

# The 1973 Arab-Israeli War

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**I**ntroduction. The October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, known as the Yom Kippur War in Israel and the Ramadan War in Arab countries, was a watershed event in Arab-Israeli relations. It also stands as perhaps the most examined example of *strategic surprise* in history, with the number and breadth of studies of the war exceeding even other such classic examples as Pearl Harbor and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in World War II. Thus, it is an excellent case to help explore the effects of human factors in national security decision making.

## PROLOGUE TO WAR

The seeds of the 1973 war were sown with Israel's stunning six-day victory in 1967. The Arab forces suffered a humiliating defeat, which was felt most severely by Egyptian President Nasser. Nasser tendered his resignation immediately after the 1967 defeat, but a demonstration of popular support within Egypt and much of the Arab world caused him to withdraw this resignation.<sup>1</sup>

It was clear in the wake of the 1967 war that the Arabs could not soon regain their territory by directly attacking Israel. Nasser's strategy evolved to one of increasing military pressure along the Suez Canal with the aim of reclaiming the Egyptian land by making continued occupation too costly for Israel. His "War of Attrition" from March 1969 to August 1970 consisted mainly of artillery and commando raids designed to impose this unacceptable cost on Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental weakness of the "attrition" strategy was Israel's ability to escalate the conflict when costs grew onerous and make the Egyptian costs too great to bear. One example was in January 1970, when Israel began deep air raids against strategic Egyptian targets. Following this escalation, Egypt sought and obtained increased assistance from the Soviet Union in the form of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and additional Soviet fighter aircraft (with Soviet pilots to fly them). There was a direct Soviet-Israeli air battle on 30 July 1970, resulting in five Soviet aircraft downed with no Israeli losses. Shortly after, Egypt and Israel agreed to a cease-fire, and the "War of Attrition" ended in August 1970. The war cost Israel over 700 dead and 2700 wounded, but the Arab losses were three to five times greater.<sup>3</sup>

In September 1970, President Nasser died of a heart attack and was succeeded by Anwar Sadat. Sadat exhibited greater flexibility than Nasser in pursuing diplomatic solutions, but he retained the option of improving the status quo by force. He accepted U.S.-mediated negotiations, but proclaimed 1971 the "year of decision" if diplomacy failed to dislodge the

Israelis from the Sinai. When 1971 passed with no Egyptian action, Sadat's proclamation was seen as a mere bluff. Later in July 1972, when Sadat expelled over twenty thousand Soviet advisers, Egypt seemed even less able to impose a military solution. Few realized that the expulsion of the Soviets, by providing more freedom of action for Sadat, was a precursor to war. Despite this expulsion, Sadat was able to obtain agreement for increased Soviet arms deliveries in late 1972, and arms and advisors began to flow in early 1973—arms that helped make war more feasible.<sup>4</sup>

For Sadat, the status quo of “no war - no peace” was intolerable. Facing a crumbling economy, deprived of Suez Canal revenues since its closure following the previous war, and still shouldering the humiliation of 1967, Sadat felt he had to do something. In October 1972, Sadat called a fateful meeting of Egyptian military leaders. At this meeting, Sadat stated his desires for a limited war with Israel as soon as Soviet weapons deliveries provided sufficient strength. The minister of war, General Sadeq, argued vehemently against limited war, believing Egypt was ill prepared to challenge the Israelis. Two days later, General Sadeq was replaced by General Ahmed Ismail who supported Sadat's plan for limited war. Sadat had decided to change the status quo by force.<sup>5</sup>

From the Israeli perspective, “no war - no peace” was a favorable outcome. The 1967 war gave Israel reasonably defensible borders and some strategic depth for the first time in the young state's history. It would be a long time (if ever) before the defeated Arabs could hope to match Israel's prowess in air combat and mobile armored warfare. The apparent cooling of Egyptian-Soviet relations was also a favorable development; Israel would be free to conduct strategic operations without the likelihood of direct Soviet confrontation. Moreover, the pursuit of détente by the superpowers favored continuation of this favorable status quo.<sup>6</sup> The environment seemed to provide Israel with a greater range of choices for a national security strategy.

The national security strategy chosen by Israel was “total deterrence” (threatening massive retaliation for any attack). Operationally the strategy relied on three essential elements, in addition to superior combat forces:

- Prepared defensive strong points along the hostile borders, which would enable Israel's small standing ground force (supported by a qualitatively-superior, largely-regular air force) to blunt any initial assault.
- Rapid mobilization of well-trained reserve ground forces to execute crushing counter-attacks (Israel's ground forces more than tripled to over 350,000 upon full mobilization).
- Sufficient strategic warning (minimum 24 to 48 hours) to both properly deploy regular forces into the border defenses and mobilize the reserves.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1973, all three elements of the Israeli strategy failed to some extent—the most critical failure being lack of strategic warning. The Israeli high-level post-war investigation committee (Agranat Commission) found that the Israeli surprise was due in large measure to their “concept” of a future Arab-Israeli conflict. This “concept” held: 1) Egypt

would not attack prior to solving their “air superiority problem” (inability to strike deep into Israel or protect Egypt and her forces from air attack), and 2) Syria would not attack without Egypt.<sup>8</sup> The “concept” was not merely a set of Israeli assumptions about Egypt; it was also the *Egyptian* assessment of the strategic situation, known through an excellent intelligence source, prior to Sadat’s replacement of General Sadeq in late 1972.<sup>9</sup>

The “concept” served Israel well right up to October 1973. In the previous three years there were at least three times the Egyptians were prepared to go to war: December 1971 and 1972, and May 1973. In the May 1973 instance, Israeli decision makers did not heed the advice of the director of military intelligence that war was not imminent. They responded with a partial mobilization that cost over \$11 million.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, an October 1973 mobilization would have political as well as economic costs, with an Israeli election approaching in late October.

By October 1973 the “concept” had been “proven.” It was a given that Egypt would not go to war while still inferior in the air. Therefore, although the Israelis believed Syria was preparing for some sort of military action, by the tenets of the “concept,” Syria would not attack. Ironically, the “concept’s” elements actually still applied in October 1973. The Arabs had solved the “air superiority problem,” not with long-range aircraft to attack Israeli airfields, but by acquiring Soviet SAMs and SCUD missiles. In the 1967 war, the Israeli Air Force was decisive in the lightning victory, nearly destroying the Arab air forces in the opening salvo and providing effective air support for the subsequent Israeli armored thrusts. By 1973, however, the Egyptian SAM umbrella provided air cover for their ground troops, and their SCUDs could threaten deep strikes. Air was important in the 1973 war, but certainly not the decisive factor Israel believed it to be. The second part of the “concept,” Egyptian-Syrian cooperation, also was present in October 1973. Syrian President Assad consolidated his power in early 1971 and proved more amenable to conventional military action than his predecessor who had favored guerrilla action. Coordination between Egyptian and Syrian military staffs began in early 1973, and on 6 October Israel faced a fully-coordinated Egyptian-Syrian attack.

#### **NO LACK OF INFORMATION—THE RUN UP TO WAR**

It is October 3d today and it is four in the afternoon. I believe that they will reveal our intention any moment from now and this is because our movement henceforth cannot leave any doubts in their minds as to our intentions. Even if they know tonight, even if they decide to mobilize all their reserves and even if they think of launching a pre-emptive attack, they have lost the chance to catch us up.<sup>11</sup>

—Anwar el-Sadat, October 3, 1973

Sadat overestimated his enemy’s acuity by some sixty hours (the Israelis were not fully convinced war was coming until 0430, 6 October), but the Israeli failure to see war on the horizon was not due to lack of information. Even allowing for clarity of hindsight, the indicators during the run up to war were striking.

Most accounts of the run up to war begin with a 13 September 1973 air battle over the Mediterranean in which Syrian fighters attacked an Israeli reconnaissance flight, to their peril as it turned out, losing twelve planes with only a single Israeli loss. There is no evidence that this engagement was part of a coordinated plan, but it did provide a convenient explanation for subsequent Arab deployments. Israeli military intelligence (AMAN) expected some sort of retaliation for the incident, and in this light, Syrian deployments could be seen as either preparation for a limited retaliatory strike or defense against any Israeli reprisals. Subsequent Egyptian deployments were seen as normal for an announced exercise ("Tahrir 41," scheduled to begin on 1 October), but also might be defensive for fear of being caught up in Israeli-Syrian conflict.<sup>12</sup> The expected Syrian strengthening opposite Golan was observed over the next week, and Israel did take the precaution of adding some forces on the Golan heights.

On 25 September, King Hussein of Jordan requested an urgent meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. He flew his personal helicopter to Israel and delivered the message that Syrian deployments were actually the precursor to war and that he expected, if war were to come, Egypt would cooperate with Syria.<sup>13</sup> Meir asked for an assessment of this information from the director of AMAN, Eli Zeira, who argued that Hussein was acting on Sadat's behalf in an effort to bluff Israel into concessions on returning the canal. Hussein's warning did result in further increases of Israeli forces on the Golan but did not dissuade Ms. Meir from departing on a planned trip to Europe the next day.<sup>14</sup>

On 27 September, Egypt mobilized a large number of reserves, announcing that they would serve until 7 October. This was the twenty-third time they had mobilized reserves in 1973. On 30 September, they mobilized another large group, and to maintain their deception plan, announced demobilization of the 27 September call up (although only a small number were actually released).<sup>15</sup> Mobilizations, troop movements, and even credible human intelligence, or HUMINT, warnings of war (as in the May 1973 Israeli mobilization) had become a common occurrence. The "cry wolf" factor certainly operated on the Israeli decision makers. Ms. Meir later said: "No one in this country realizes how many times during the past year we received information from the same source that war would break out on this or that day, without war breaking out. I will not say this was good enough. I do say it was fatal."<sup>16</sup>

While Egypt had orchestrated a well-constructed deception plan, there is still argument whether the next critical element in the path to war was part of it or just plain bad luck for Israel. On 28 September, Palestinian terrorists from a previously unknown organization based in Syria took over a Moscow-to-Vienna train carrying emigrating Soviet Jews. They demanded closure of a transit center for Soviet Jews at Schonau castle that had processed over sixty thousand émigrés in the previous two years. The Austrian chancellor, himself a Jew, quickly acceded to their demands to save the hostages.<sup>17</sup> All Arab leaders quickly praised Austria for the action.

Many thoughtful analysts of the war doubt that this incident was part of the deception plan, but the effect was dramatic.<sup>18</sup> The Schonau incident, as it came to be called, caused

Ms. Meir to delay her return to Israel until after she could make a personal (and unsuccessful) plea to the Austrian chancellor to reopen Schonau (she did not return until 3 October). Moreover, Schonau was the lead story on all Israeli newspapers right up to the day before the war, accompanied by public demonstrations, petitions, and meetings, and it provided another possible explanation for the Arabs' threatening preparations (Syria and Egypt could be reacting in fear of an Israeli attack over Schonau).<sup>19</sup> Schonau was also the lead Middle East story in *The New York Times* from 29 September through 5 October.

U.S. intelligence agencies were not oblivious to the Arab build up—as early as 24 September the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) passed a warning to Israel noting discrepancies in Egyptian preparations from previous exercises. Israeli intelligence was not alarmed. On 30 September and again on 4 October, Henry Kissinger asked for specific assessments of the region, and both the State Department Intelligence and Research Bureau (INR) and the CIA, apparently relying on assessments they had received from Israel, termed the possibilities of war “dubious” to “remote.”<sup>20</sup> Kissinger later told reporters: “We asked our own intelligence, as well as Israeli intelligence, on three separate occasions. . . . There was the unanimous view that hostilities were unlikely to the point of there being no chance of it happening. . . . obviously, the people most concerned, with the reputation of the best intelligence service in the area, were also surprised, and they have the principal problem of answering the question which you put to me.”<sup>21</sup>

Israeli intelligence did indeed have an excellent international reputation. The Israeli intelligence apparatus consists of four separate organizations. AMAN, as noted, deals with military intelligence, the *Mossad* operates in foreign nations much as the U.S. CIA, the *Shin Beth* is concerned with internal security like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and a small research department in the Foreign Office deals with political intelligence akin to INR. Unlike the United States, only AMAN (military intelligence) had responsibility for national estimates. Additionally, in Ms. Meir's government, decisions were often made in a smaller forum known as “Golda's Kitchen Cabinet,” comprised of Meir, Deputy Premier Allon, Defense Minister Dayan, and Minister without Portfolio Galili. For any national security issues, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Elazar and Director of AMAN Zeira were usually included. Thus, AMAN not only had responsibility for intelligence estimates, but a rather central *de facto* role in the most crucial policy decisions.<sup>22</sup>\*

Late in the evening of 30 September, AMAN Director Zeira received word from Mossad that a reliable HUMINT source warned the Egyptian exercise would end in a real canal crossing (ironically, this was the same day that Egypt passed the “go” code, “BADR” to their Syrian allies). Zeira waited until the next morning before passing the information to his superiors Elazar and Dayan and said that his experts considered the report “baseless.” In

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\* The Agranat Commission later recommended that the intelligence structure should be revised to provide more diverse advocacy in national estimates and distance intelligence somewhat from the policy formulation function, but the central position of the director of AMAN prior to the war meant he played a critical role in the Israeli surprise. (Source: Hassan el-Badri, Taha el-Magdoub and Mohammed Dia el-Din Zohdy, *The Ramadan War, 1973* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1978), 58.)

addition, at an IDF General Staff meeting that day, Zeira voiced the opinion: “the Syrians are deterred by the IDF’s ability to defeat the army in one day.”<sup>23</sup>

Reports received on 2 October included Syrian movement of bridging equipment, fighter aircraft and SAM batteries. In the south, Egyptian bridging equipment was also observed advancing and crossing spots were being prepared in the Egyptian Third Army sector.<sup>24</sup> An article was also published that day by the Cairo-based Middle East News Agency that the Second and Third Armies were on full alert (the article was one of the very few breaches in Arab security and deception plan; another was the premature cancellation of flights and dispersal of Egypt Air commercial aircraft on 5 October).<sup>25</sup> It was only at this late date (2 October) that the precise hour for the attack was agreed between Egypt and Syria, and the next day, the Arabs directly informed the Soviets that war was imminent.

The combination of indicators led Defense Minister Dayan to recommend a “Kitchen Cabinet” meeting on the morning of 3 October, just after Ms. Meir’s return from Europe. At the meeting,

Zeira’s deputy (Zeira was ill) related that the probability of war was still “low” because, “there has been no change in the Arab’s assessment of the balance of forces in Sinai such that they could go to war.” At a full Israeli Cabinet meeting later that day, Ms. Meir did not even discuss the Arab build up. Rather, the “hot topic” remained the Schonau incident.<sup>26</sup>

Not everyone in AMAN was as wedded to “the concept” as those at the top. On 1 October, a young intelligence officer in IDF Southern Command, LT Siman-Tov, produced a document that argued the build up opposite the canal was preparation for actual war. The lieutenant revised and strengthened his argument with a follow-up document on 3 October. Both of the reports were suppressed by the senior Southern Command intelligence officer because, as that officer later recounted, “they stood in contradiction to Headquarters’ evaluation that an exercise was taking place in Egypt.”<sup>27</sup> +

Some of the most dramatic warning indicators of the run up to war were provided on 4 October. A special air reconnaissance mission in the Sinai revealed an unprecedented build up of Egyptian forces. Fully five divisions and massive numbers of artillery were now positioned on the west bank of the canal.<sup>28</sup> In the late afternoon, it was learned Soviets were preparing to evacuate dependents (but not advisers). Late that evening, AMAN detected a Soviet airlift heading for the region, presumably to execute the evacuation.<sup>29</sup> At 0200 the next morning, Mossad’s best HUMINT source gave his case officer the codeword for imminent war (“radish”) and requested an urgent meeting. The chief of Mossad himself elected to fly to Europe to meet with the source personally and notified Zeira of the development.<sup>30</sup>

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+ AMAN Director Zeira only learned of Siman-Tov’s reports during the Agranat Commission testimony months after the war. Upon learning of the reports and Siman-Tov’s subsequent removal from his post at Southern Command, Zeira invited the lieutenant for an office visit and promoted him to captain. (Source: Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement, October 1973* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), 47.)

By the morning of 5 October, AMAN also reported that Soviet Naval vessels were departing Arab ports.<sup>31</sup>

In the face of these indicators, IDF Chief of Staff Elazar, with Minister of Defense Dayan's concurrence, increased the alert status of the regular armed forces and instructed logistics centers to prepare for the mobilization of reserves. At a subsequent 1100 meeting with Ms. Meir, Dayan, Elazar, and Zeira, discussion turned to what was seen as the most ominous of the indicators—the evacuation of Soviet dependents. Zeira outlined three possible explanations for the evacuation: 1) Soviets knew war was coming; 2) Soviets feared an Israeli attack; and 3) there had been a serious rift in Soviet-Arab relations. He admitted that only the first explanation squared with all the indicators, but he did not change his opinion that there was a low probability of war.<sup>32</sup> Zeira did mention that he anticipated additional information to be forthcoming shortly, although he did not mention the Mossad HUMINT source by name. He was explicitly asked if “all sources were open and being used,” and he told his superiors that this was the case. It was learned later that at least one highly valued SIGINT source was not activated on Zeira's specific orders. It is presumed that he feared compromise of the source, but the fact that he essentially lied to his superiors indicates how strongly he still believed in the low probability of war.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the meeting, Ms. Meir decided to convene a full Cabinet meeting, but many ministers had already departed for the Yom Kippur holiday.

The “rump” cabinet met around noon to consider the situation. After brief discussion, it was agreed that authority to mobilize reserves would be delegated to Dayan and Elazar, but that steps already taken by Elazar would be sufficient for the present. The final AMAN report prepared before the war was ready shortly after the “rump” cabinet dispersed. Thirty-nine paragraphs of alarming indicators were recounted in the report, but the AMAN Egyptian desk officer appended his own final paragraph. The paragraph read:

Though the actual taking up of emergency positions on the canal appears to contain indicators testifying to an offensive initiative, according to our best evaluation no change has occurred in the Egyptian assessment of the balance of power between their forces and the IDF. Therefore, the probability that the Egyptians intend to resume hostilities is “low.”<sup>34</sup>

At about 0400 on 6 October, AMAN Director Zeira received a phone call from the Mossad with the warning provided by their best HUMINT source (the information was actually received by the chief of Mossad the previous evening and another Mossad officer allegedly phoned the information to Israel—the delay in getting to the decision makers remains unexplained).<sup>35</sup> Zeira telephoned Elazar with the information that the Arab attack would come at 1800 that very day. Elazar in turn called Dayan who already had the same information (it is unknown how Dayan got word, but possibilities include the earlier Mossad phone call and the U.S. CIA). By 0600 when Elazar and Dayan arrived at IDF headquarters, signals intelligence, or SIGINT, sources had already reported Syrian officers phoning relatives in Lebanon telling them not to return to Syria anytime soon. There was no doubt at this point that war was imminent.<sup>36</sup>

Elazar and Dayan disagreed on how to respond. Elazar favored a preemptive air strike and full mobilization to be ready for a rapid counter-attack. Dayan opposed the preemptive air strike for political reasons and thought a full-scale mobilization was unnecessary since in-place forces should be able to hold their lines. At a subsequent 0900 meeting with Ms. Meir, the preemptive strike was conclusively ruled out and only a partial mobilization was authorized. Mobilization actually began only at 1000, and full mobilization was authorized later that day as the magnitude of the attack became apparent.<sup>47</sup> In addition, movement into the prepared defensive strong points in the Sinai was not rapid enough to occupy them all by the actual 1400 start of the war (some believe because the warning specified an 1800 H-hour).<sup>38</sup>

Israel's reactions, even after all doubts concerning the attack had been removed, have evoked a number of competing explanations. It is clearly the case that Israel was mindful of the political necessity to not appear to be the instigator of the conflict. Ms. Meir spoke with the U.S. Ambassador to Israel the morning of the attack and was told diplomatically that: "If Israel refrained from a preemptive strike, allowing the Arabs to provide irrefutable proof that they were the aggressors, *then* America would feel morally obliged to help. . ." (this statement was also the "moral lever" that Ms. Meir used later to argue for increased military resupply from the United States).<sup>39</sup> Some scholars argue that Israel feared even full mobilization might be perceived as Israeli aggression or trigger an Arab attack even where none was actually planned.<sup>40</sup> Others have argued that the Israeli "concept" and mindset continued to affect their thinking even after any doubts about Arab intentions were resolved. These scholars argue that complacency and overconfidence in their own capabilities versus the Arabs caused less than optimal response by the Israelis.<sup>41</sup> No matter which explanation is closer to the truth, it is clear that Israel paid dearly for both her surprise and limited initial reactions in the ensuing war.

## **THE WAR**

The first forty-eight hours of the Arab attack sent Israel reeling. On the Syrian front, three infantry and two armored divisions stormed into the Golan Heights, defended by a single Israeli armored division. Although Syrian losses were extremely heavy, by the afternoon of 8 October, the Syrians had achieved a major break-through and had nearly overrun a divisional head-quarters. Syrian tanks stood on the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee and pre-1967 Israel. The situation was so desperate that arriving Israeli tanks were committed to battle in "ad hoc" platoons, formed whenever three tanks could be assembled.

In the south, the Egyptians sent two field armies (five infantry and two armored divisions) across the entire length of the Suez canal and through the Israeli front-line strong points. The crossing must be considered one of the best-orchestrated obstacle crossings in history. The Egyptians achieved major bridgeheads east of the canal (Second Army in the northern half, Third Army in the south). The Egyptians estimated the possibility of up to 10,000 killed in this operation—the cost was a mere 200 killed.<sup>42</sup> By 7 October, the defending Israeli regular division had lost two-thirds of its 270 tanks, most to infantry antitank weapons.

On 8 October 1973, the first two reserve armored divisions arrived in the Sinai and were committed to a major counter-attack of the Egyptian positions. One of the divisions was badly mauled by the entrenched Egyptian infantry. The other spent the day maneuvering due to confusing reports on the progress of the battle. By the end of the day, the Israeli army suffered what noted military historian Trevor Dupuy called: “the worst defeat in their history.”<sup>43</sup>

The low point of the war for Israel came on the evening of 8 October. Israeli Minister of Defense Dayan told Prime Minister Golda Meir, “the *Third Temple* [the state of Israel] is going under.”<sup>44</sup> Some speculate that if ever Israel considered seriously using nuclear weapons, it was on the night of 8 October 1973, and at least one author has claimed that a decision to ready the weapons was actually made.<sup>45</sup> It is known that on 9 October Ms. Meir was concerned enough to propose the drastic step of traveling personally to Washington to speak face-to-face with President Nixon but discarded the idea upon receiving reassurances of U.S. resupply.<sup>46</sup> Several days later on 12 October, Golda Meir transmitted a personal letter to Nixon. That letter reportedly hinted Israel might soon be forced to use “all available means to ensure national survival” if U.S. military resupply was not immediately forthcoming. This subtle nuclear threat was less credible by 12 October, when the gravest danger to Israel had already passed, but U.S. arms began flowing the next day. Years later, Henry Kissinger indicated to a trusted colleague that an implicit nuclear threat was involved over the arms resupply issue.<sup>47</sup>

The tide began to turn by 9 October. In the south, the Israelis eschewed further counter-attacks as the Egyptians elected to reinforce their positions. The Israeli reserves arriving on the Syrian front stabilized the situation and restored the prewar lines by the evening of 10 October. A major Israeli counter-attack was prepared for 11 October. The counter-attack in the north was aimed at threatening the Syrian capital of Damascus. The intent was to knock Syria out of the war so Israel could concentrate on the Sinai. The attack succeeded in pushing the Syrians some ten miles past the prewar lines, but it stalled approximately 20 miles from Damascus. At this point, the Syrian defensive lines held, aided by the arrival of troops from Iraq and Jordan. By 14 October, the northern front stabilized, with both sides facing force ratios more suitable for defense than offense.<sup>48</sup>

The counter-attack in the north did not knock Syria out of the war, but it did affect the southern front to Israel’s advantage. On 11 October, Syria urgently requested Egyptian action to relieve Israeli pressure in the north. Egypt had achieved success thus far by remaining under their SAM umbrella and fighting a defensive war. Not all Egyptian commanders were convinced that switching to the offense was the best course of action; notably, Minister of War Ismail was opposed. However, the Syrian plea strengthened the position of other key Egyptian leaders who had argued that Egypt should exploit her gains. Thus, on 14 October, the Egyptians launched the equivalent of a two-armored-division thrust along a broad front against the now-prepared and reinforced Israelis. The Egyptians were repulsed with extremely heavy losses. This was the last major Egyptian offensive operation, but it did disrupt plans for a major Israeli attack scheduled for 14 October.

The Israeli offensive in the south began on the afternoon of 15 October as a two-division thrust toward the Suez Canal. The attack was directed near the junction of the Egyptian Second and Third Armies just north of Great Bitter Lake. Lead elements of the Israeli force, maneuvering through lightly-defended terrain, reached the east bank of the canal late on 15 October and began crossing in the early morning of the 16th. The Israelis had secured a bridgehead, but for the operation to succeed they would also have to clear two main east-west roads to allow movement of bridging equipment and supplies. These roads were held in force by elements of the Egyptian Second Army. In a pitched battle over the next three days, the Israeli forces secured a twenty kilometer wide corridor to the canal, with heavy losses on both sides. By 18 October, an Israeli pontoon bridge was spanning the canal and a two-division force was crossing into "Africa."

Beginning on 16 October, the first Israeli operations west of the canal consisted of small raids against vulnerable SAM sites, supply depots, etc. These continued until 19 October when the main force was in position to breakout and accomplish its main objective. The purpose of the Israeli operation was to cut off the Egyptian Third Army by sweeping south to the Gulf of Suez. By 22 October, elements of the Israeli force were within artillery and tank range of the main Suez-Cairo road, threatening communications with the Third Army.

Initially the Egyptians believed the offensive as an attempt to roll up the right flank of the Second Army. The Egyptians did not appreciate the true purpose of the Israeli thrust until late on 18 October, when satellite photography confirmed the size of the Israeli force west of the canal (the photography was provided by Soviet President Kosygin, who had traveled secretly to Cairo on 16 October).<sup>49</sup> When the intentions of the Israelis became clear, Sadat became much more receptive to Soviet suggestions to press for a cease-fire. On 20 October, Henry Kissinger flew to Moscow to hammer out the terms of a UN-mediated halt to the fighting. The result was UN Security Council Resolution 338 (UNSCR 338), adopted in the early morning hours of 22 October. The resolution called for a cease-fire beginning at 1852, 22 October.

Henry Kissinger stopped by Tel Aviv on his way back to Washington at Israel's request to discuss the negotiations (Kissinger had not communicated with the Israelis prior to agreement on the draft UNSCR). The "cease-fire in-place" portion of UNSCR 338 was criticized by Israeli officials who complained it would not allow them to "finish the job" in the Sinai. Kissinger responded by asking how long it would take to complete encirclement of the Egyptian army. Upon hearing "two or three days," Kissinger is reported to have responded: "Well, in Vietnam the cease-fire didn't go into effect at the exact time that was agreed on."<sup>50</sup>

Although both Egypt and Israel accepted the terms of UNSCR 338, fighting continued unabated past the designated cease-fire time. Both sides claimed that the other had violated the cease-fire, and both sides were probably correct. With many Egyptian units encircled behind the Israeli line of advance on the west bank of the canal, some continued fighting was inevitable. It is clear that Israel went beyond consolidating gains and used the continued fighting to complete their encirclement of the Egyptian Third Army. Israeli forces reached the Gulf of Suez by midnight, 23 October.

By 24 October the final positions of the opposing forces were essentially established, but fighting continued on the west bank of the canal. The Soviets, who had guaranteed Sadat the cease-fire would hold and that the Third Army would be saved, responded to the continued fighting by placing up to seven airborne divisions on alert and marshalling airlift to transport them to the Middle East. At 2125, 24 October, President Nixon received an urgent note from Brezhnev suggesting joint U.S.-Soviet military action to enforce the cease-fire. The note threatened unilateral Soviet action if the United States were unwilling to participate.<sup>51</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger saw deployment of U.S. troops so soon after Vietnam, possibly to fight along side Soviets against Israelis, as impossible. Similarly, unilateral Soviet action was unacceptable. Early on 25 October, Nixon cabled Brezhnev voicing his strong opposition to superpower military involvement, especially unilateral Soviet action. Nixon also placed U.S. military forces world-wide on an increased state of alert (DEFCON THREE), and an urgent warning was sent to Israel to cease fighting. By the afternoon of 25 October tension was relieved, with the Soviets dropping their insistence on superpower participation in cease-fire enforcement. Fighting along the Suez front subsided to minor skirmishes, but the war had produced the most serious superpower confrontation since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>52</sup>

It took until 18 January 1974 to reach a disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt. The agreement created a UN buffer zone approximately ten miles east of the Suez Canal with limitations on Egyptian and Israeli forces in areas adjacent to the buffer zone. Disengagement negotiations with Syria were more difficult. An agreement was finally reached on 31 May 1974, including a UN buffer zone approximating the prewar border with force limitations in the adjacent areas.

### **WINNERS, LOSERS, AND LESSONS**

Both sides claimed victory, and both sides had a reasonable case. Israel, after being nearly overwhelmed, staged a remarkable comeback, conquering new territory in the north and isolating an entire field army in the south. By the “numbers,” Israel won the war. Israel suffered over 11,000 total casualties (2,800 killed) and lost over 800 tanks (400 of which were later repaired) and over 100 aircraft. The Arabs combined suffered over 28,000 casualties (8,500 killed), losing over 1,850 tanks and 450 aircraft.<sup>53</sup> While the Arabs lost more men and equipment, the impact on Israel with a smaller population was arguably more severe.

Despite the losses, Arab claims of victory are not farfetched. In the north, the Syrians and their allies had fought the Israelis to a standstill. In the south, Israel had isolated the Egyptian Third Army, but it is not clear that the Israelis could have protected their forces on the west bank of the canal from a determined Egyptian assault and still maintain sufficient strength along the rest of the front. In the final settlements, Syria essentially maintained the status quo ante, and Egypt regained the Suez Canal. Unquestionably the best argument for an Arab victory is the changed political situation. The Arabs had accomplished their goal of upsetting the status quo, and the 1973 war was a direct antecedent of the 1979 Camp David Accords. Trevor Dupuy sums up the issue well:

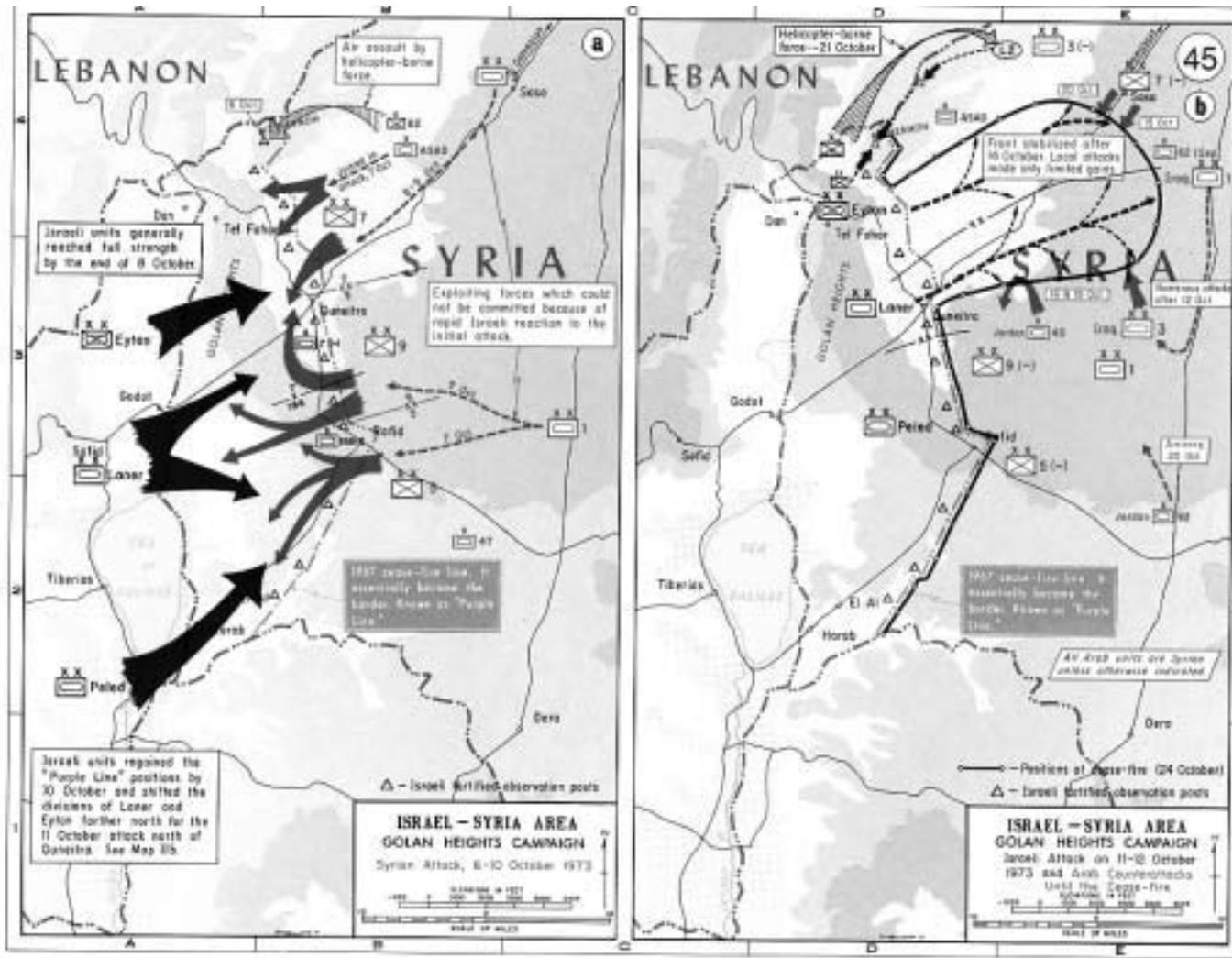
Thus, if war is the employment of military force in support of political objectives, there can be no doubt that in strategic and political terms the Arab States - and particularly Egypt - won the war, even though the military outcome was a stalemate permitting both sides to claim military victory.<sup>54</sup>

The 1973 War has been extensively studied for both its military and political lessons, but it is equally revealing as a study in human decision making. The disastrous 14 October Egyptian offensive, which was resisted by Minister of War Ismail, is one example. The Syrian call for help, coupled with the euphoria over initial Egyptian successes felt by many in the senior Egyptian staff, prompted this poor decision. Parallels to the revision of objectives in Korea after Inchon are discernable, as is an appreciation for the discipline it must have taken to hold to the original objectives in Desert Storm. The case also graphically points out the human tendency to "fight the last war." Israeli reliance on mobile armored warfare, supported by air, was key to the 1967 victory, but also the precursor to the 8 October defeat. The most striking lesson, however, is the aspect of lack of appreciation for the opponent's point of view.

The Israelis were genuinely surprised in October 1973 mostly because they viewed Egypt's resort to war as an irrational act. By their calculations, there was no chance for Egyptian victory, thus no rational reason to resort to force. From Sadat's perspective, continuation of the status quo was intolerable, and even a military defeat (so long as it could be limited) was preferable to surrender without a fight. The parallels to U.S. evaluations of Saddam Hussein's calculations are evident. The technology of war may change, but the calculations (and miscalculations) of national leaders remain a constant element of international conflict.

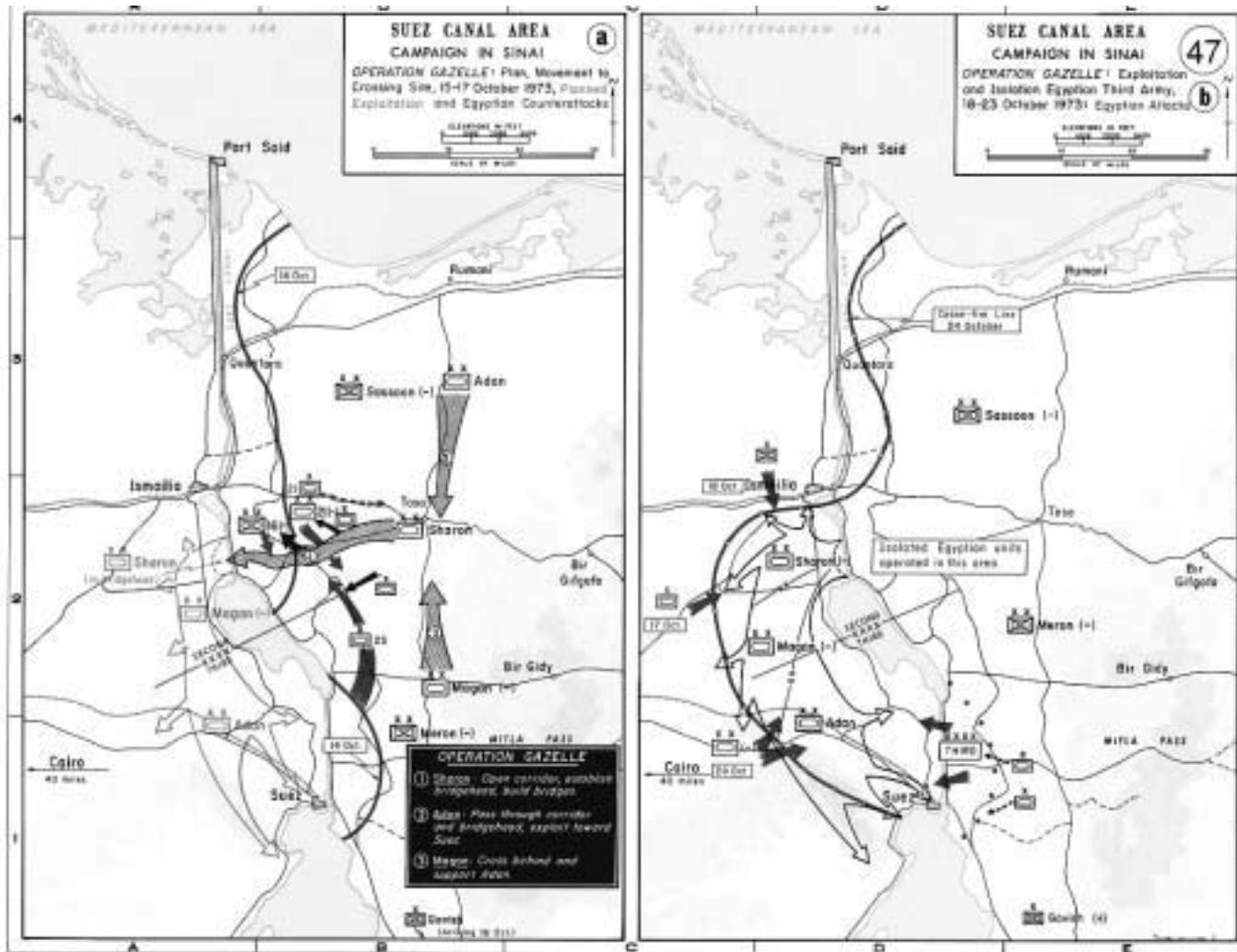


Source: USMA Military History Atlas  
<http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/MapsHome.htm>



Source: USMA Military History Atlas  
<http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/MapsHome.htm>





Source: USMA Military History Atlas  
<http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/MapsHome.htm>

## 1973

13 Sep - Air battle with Syria; 23 Sep - Syria deploys in defensive positions/calls up reserves; 24 Sep - Israel begins strengthening Golan; 25 Sep - King Hussein warns Ms. Meir of Syrian intention to attack; Egyptian deployments noted; 29 Sep - Ms. Meir to Europe (previously planned trip); 27 Sep - Egypt mobilizes reserves (23d time in 1973); 28 Sep - Terrorists attack train in Austria, Schonau transit facility closed

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
<b>Sep 30</b>	<b>Oct 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Mossad HUMINT says war coming Egypt to Syria: "go" CIA/INR report calms Kissinger	LT Siman-Tov warns war coming Egyptian exercise "Tahrir 41" begins Syria deploys more	Bridging equipment moves, both fronts Syria calls reserves 1400 time of attack agreed Ms. Meir to Vienna	Soviets informed Ms. Meir returns from Austria Siman-Tov's 2d Rpt Kitchen Cabinet briefed "low"	Sinai recon reveals artillery/ammo Soviet evacuation Soviet Navy leaves Mossad source requests meet	Israel cabinet meets: Alert IDF, but no mobilization and prob. still "low" Mossad Chief warned by source	0400 - War at 1800 0930 - Mobilize/not preempt 1400 - War begins <i>Yom Kippur</i>
<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
Egypt establishes bridgehead Syria threatens southern flank	Israel's "worst defeat" in Sinai Syria near-break-through "3d Temple" falling	Meir proposes visit to United States Sinai stabilizes Tide reverses in Golan	Israel regains ground lost in Golan	Counter-attack into Syria Syria requests Egyptian attack	Israel would accept ceasefire in-place Meir letter to Nixon	U.S. airlift begins Syria offensive begins to stall
<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>
Egyptian attack defeated Syria lines harden	Israeli thrust toward canal begins	First Israeli forces to west of canal Kosygin travels to Egypt	Battle for corridor to canal	Bridge over canal secured Sadat agrees to ceasefire	Israeli breakout west of canal aimed at Suez	Kissinger to USSR
<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>
Kissinger in USSR	UNSCR 338 calls for ceasefire Kissinger visits Israel	Fighting continues; Israel closes toward Suez	USSR threatens unilateral action United States to DEFCON III	Ceasefire observed by both sides		

## Notes

1. Trevor N. Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947–1974* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 343.
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3. Dupuy, 361–9.
4. The Insight Team of the London *Sunday Times*, *The Yom Kippur War* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1974), 49–58.
5. Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 234–7.
6. Michael I. Handel, “The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise,” *International Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (September 1977): 498–9.
7. Herzog, 43.
8. Avi Shlaim, “Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War,” *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (April 1976): 352.
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11. Herzog, 37.
12. Cohen and Gooch, 103.
13. Ahron Bregman and Jihan el-Tahri, *Israel and the Arabs: An Eyewitness Account of War and Peace in the Middle East* (New York, TV Books, 2000), 142.
14. Uzi Benziman, “Yom Kippur, May 1998,” *Ha’aretz*, 17 May 98, online: <[http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/scripts/show\\_katava.asp?id=19436](http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/scripts/show_katava.asp?id=19436)> [accessed 20 Jun 01], and Ze’ev Schiff, “Was There a Warning?” *Ha’aretz*, 12 Jun 98, online: <[http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/scripts/show\\_katava.asp?id=20569](http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/scripts/show_katava.asp?id=20569)> [accessed 20 Jun 01].
15. Saad el-Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco: American Mideast Research, 1980), 207.
16. Shlaim, 356.
17. Insight Team, 101.
18. Handel, 497.
19. Insight Team, 107.
20. *Ibid.*, 92, 104, 112.
21. Shlaim, 361.
22. *Ibid.*, 366–9.
23. Uri Bar-Joseph, “Israel’s Intelligence Failure of 1973: New Evidence, a New Interpretation, and Theoretical Implications,” *Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 595.
24. Uri Bar-Joseph, “The Wealth of Information and the Poverty of Comprehension: Israel’s Intelligence Failure of 1973 Revisited,” *Intelligence and National Security* 10, no. 4 (October 1995): 232.
25. Handel, fn. 3, 467.
26. Insight Team, 108–9.
27. Shlaim, 353–4.
28. Cohen and Gooch, 107.
29. Bar-Joseph (October 1995), 233.
30. Bar-Joseph (Spring 1995), 595–6.
31. Op. Cit.
32. Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 74.
33. Bar-Joseph (Spring 1995), 601–2.
34. Insight Team, 114–9.
35. Bar-Joseph (October 1995), 236.
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37. *Ibid.*, 122–4.
38. el-Badri, et al., 59. The actual time for attack was only decided on 2 October, probably after the Mossad HUMINT source had learned of the attack.
39. Insight Team, 125.
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45. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), 225–6.
46. Michael Brecher and Benjamin Geist, “Crisis Behavior: Israel, 1973,” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 3, nos. 2, 3 (Winter-Spring 1978): 200.
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49. Insight Team, 368–9.
50. Ray Maghroori and Stephen M. Gorman, *The Yom Kippur War: A Case Study in Crisis Decision-Making in American Foreign Policy* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1981), 39.
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54. Dupuy, 603.

