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The Intelligence Failure of the Yom Kippur War of 1973

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On the morning of 6 October 1973, the inexperienced young reservists of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) stationed on the Bar-Lev Line in the Sinai Peninsula received the order to mobilize in light of a possible Egyptian assault. Little did the Israeli soldiers believe they would come under attack on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that constituted the holiest day of Judaism, and even less so during the holy month of Ramadan, a time of great significance to their Arab adversaries. Across the Suez Canal, the Israelis could observe their Egyptian counterparts patrolling the banks without helmets or weapons, performing their daily routine as they had for the past few months. Refusing to take the order seriously, the Israelis withdrew into their bunkers in a leisurely fashion. Mere minutes later, the shell-shocked defenders found their fortifications overwhelmed as Egyptian forces flooded past their lines and advanced towards the homeland they had sought to protect.

The day was to be forever remembered as the War of the Day of Judgment in the hearts and minds of the Israeli people. At 2:00 pm, Israel was attacked by a coordinated assault on two separate fronts. Syria fell upon the Golan Heights from the north, capturing Mt Hermon and decimating Israel's picketed defense line with over 800 tanks in the preliminary assault alone. To

the south, thousands of Egyptian tanks streamed across the Suez Canal to secure and fortify their foothold in the Sinai. Israel was at the mercy of its Arab aggressors during the early days of the engagement. Once fully mobilized on October 9, the IDF curbed the assault and one week later began successful counterattacks to reclaim its lost territory.¹ On October 22, Israel had reached the outskirts of the capital cities of Cairo and Damascus when the United Nations implemented Security Council Resolution 338 calling for an immediate ceasefire.² At the cost of 2,688 lives, Israel absorbed the surprise attack and repelled its invaders.³

Ultimately successful, how much of a victory can be claimed in the wake of such a devastating assault to which Israel was caught unaware? How did the State with its reputable intelligence community fail to foresee an impending attack of such magnitude and ferocity? The 1973 Yom Kippur War is synonymous with intelligence failure; the attack caught the Israeli and American intelligence communities by surprise. The causes of this failure varied for each country. Israel deployed a rigid military assessment of the Arab forces that did not envision nor predict Arab actions outside the assessment's boundaries. The United States approached the Middle East crisis with an overreliance on diplomacy that would allow for exploitation by Egypt. Israel and the U.S. experienced organizational challenges within their intelligence communities, and moreover, suffered from the same preconceived notion that Egypt and Syria would not initiate war against the superior IDF for reasons that they considered irrational. It is critical that the intelligence failure be analyzed from the perspectives of both Israel and the U.S. in order to establish an accurate and integrated assessment, so that lessons may be learned concerning the

¹ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2007), 755-87.

² "Resolution 338 (1973) of 22 October 1973," United Nations Security Council.

³ R. G. Grant, *Battle* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2005), 345. Arab forces suffered 19,000 casualties.

sources that impeded the foresight of the attack, the approaches on part of Egypt and Syria in deceiving their enemies, and the reasons as to why the Arab forces launched a surprise attack.

Egypt was the primary antagonist in 1973, the latest conflict in a series of Arab-Israeli wars. When Anwar al-Sadat became President of Egypt in September of 1970, he inherited a regime tainted by its humiliating defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War in which the Sinai Peninsula had been lost to Israel. Sadat entered office with a confrontation with Israel in mind. Depended on this measure were accommodating Egypt's population explosion, economic needs for oil reserves, and maintaining its war economy. Furthermore, lacking a strong political base, Sadat responded to the pressures of the Egyptian army to reclaim the Sinai. Meanwhile, Syria possessed a maximalist approach towards Israel, calling for a "total, ultimate solution of the Palestinian question."⁴ Vengeance from the loss of the Golan Heights in 1967 fueled a high sense of nationalism in Syria under the regime of President Hafez al-Assad and the Ba'ath Party. Irritated by the lack of progress towards a peace settlement for the return of the Sinai, Sadat embarked on forming an alliance within the Arab camp to take collective action against Israel. Motivated to reclaim the Golan Heights and in possession of vast military equipment supplied by the Soviet Union, Assad quickly joined Sadat's campaign, and a subsequent joint-offensive was agreed upon on March 1973. Originally scheduled for May, the attack was postponed so as not to embarrass their Soviet patrons undergoing diplomatic meetings with the U.S.⁵ The final date was to be October 6 for reasons of low tide and high moon to compliment the Suez Canal crossing.

As early as 1 October 1971, Sadat had instructed his military command to prepare for offensive actions against Israel in the Sinai. The obvious question was how to stage an invasion force under the gaze of Israeli soldiers just two-hundred meters across the Suez Canal. "How can

⁴ Sachar, 748.

⁵ Ibid., 750. The Nixon-Brezhnev conference was scheduled for that month.

I catch them by surprise? I must hide my intentions,” explained one Egyptian general.⁶ The Egyptian army advanced under the pretext of military exercises to deceive Israeli intelligence that Egypt was merely preparing defenses against the possibility of an Israeli attack similar to 1967. Endless drills were conducted to fool Israeli observers as well as to gain proficiency for the coming attack. Commanders tediously studied the military mistakes of the 1967 War and amended accordingly. Egypt went so far as to reconstruct Israeli fortifications to provide models for rehearsals.

However, Israel never interpreted this as preparations for war. Part of the reason lay in the organization of the intelligence community itself. Since 1962 the Israel Defense Intelligence (IDI) had continuously misevaluated the intentions of Egypt during the War of Attrition from 1969 to 1970, the cause of which was the tendency to analyze the enemy’s behavior solely through the prism of military force without incorporating the political dimension.⁷ The reputable Mossad also hid a string of intelligence failures prior to the Yom Kippur War, none of which were properly studied for future prevention.⁸ The military eventually came to usurp senior positions within the organization, thereafter in which little attention was paid to intelligence collected by other agencies of the Mossad. No less influential was the new leadership installed one year prior to the outbreak of war. Major General Eliahu Zeira was new to the field of intelligence when he assumed command, as was his deputy, Brigadier Arie Shalev, who was responsible for the Egyptian front.

⁶ Ahmed Hany elSherif. “Yom Kippur War 1973: The Egyptian Revenge – (2/4).”

⁷ Uri Bar-Joseph, “The Intelligence Community during the Yom Kippur War (1973),” in *Israel’s Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence*, ed. Amos Gilboa, and Ephraim Lapid (Jerusalem: Green Publishing House, 2012), 78.

⁸ Sachar, 753.

The main cause of the 1973 intelligence failure lay in a series of miscalculations of the intelligence itself. According to Brigadier General Amos Gilboa, former Head of the Production and Analysis Division of IDI, a different evaluation model had been used than the one in the Six-Day War. Whereas the 1967 model emphasized Arab capabilities, the 1973 model looked towards intentions.⁹ There is no doubt that Israel possessed all the necessary data on preparations and deployments of Egypt and Syria before October 6; what it lacked was a reason for initiating war. Israel did not believe that the Arab armies possessed any chance of victory in a confrontation with its superior military might, and therefore concluded that they would not attack; to do otherwise was irrational. Unbeknownst was the fact that Egypt and Syria accepted the prospect of limited tactical gains in order to reclaim their pride, along with the Sinai and Golan Heights, which had been lost during the 1967 conflict.

Failure in understanding Arab motivation and intentions was accompanied with the adoption of “the Concept” on part of the Israelis.¹⁰ “The Concept” was an assessment that claimed Egypt would not initiate war before acquiring air superiority over the Israel Air Force (IAF). Egypt rightly assessed that Israel’s 1967 victory was attributed to the IAF that shattered its air force in a preemptive strike, and subsequently, its unprotected ground forces. For a new round of fighting, Sadat sought leverage to counter the IAF, which came in the form of SAM-2s, SAM-6s and SAM-7s as well as FROG ground-to-ground missiles and Scud missiles that the Soviet Union supplied.¹¹ With the absence of dominant air power, SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) would at least be able to provide an air-defense umbrella under which Egyptian ground

⁹ Amos Gilboa, “A Comparison of the Intelligence between Two Wars: The Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973),” in *Israel’s Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence*, ed. Amos Gilboa, and Ephraim Lapid (Jerusalem: Green Publishing House, 2012), 73.

¹⁰ Uri Bar-Joseph, 79; Sachar, 754.

¹¹ Department of State, “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel,” *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, DC, 281-3).

forces could advance free from IAF harassment. Regardless of whether the IDI was aware of this development, its intelligence reports failed to incorporate Soviet assets and equipment into Arab military capabilities.¹² This rigid assessment restricted intelligence analysts from exploring Arab military solutions outside “the Concept.”

Beginning in the summer of 1973, Syria had gradually been reinforcing the Golan front in preparation for the assault, which did not go undetected by the IDI. In a previous incident known as the Blue-White Alert, upon the insistence of Chief of Staff Lieutenant General David Elazar, the IDF mobilized in May 1973 along the Syrian border.¹³ This came as a response to the Lebanese Civil War which had prompted Syria to intervene, but such an act never came to fruition. It had been a financial blunder that cost eleven million Israeli lira and assured the Israeli intelligence community that Syria was in no condition to declare war, all of which made hesitant the decision of mobilizing again on October 6. As Egypt continued mobilizing under the ruse of military exercise “Tahrir 41,” the acceptance of ‘the Concept’ asserted the Israeli belief that Egypt would not initiate war without proper military equipment, nor that Syria would attack without Egypt.

Only two days before the attack did a number of unmistakable warning signs finally alert the Israeli intelligence community that perhaps an impending war was indeed on the horizon. On the evening of October 4, it was noticed that families of Soviet military advisors in Egypt were being hastily evacuated. Ten hours before the attack, Chief of Mossad Zvi Zamir received confirmation from his best Egyptian asset that war was imminent.¹⁴ Finally, at 4:00 am on October 6, Israeli and American monitors intercepted distinct radio signals of final Arab war

¹² Amos Gilboa, 74-5.

¹³ Uri Bar-Joseph, 80; Sachar, 752.

¹⁴ Uri Bar-Joseph, 79. The Egyptian asset was Ashraf Marwan (code-named ‘The Angel’), Nasser’s son-in-law and Sadat’s personal aide.

preparations, which among the final blunders of intelligence was predicted to be 6:00 pm. Notified of these alarming developments, the IDF general staff convened to discuss frenzied war preparations, all of which required the final consent of the prime minister. In turn, Prime Minister Golda Meir was awoken by a telephone call and organized an emergency consultation for 8:00 am in her Tel Aviv bureau to review the situation. Among those present were Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, Chief of General Staff Lieutenant General David Elazar and Chief of Intelligence Branch Major General Eliahu Zeira. Elazar requested a preemptive strike that would allow the IAF to gain the initiative. However, preemption was quickly shot down by both Meir and Dayan on grounds of political ramifications.¹⁵ The decision to mobilize the IDF was lengthier and complicated; ultimately, a partial mobilization was agreed upon in which the armored reserves would immediately be ordered to their units.

Following the cabinet meeting, Meir summoned U.S. Ambassador Kenneth Keating to explain the current predicament. The documented exchange of words revealed the reasons behind lack of preemption and mobilization, and moreover, the true scope of the intelligence failure. Contrary to the overwhelming evidence of Arab preparedness, the cabinet members feared that mobilization on Israel's part might be misinterpreted as military aggression and provoke Arab retaliation. In Meir's message to Keating, among the two motivations for Egyptian and Syrian military deployments was a "bona fide assessment by both or one of these countries, for whatever reason, that Israel intends to carry out an offensive military operation against them or against one of them."¹⁶ Wishing to avoid a perceived call to war, the U.S. forwarded the message to Egypt on behalf of Israel, which stated that Israel, "has called up 'some reserves' on

¹⁵ Political ramifications will be discussed in more detail in the American perspective of the war.

¹⁶ Department of State, "Message from Israeli Prime Minister Meir to Secretary of State Kissinger," 284.

a contingency basis, but has not declared a general mobilization.”¹⁷ In turn, the misevaluation of Arab actions led to the denial of a preemptive strike. In her message to Keating, Meir continued to explain, “[If] this development stems from their apprehensions about an offensive military operation from the side of Israel, such apprehensions are completely without foundation. We wish to assure you personally that Israel has no intention whatever to initiate offensive military operations against Syria or Egypt.”¹⁸ At 2:00 pm later that day, four hours before the expected Zero Hour and with IDF mobilization not yet complete, reports flowed in of exchange of fire on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. “So they surprised us after all...” Meir exclaimed, “I am angry that they surprised us.”¹⁹

At the same time in Washington, D.C., a different reaction was expressed. “Who started it?” were the words of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger.²⁰ The American intelligence community likewise was caught by surprise by the Arab attack, so much so that they were unsure as to which side even initiated hostilities. As one author describing the events in 1976 wrote, “The October war was a surprise to Dr. Kissinger – and to Israel – though it should not have been...He did not ignore the evidence. Like the Israelis, and like the CIA, he misinterpreted it.”²¹ Henry Kissinger was sworn in as the 56th Secretary of State in September of 1973 under President Richard Nixon’s administration. However, Kissinger was not the only individual to inherit such a crucial position shortly before the Yom Kippur War. William Colby had been Director of National Intelligence (DCI) for less than a month and failed to alert U.S. policymakers of the impending war. Similar to the IDI and the Mossad in Israel, the Central

¹⁷ Department of State, “Memorandum from William B. Quandt of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft),” 287.

¹⁸ Department of State, “Message from Israeli Prime Minister Meir to Secretary of State Kissinger,” 284-5.

¹⁹ “Outbreak of Yom Kippur War: Saturday 6 October 1973,” Prime Minister’s Office: Israel State Archives.

²⁰ Department of State, “Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting,” 295.

²¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War,” 7-8.

Intelligence Agency (CIA) also underwent drastic organizational challenges that created an environment bred to produce intelligence failure. These included the installment of an ineffective system of individual National Intelligence Officers (NIOs), a new chief of Office of Current Intelligence (OCI), personnel changes that included the dismissal of senior Middle East analysts, and restricted access to the White House as a result of Nixon's Watergate scandal.²² No less influential was the relaxed view the CIA had of the developing situation; the agency primarily focused instead on Vietnam. No additional National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had been requested after May 1973, in which the last report stated that "substantial Egyptian-Israeli hostilities appear unlikely in the next few weeks."²³

Part of the reason of this "unlikely" view lay in the American position that diplomacy would prevent an outbreak of war in the Middle East. An overreliance on this approach severely blinded the potential for future conflicts. In a paper prepared by the CIA in 1973, Sadat reluctantly accepted Kissinger's invitation in September of 1972 for secret high level talks between the two nations' offices of presidencies to discuss the prospect for peace.²⁴ The U.S. understood that in order to negotiate an Egyptian-Israeli settlement, "Egypt must be convinced that it can regain sovereignty in Saini...", and furthermore, would not enter the first stage of an agreement unless Israel was committed "to full withdrawal in return for peace."²⁵ On part of Israel, the U.S. evaluation was thus: "Israel refuses to make prior commitment to full withdrawal, both because she intends to retain some Egyptian territory and because she does not want to give

²² Central Intelligence Agency, "President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War." Refer to this document for a detailed summary of organizational challenges.

²³ Department of State, "National Intelligence Estimate," 180.

²⁴ Department of State, "Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," 4.

²⁵ Department of State, "Memorandum from Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," 17.

up what she considers her major bargaining asset before negotiations begin.”²⁶ In 1973 as mediator, the U.S. government undertook the task of establishing a settlement in the Middle East.

Unbeknownst to Washington, however, Sadat had lost hope in the U.S. to represent Egypt’s position in the peace process due to a number of reasons, not least of which was the American alliance with Israel as well as its tensions with Egypt’s patron, the Soviet Union. As early as February of 1971, Sadat proposed to UN Special Representative Gunnar Jarring that Egypt was prepared to terminate belligerency and respect Israel’s “right to live within secure and recognized boundaries,” open the Suez Canal, and expel Soviet advisors from Cairo in return for Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai.²⁷ Sadat’s proposal was quickly hijacked as a U.S. initiative, which further damaged relations when Israel declined the settlement. Throughout 1972, American interest lay elsewhere, as one memorandum described that “complications in the Vietnam negotiations then intruded to cause unexpected and protracted delay...after the settlement of the Vietnam War, the USG [United States Government] will give the highest priority to the Middle East problem.”²⁸ Just as Washington was preparing to renew Arab-Israeli negotiations for a settlement in 1973, Sadat had already committed to war. “Everyone has fallen asleep over the Middle East”, he remarked, “but they will soon wake up.”²⁹

His decision came as a result of the conclusion to the first meeting between his national security advisor General Hafez Ismail and Nixon that took place on 23 February 1973 in Washington. In a final effort in securing American support towards a settlement, Sadat dispatched Ismail to gauge the diplomatic stance of the U.S. Prior to the meeting, Nixon was well aware of Sadat’s political options from a memorandum prepared by Kissinger. It suggested

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Department of State, “Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency,” 22.

²⁸ Department of State, “Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency,” 5.

²⁹ Sachar, 748.

that Egypt was wary of negotiations due to the 1971 failure as well as Israel's refusal of its initiatives. "When Israel objected, the U.S. backed down", it was noted.³⁰ The meeting on February 23 was documented in a memorandum, in which Nixon rather bluntly admitted to Ismail that a perfect solution was a "dream," and furthermore, withheld commitment to an Egyptian settlement. When Nixon congratulated the peace thus far between Egypt and Israel, Ismail replied that "30 months of ceasefire...was becoming a burden and a strain," and that it was necessary "either to break it or to establish peace."³¹ Unbeknownst to Nixon, Ismail's comment summarized Sadat's secret dilemma between compromise and war. The conclusion of the meeting on February 23 prompted Sadat to choose the latter.

In that same month, King Hussein I of Jordan was the first to suggest that "Sadat has begun to think of war as a serious alternative."³² Hussein's warning, however, did little to raise alarm in the U.S. mainly due to the CIA's perceptions of Sadat himself. Prior to being chosen as successor in 1970, Sadat had been regarded as a 'yes-man' with little influence, known primarily for his lack of enemies and talent for compromise. One CIA paper described him as a "very short-range thinker," and concerning Arabs in general, commented that "their emotions and exaggerated sense of pride continually interfere with their reasoning and judgment," all of which led to an ignorant conclusion by the CIA that Sadat, much less Egypt and Syria combined, was incapable of crafting any military operation against Israel.³³ Whether aware of this crude analysis or not, Sadat feigned several false alarms along the Suez Canal in order to lessen the degree of response and alertness of both the U.S. and Israel, to which their dullness would allow for a

³⁰ Department of State, "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," 69.

³¹ Department of State, "Memorandum for the President's Files by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft)," 72-8.

³² Department of State, "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan," 39.

³³ Department of State, "Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," 22-4.

successful surprise attack. Accompanied political threats of military action served the same purpose within the diplomatic arena. Sadat's ploy of 'crying wolf' worked; the National Intelligence Estimate published in May stated the following: "Believing that perpetuation of the present Middle Eastern situation as intolerable for himself and for Egypt, Sadat is pressing ahead with his campaign of threats in the hope of inspiring U.S. pressure on Israel."³⁴ Likewise, a telegram from the U.S. Interests Section in Cairo analyzed Sadat's threat of military action for June or July as another attempt to stimulate the Middle East situation, and furthermore, noted that "Sadat has no clear idea of what he is going to do...his general mood of anger and frustration leads him to make ill-advised war-like declarations."³⁵

On May 20, Ismail was again dispatched to Washington to meet with Kissinger. Given that Sadat had since committed to war three months prior, it would appear that this move was merely intended to further deceive the American diplomatic effort with false hope. Indeed, the summary of the meeting concluded that "more progress was made than last time," that Ismail "felt military action would be 'too adventurous' now," and outlined a general theory as to how to proceed towards a settlement in the near future.³⁶ Sadat's successful political maneuvering in deceiving and exploiting the U.S. government's overbearing faith in diplomacy was clearly demonstrated on the morning of October 6, when at 7:00 am Kissinger made a telephone call to Egyptian Foreign Minister Zayyat about potential Arab hostilities, to which Zayyat denied and instead accused it as "a pretext on the Israeli part."³⁷ Kissinger concluded that he would take this into consideration.

³⁴ Department of State, "National Intelligence Estimate," 180.

³⁵ Department of State, "Telegram from the U.S. Interests Section in Cairo to the Department of State," 199.

³⁶ Department of State, "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," 187-91.

³⁷ Department of State, "Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Secretary of State Kissinger and Egyptian Foreign Minister Zayyat," 292.

No less influential to America's intelligence failure were the same reasons as to why Israel failed to foresee it. Among them was the 'rationale factor,' in which the CIA, much like the Israeli "Concept," failed to provide sound reason or motivation for Egypt and Syria to initiate hostilities. As one telegram presenting a military assessment declared, "The Arabs have theoretical capability to attack all Israeli population centers either with aircraft or with missiles...U.S. and Israel should examine motivation."³⁸ Lack of motivation and the preconceived notion of the IDF's superiority over the Arab armies convinced the U.S. intelligence community that war would not break out. As Kissinger remarked towards the end of October 6, a return to the status quo before the fighting even started would be doing them a favor; "the Arabs will be pleading with us to get this for them, since within 72 to 96 hours the Arabs will be completely defeated." Other reports predicted that Israel would have pushed deep inside Egypt and Syria within 72 hours and that they were "interested in beating up the Arab forces." A Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) produced on October 6 clearly expressed American confidence in the IDF: "The Israelis have the strength to blunt the Syrian offensive capability within a few days and, as quickly, to push the Egyptians back across the canal."³⁹

In a message to Kissinger's executive assistant, Israel was quoted as believing that "there is good prospects" of forcing the Egyptian and Syrian troops out of their territory "within three days."⁴⁰ In turn, this statement revealed an underlying mistake that had plagued the U.S. in its own intelligence analysis: an overreliance on Israel in knowing its own security posture. As late as October 1, a telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Israel assured the State Department that the

³⁸ Department of State, "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel," 281.

³⁹ Department of State, "Special National Intelligence Estimate," 285-6.

⁴⁰ Department of State, "Message from Secretary of State Kissinger's Executive Assistant (Eagleburger) to Secretary of State Kissinger," 337.

“Israelis do not perceive a threat at this time from either Syria or Egypt,” despite that they “are aware of Syrian redeployments.”⁴¹ The Americans relied heavily on Israeli intelligence for data to incorporate into their own reports and subsequent judgments. United States intelligence was sure that Israel would be aware of any potential actions arrayed against it, and would plea for U.S. correction if they thought contrary. An intelligence memorandum to Kissinger dated September 30 assessed that, aside from U.S. analysis still arguing against Syrian military action, “If Syria were already in an advanced state of military preparation, the Israelis almost certainly would have approached us with considerable alarm through liaison channels.”⁴² Along with this absence of Israeli approach, the U.S. felt it was not its place to inform Israel otherwise as they held steadfast in their own assurance in security. As Nixon would later write, he was “stunned by the failure of Israeli intelligence. They were among the best in the world, and they too, had been caught off guard.”⁴³

The causes to which both the U.S. and Israel found themselves “off guard” vary slightly. Whereas the United States was distracted with the Vietnam negotiations and deluded by the prospect of a diplomatic settlement in the Middle East, Israel held a rigid military assessment that did not predict enemy action outside of it. A review of each nation’s intelligence failure reveal similarities which can be attributed to organizational challenges within their respected communities as well as the ‘rationality’ fallacy in that Egypt and Syria would not initiate war against a preconceived superior enemy with an absence of motivation and proper military equipment. The American overreliance on diplomacy blinded the U.S. government to Sadat’s true intentions. Additionally, Sadat sought to intentionally deceive the U.S. to believe that Egypt

⁴¹ Department of State, “Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State,” 280.

⁴² Department of State, “Briefing Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Cline) to Secretary of State Kissinger,” 279.

⁴³ Central Intelligence Agency, “President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War,” 18.

was on the road to peace. In turn, the United States Government, acting as mediator between Egypt and Israel, conveyed this false sense of prospect to Israel. Israel likewise conveyed misevaluated intelligence reports to Washington concerning its own security posture. The failure of each nation can best be summarized by Kissinger's assessment, where in his memoirs he wrote: "Clearly, there was an intelligence failure, but misjudgment was not confined to the agencies. Every policymaker knew all the facts. The Israelis were monitoring the movement of every Egyptian and Syrian unit. The general plan of attack, especially of the Syrians, was fairly well understood. What no one believed – the consumers no more than the producers of intelligence – was that the Arabs would act on it. Our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect. There was no defense against our own preconceptions or those of our allies."⁴⁴

However, it is worth exploring the notion that the infamous surprise attack on Yom Kippur was not the result of intelligence failure, but rather a failure of policy. On the morning of October 6, when it was virtually known that war was imminent, Meir made the conscious decision not to authorize a preemptive military strike. This single decision could have drastically altered the outcome of the war, as well as influenced its subsequent place in history as a victory comparable to that of 1967 as opposed to a surprise attack. Kissinger insisted against preemption and urged restraint on the part of Israel. The May NIE proposed that substantial Arab casualties caused by an Israeli preemption would have detrimental implications for the U.S., among them being U.S. interests and presence subject to attack in the Middle East, severing of diplomatic relations by Arab and other industrialized nations, an oil embargo on part of Arab oil producers, increased Soviet influence in the region, and the elimination of a peace settlement for the far

⁴⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1982), 464-5.

future.⁴⁵ Regardless whether such implications were realized, Meir had already decided against preemption and assured Kissinger that Israel would not do so.

On 21 November 1973, a national inquiry commission was established to investigate the IDF's function during the Yom Kippur War, and ultimately, those individuals responsible for its lack of preparedness. The commission was headed by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Dr. Shimon Agranat along with four additional members, and was titled the Agranat Commission respectively. It was during her testimony that Meir revealed the dilemmas that had plagued her decision not to authorize a preemptive strike, but nevertheless, stood steadfast in defending her position. As an elderly woman with little military experience, Meir was forced to choose between the positions of Elazar and Dayan on the morning of October 6 concerning preemption, and indirectly, the fate of Israel. She admitted to the commission that, "My heart was drawn to a preemptive strike, but I was scared."⁴⁶ Meir argued that Israel could not have risked diplomatic quarantine as a result of firing the 'first shot' against an inferior enemy, and moreover, explained that "1973 is not 1967, and this time we will not be forgiven, and we will not receive assistance when we have the need for it."⁴⁷ Observing Israel's early condition in the war, the U.S. did indeed feel it necessary, perhaps obliged by a sense of guilt for insisting against preemption, to grant a military airlift of crucial arms and supplies to Israel, including forty Phantom and fifty-three Skyhawk fighter jets after much of the IAF had been shattered by Soviet-supplied SAMS.

Whether American assistance would have been denied in the case of an Israeli preemption is controversial; Meir certainly thought so. Israel's need for American diplomatic assistance deterred Meir from authorizing a preemptive strike. Even at the time of the emergency

⁴⁵ Department of State, "National Intelligence Estimate," 181.

⁴⁶ Mitch Ginsburg, "Golda Meir: 'My heart was drawn to a preemptive strike, but I was scared,'" *The Times of Israel*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

cabinet meeting on the morning of October 6, there still existed a one percent chance that Egypt and Syria would not initiate war, and acting upon that one percent, Meir declined a preemptive strike. However, even if it was concretely known that morning of the imminent Arab attack, would this revelation mere hours beforehand merit the dissolution of an intelligence failure? A compromise can be made in stating that the Yom Kippur War was a failure of intelligence as much as it was a failure in policy. Both the U.S. and Israel practiced a policy of appeasement towards the Arab world and the U.S. government respectively. Their diplomatic attempts to allay restricted them in manners that would allow for the infamous surprise attack on the afternoon of Yom Kippur.

The conclusions of the Agranat Commission were published on 1 April 1974 and recommended the dismissal of Chief of Staff David Elazar, Chief of Military Intelligence Eliahu Zeira, Commander of the Southern Command Shmuel Gonen, and several others. To the dismay of many within the IDF, no flaws were found in the conduct of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Prime Minister Golda Meir, the two individuals ultimately responsible for denying preemption and opposing full mobilization. In fact, Meir was even commended for her performance.⁴⁸ The lenient attitude with which Dayan and Meir were judged caused outrage by the Israeli public, who viewed the commission as a whitewash for the political leadership. Demonstrations and protests soon followed, causing Meir to announce her resignation at a special Knesset Plenum sitting on 11 April 1974. Dayan as well was not appointed to the new government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The Yom Kippur War dealt a terrible blow to Israel. After its remarkable 1967 victory, the nation had become complacent in its assurance of military superiority and its effect as a

⁴⁸ "Agranat Commission," The Knesset. Refer to this site for detailed information on the Agranat Commission.

determent against war. The Arab surprise attack demolished the sense of ‘peace of mind’ for the Israeli public, and furthermore, the trust in their political leadership. The stunning IDF victory that concluded the 1973 conflict did little to restore morale and confidence. With preconceived notions and beliefs in shambles, the war would leave an enduring scar on the Israeli psyche. While Egypt suffered a military defeat, it nevertheless considered the war a victory in that it accomplished Sadat’s end goals. The surprise attack eradicated Israel’s assurance in security, and for Egyptians, healed the psychological trauma of 1967. Moreover, it allowed Egypt to approach Israel as an equal within the diplomatic arena, which ultimately concluded with the Camp David Accords in September 1978 with the Sinai Peninsula being restored back into the hands of Egypt.

Perhaps no words can best describe the adventure of the Yom Kippur War than those on 7 May 1973 when, in a diplomatic meeting with Soviet ambassadors concerning the Middle East, Kissinger had this to say, “You know the story of the scorpion who wanted to cross the Suez Canal. He asked a camel if he could ride on his back. The camel said, ‘If I do and you sting me, I will be dead.’ The scorpion said, ‘I will drown also, so you have every guarantee.’ So the camel took the scorpion on his back and they started across. In the middle of the Canal the scorpion stung the camel and as they drowned the camel asked, ‘What did you do this for?’ The scorpion said, ‘You forgot this is the Middle East.’”⁴⁹ Had Kissinger fully appreciated the moral of his comedic story, the Yom Kippur War five months later should not have come as all too much a surprise.

About the author

⁴⁹ Department of State, “Memorandum of Conversation,” 156.

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