an initial period of six months and the Security Council has regularly renewed its mandate ever since.



MAP 1.1 The occupied Syrian Golan Heights (map by Mina Moshkeri).

In the painting one of the women is waving a veil of white muslin, which, like the white scarves, is traditionally worn by religious Druze women in the Jawlan/Golan. They are waving to be seen, probably by relatives – sisters, brothers, sons, daughters and their spouses – on the other side of the ceasefire line, who, barely visible, are shouting from an assembly point built by the Syrian government. As a result of the 1967 war, some 127,000 inhabitants (95 per cent of the population in the conquered Syrian territory) fled or were forcibly displaced to Syria, while depopulated villages were systematically demolished

under the supervision of the Israel Land Administration. Israel decreed the occupied territory as a closed military zone with no one allowed to leave or enter: Military Order No. 57, issued in September 1967, banned those forcibly displaced from returning to their homes. Strict restrictions on movement and communication remained, with occasional family reunifications and visits at the discretion of military and later civil authorities (Russell 2018). Only a small population of the indigenous Syrian inhabitants remained, in five mostly Druze villages clustered on the south-eastern slopes of Jabal al-Shaykh (Mount Hermon) and the Alawite village of Ghajar further west on the Lebanese border. One of the Druze villages, Sahita, was razed by the Israeli military in 1969, although the four other Druze villages – Majdal Shams, Mas'ada, Buq'atha and Ein Qiniya – remained. By 2020, these four villages, and Ghajar, contained 26,600 residents. The tenacity of these communities, in the face of over half a century of resource dispossession and economic de-development, is at the heart of the untold story of the Golan Heights.

Located 3 kilometres east of Majdal Shams, next to the 1974 ceasefire line (UNDOF Line 'Alpha'), the Shouting Hill (*talat al-ṣurākh*) first emerged as an area where people gathered to communicate with relatives and friends over the border fence. During the 1974–81 period, families met in UN tents across the ceasefire line, but Israel put an end to it after passing the 1981 Golan Heights Law, which applied Israeli law, jurisdiction and administration to the territory – an annexation in all but name. Kept 500–600 metres apart by mines and other security structures, people resorted to megaphones to make themselves heard and used binoculars to see more clearly their interlocutors. The valley became an arena for political gatherings, but quickly also became an intimate public space for separated families to reconnect, sharing news of everyday events and practical matters, of births, illnesses and deaths. Over time, the act of shouting across the ceasefire fence acquired a ritualistic quality, as the overlapping cries stubbornly performed kinship and community in the face of enforced separation: the political and the private converged. In the 1980s and 1990s, thousands gathered from both sides on 17 April to celebrate Syrian Independence Day and on 14 February to mark the anniversary of the declaration of the 1982 Jawlani general strike against the 1981 Golan Heights Law (Mara'i and Halabi 1992: 91; Phillips 2015). The arrival of mobile phones and internet access in the late 1990s reduced the scale and incidence of these gatherings, but the hill retains

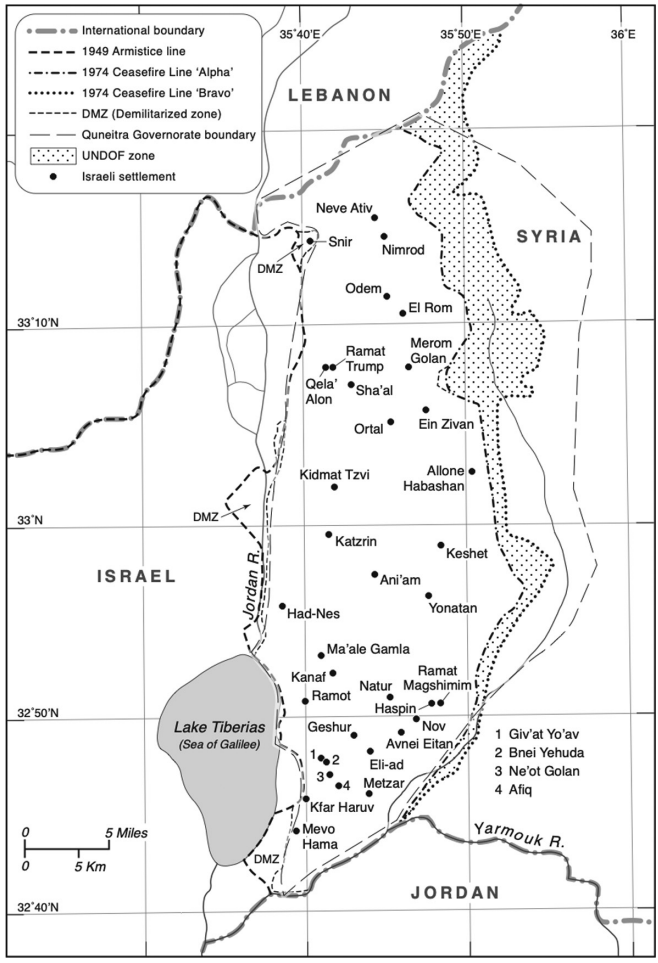
symbolic significance as an arena for communal celebrations and political demonstrations.

The six months general strike that commenced on 15 February 1982 was a monumental event that impacted the lived geographies of the Jawlanis and reconfigured their relations with land. On 17 April 1982, at the height of the strike, the Jawlanis went out to the streets to commemorate the 36th anniversary of the Evacuation Day (*Youm Al Jalaa*) – a Syrian national day commemorating the evacuation of the last French soldier and the declaration of Syrian independence and the end of the French mandate on 17 April 1946. Nearly 6,000 of them marched towards the ceasefire fence. On that day, the Jawlanis also declared their commitment to steadfastness (*sumud*), to protecting their land and agricultural livelihoods. In a statement published that week, they announced ('On the Anniversary of the Colonial Defeat'):

> Land is the symbol of our sumud and our principal foundation to strengthen our existence and to continue our struggle to reach our human and national aspirations. The decision is to work in a collective and organised manner so that the production can be for the public good. This way we can continue with the strike.

'Shouting Hill' has become a mainstream – typically outsider – label, popularized in Israeli 'alternative' tourist guides for those seeking the frisson of a visit to the ceasefire line. Among the Jawlanis, the charged terms of 'Crying Hill' (*talat al-tabkī*) and 'Valley of Tears' (*wādī al-damū'*) capture more fully the insider perspective of separated families and friends, an emotional and psychological wrenching that is counted in generations rather than years. The Jawlani women in the painting are also in an allegorical sense waving to be seen, to reveal a story that is untold and largely unknown by the outside world. For Israel, the existence of the Jawlanis *as Jawlanis* is dismissed: their lived experiences are distorted or erased in mainstream histories and geographies of the region. This book therefore contributes to the social history of the occupied Jawlan. It seeks to transform our imaginary of the region, of the people who remain and of those who have been displaced.

So far, the only scholarly book in English on the Golan Heights is a political and settlement history, by Israeli author Yigal Kipnis, focusing on Jewish colonization since 1967 (Kipnis 2013). By 2020, facilitated by the Israeli state, 34 Jewish settlements, with 26,250 inhabitants, had



MAP 1.2 Israeli settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights (map by Mina Moshkeri).

successfully been established in occupied Syrian territory (Map 1.2). Kipnis claims that his account of the Golan Heights is objective and fact-based (2013: 3), yet the remaining Arab population is absent as an historical actor after 1967. There is nothing on the land and water confiscation from the northern Syrian communities, nothing on their resistance to occupation or the coercive measures employed against them. Tellingly, Kipnis also does not discuss international humanitarian law pertaining to belligerent occupations, despite unequivocal statements

by the UN (e.g. UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1981)) that this law applies to the occupied Syrian Golan. For example, population transfer into the territory, as driven by Israeli government policy (Kipnis 2013: 68), is in direct breach of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949, which was ratified by Israel in July 1951.

In this volume, we reveal the untold story of the Golan Heights – the political and cultural agency of the remaining Syrian Arabs, paying particular attention to events since 1981, when the territory was effectively annexed under the Golan Heights Law. The dual conceptual focus of the book is on processes of *everyday colonization* and the *politics of the governed*. From the lens of 'everyday colonization', we are interested in the daily experiences of, and reactions to, the Israeli occupation as manifest in Jawlani society, culture and land use. How are settler colonial processes of dispossession, segregation and misrecognition bound up with wider processes of state rule and economic exchange? By 'politics of the governed', we mean the various ways in which the Jawlanis engage with the political field of settler colonial power. Annexation in 1981 sparked a movement of non-violent resistance deploying diverse forms of political opposition, including a general strike, communal rejection of Israeli citizenship and, more recently, boycotts of Israeli local elections and protests against Israeli wind farm development (Fakher Eldin 2019). Contributors to this book show that an anti-colonial politics suffuses Jawlani cultural expression, is renewed by youth mobilization and solidarity with Palestinians, and also generates a singular political-ecological identity based on the collective defence of land. However, they also reveal that Jawlani politics is not simply oppositional but rather a myriad of tactics and manoeuvres among very unequal power relations and dependency: the demands of everyday living necessitate frequent exchanges with Israeli actors and institutions – interactions that may bring material and other gains to individuals, although short-term benefits may restrict future options for community self-determination (e.g. rents from leasing agricultural land for wind turbines).

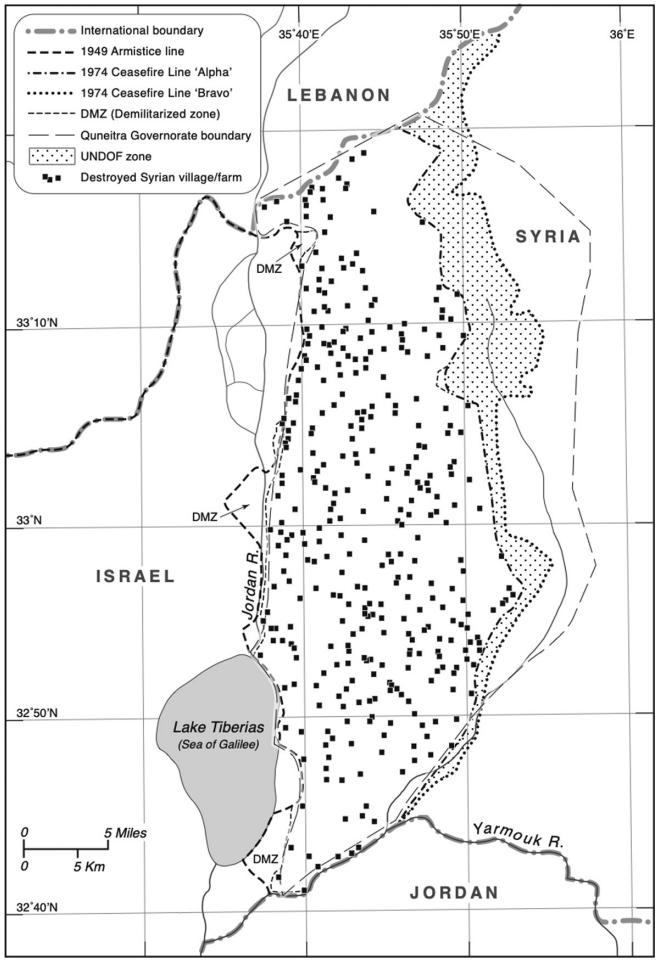
Indigeneity in the post-1967 Jawlan

On the eve of war in June 1967, the administration of the Golan Heights mainly fell under the Syrian province of Quneitra, with the eastern third of the plateau part of Dera'a province. Of 160,000 inhabitants across the

Golan, the great majority of the population was Sunni Muslim (including over 9,000 Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war), with significant Christian, Druze and Alawite minorities. The non-Arab population comprised smaller numbers of Circassians, Turkmen, Armenians and Kurds, who were Sunni Muslims. While the villages across the region tended to be differentiated across ethnic-religious lines, these communities had a long history of coexistence, despite occurrences of communal strife in the late Ottoman era and French colonial rule (Kipnis 2013: 56–7; Mara'i and Halabi 1992: 78).

Israel completed its 1967 invasion of the Golan Heights within two days (9–10 June) and moved unsparingly to deepen the depopulation, forcibly displacing civilians in the wake of those who had already fled and undertaking the widespread destruction of Syrian villages and farms. Murphy and Gannon (2008) claim that these acts constitute war crimes, including grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the forcible transfer of a civilian population (Article 49) and the destruction of private and public property (Article 53). There are different figures available for the number of destroyed Syrian settlements in the occupied Golan Heights, for some smaller sites were left abandoned rather than demolished. Davis (1983: 5) notes that 131 villages and 61 farms were destroyed. Map 1.3, using data published by Al-Marsad (2021), shows 341 Syrian villages and farms destroyed.

As the war ended on the Golan Heights front, the Druze villages remaining were disconnected from each other and the outside world. Jawlanis recall how during the first days and weeks of the occupation, they were not aware how many villages remained intact, who was controlling what area and the situation in the nearby city of Quneitra. Slowly, with the presence of Israeli army in their villages and the imposition of military rule, it became evident to the Jawlanis that familiar worlds of experience were vanishing. The Israeli occupation caused a devastating physical and existential rupture, also disrupting the socio-economic and political lives and disconnecting the remaining inhabitants from their Syrian homeland. It was nonetheless considered by the remaining population as a 'temporary' phase of military rule that was to be tolerated until political interventions and negotiations rectified the situation. For the Jawlanis, the 1967 war and its aftermath are considered a point of rupture in their lived experience. Similar to the *Nakba* (catastrophe) experienced by Palestinians in 1948, the Jawlanis experienced an abrupt disintegration of their social and political everyday life.



MAP 1.3 Destroyed Syrian communities in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights (map by Mina Moshkeri using data from Al-Marsad (2021)).

Shortly after the end of the 1967 war, Israeli archaeologist Dan Urman was appointed the Israel army staff officer in charge of antiquities in the Golan Heights. As Head of Surveying and Demolition Supervision for the Golan Heights, he coordinated the first round of demolition of Syrian villages (90 depopulated villages from a list of 127), preceded by surveys of sites deemed by the Israel Archaeological Survey Society to be of interest (Shai 2006: 100–1; Suliman and Kletter 2022: 57–62). The archaeological surveys, under Urman's direction, focused on evidence