

# Revisiting the Yom Kippur War: Introduction

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The preparations for a War usually occupy several months.... It therefore rarely happens that one State surprises another by a War, or by the direction which it gives the masses of its forces.

*Carl von Clausewitz, 1882*

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On 24 October 1973, when Israel had finally implemented the cease-fire agreement, nothing stood between its advancing troops and the Egyptian capital, and the forces led by Ariel Sharon were about 'sixty miles from Cairo and at the gates of the Ismailia'.<sup>1</sup> Israel had gained complete control over the entire front. Even though it did not expel the Egyptian forces from Sinai, bypassing these positions, it had established a firm presence and control on the western banks of the Suez Canal. Facing an imminent threat to Cairo and hence to the regime itself, President Anwar al-Sadat was desperately seeking heightened Soviet intervention and even direct military involvement to secure an early cease-fire. But for the intense American pressure preceded by a US-Soviet nuclear alert, Israel would have annihilated the stranded and encircled Egyptian Third Army. The story was more or less the same in the north where the Syrian advances on the Golan Heights were stopped and reversed, and the outskirts of Damascus were brought within the range of Israeli artillery.

After initial surprises and setbacks Israel had bounced back, stopped the Arab offensive, repulsed some enemy advances and reversed the course of the battle. If the Arab military offensive was motivated by a desire to change the status quo in Sinai or on the Golan Heights, Israel had throttled them. The October 1973 cease-fire lines significantly

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improved Israel's position and witnessed a large Israeli enclave West of the Suez canal. Above all unlike the previous wars, there were no civilian Israeli casualties.

In the long run, the Yom Kippur War substantially enhanced Israel's strategic interests. It planted the seeds of Egyptian–Israeli peace and ironically provided the Arab states, especially Egypt, a much needed 'ladder' to climb down from their refusal to accept and recognize the presence of the Jewish state in the Middle East. It signalled the end of Arab unity against Israel and ushered in the process of direct and separate peace between Israel and the neighbouring Arab countries. Absolutist rhetoric of the past began to give way to a more pragmatic approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict. While the conflict exposed Israel's political and diplomatic isolation, it also highlighted and strengthened Israel's strategic relationship with the US. The Arab oil boycott and the reluctance of the NATO allies to provide landing or refuelling facilities did not inhibit the US from launching a massive airlift of military supplies to Israel. Controversies over the reasons for the initial delay could not diminish the military value and political significance of the American airlift.

There are thus sufficient reasons to recall the war with 'satisfaction and pride'. As Charles Liebman observed, portraying the Yom Kippur War 'as a defeat is not only a myth but a distortion of reality because the successful conclusion of the War and the subsequent outcome were significant achievements'.<sup>2</sup>

This, however, did not happen. Even a quarter of a century later the Yom Kippur war remains the most traumatic phase in Israel's history. The co-ordinated Arab effort in initiating the hostilities and breaching the 1967 cease-fire line still haunts many. Such an event occurring on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, had heightened the sense of loss associated with the war. It is remembered and discussed primarily for the initial Israeli 'unpreparedness' and far less for the subsequent military successes and peace dividends. With fewer than 3,000 killed, 15,000 wounded and about 1,000 POWs, the Israeli casualties were the highest since the Arab–Israeli conflict of 1948.<sup>3</sup> The death and destruction were physical as well as psychological. For many the war extracted a heavy personal price. It shattered many dreams, ruined numerous careers, slaughtered holy cows and disproved popular myths. Erstwhile euphoria following the June war of 1967 suddenly transformed into worse nightmares. For the first time since its establishment, Israel was seen to be on the brink of collapse. When the initial counter-offensive against Egypt failed on 8 October, some feared the fall of the Third Temple. Driven by apprehensions and even panic, Defence Minister Moshe Dayan apparently sought nuclear options to reverse the military trends.

The June war of 1967, which some Israelis viewed as the last of the Arab–Israeli conflict, ironically sowed the seeds of the Yom Kippur war.

The loss of Sinai provided a strong incentive to Sadat to regain the Egyptian territory by all available means, including a military confrontation with Israel. At the same time, intoxicated by the spectacular military successes, the political-military echelon in Israel was overconfident of its military powers and intelligence capabilities.

On 6 October barely a couple of hours before the hostilities started the Israeli cabinet unanimously decided against pre-emptive strikes, apparently to underscore and identify the aggressor. The reasons were political rather than military. For months neither the political nor the military leadership was anticipating a war in 1973. This situation was quite different from the pre-war period in 1967 when Israel assessed that the crisis created by President Gamal Abdul Nasser's expulsion of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from Sinai could be remedied only by military action. Even before the induction of Moshe Dayan as Defence Minister, Israel was contemplating a pre-emptive option.

Accordingly the head of the Mossad Meir Amit flew to Washington to assess the American position and possible reaction. He met Defence Secretary Robert McNamara and informed him, 'I'm personally going to recommend that we take action, because there's no way out, and please don't react'. During that meeting, informing Amit of Dayan's appointment, McNamara asked

two questions, only two questions. He said 'How long will it take?' And I said 'Seven days'. That was our assessment. And then, 'How many casualties?' Here I became a diplomat. I said less than in 1948, when we had 6,000. That's all; I think the whole meeting lasted forty minutes or so.<sup>4</sup>

Israel was prepared for military action and sought American understanding if not a 'green light'. It thus had 'three weeks' time to prepare, to dig in and when the thing started it was like a striking fist'.<sup>5</sup>

This was not the case in 1973. The intelligence establishment repeatedly assured the political leadership that the chances of the Arab countries initiating a war were minimal and low, if not negligible. Under this circumstance, Israel was unable to pre-empt a non-existing threat let alone seek American guarantees and understanding before the commencement of the hostilities.

Furthermore, the next war was supposed to be a repeat performance of 1967 when Israel simultaneously fought in three fronts, inflicted massive damages to the enemy air and ground forces within the first 48 hours and was able to capture a territory four times its pre-1967 size. The security establishment was convinced that the Arab powers, especially Egypt, were incapable of launching war and would definitely not initiate a conflict until certain conditions were met. These included: the political and military support of the Soviet Union, improved quality of the Arab armies especially the air force, the formation of an Arab war coalition to initiate and pursue a military confrontation under a joint

command and well-defined military objectives. The victory in 1967 and Israel's presence and fortifications along the Eastern banks of the Canal were seen as sufficient deterrence against Arab miscalculations and misadventures.

The prevailing military doctrine sought to deter wars through Israel's qualitative superiority. Even the prolongation of the costly War of Attrition did not alter this fundamental approach to security. If a confrontation became inevitable, the military was confident that it would have sufficient early warning to initiate a pre-emptive strike and inflict a surprise blow on the enemy. The possibility of Israel being taken by surprise was not considered seriously. In the words of one former intelligence official: 'You cannot suspect a stupid enemy of deceiving you who are smarter, because the mere fact that he can deceive you makes him smarter than you, an idea that was completely unacceptable in 1973'.<sup>6</sup>

Firmly entrenched in this concept, the security establishment, especially the higher echelons of the Military Intelligence, AMAN, were unable as well as unwilling to read any information and assessment that suggested a different Arab approach. They were taken by surprise both by the Arab initiative itself and by the scale of the Egyptian war machines. The failure to forecast the war had more to do with incorrect assessments than with inadequate data. As Uri Bar-Joseph elaborates advance warnings went unheeded and lower echelons of AMAN who dared to offer different interpretations were sidelined or silenced. In short, 'contradictory data, both in April-May and September-October, regardless of its reliability and relevance, was filtered out. Some were not analyzed; some was analyzed but not understood; and some was just filed.'<sup>7</sup>

All the information that did not fit in with the *concept* was summarily dismissed as unimportant and irrelevant. Even when convincing explanations were not available, AMAN and its head, Major-General Eli Zeira, chose to ignore crucial pieces of information. Inter-agency co-operation was abysmal. The unprecedented personal warnings of King Hussein to Prime Minister Golda Meir in late September 1973 were not followed up adequately. Likewise the sudden evacuation of family members of the Soviet advisers from Egypt as well as Syria barely 48 hours before the commencement of the hostilities was not interpreted correctly. Confident of the deterrence and the *concept*, the AMAN leadership even shied from elementary co-ordination among its various desks. The concept was all-pervasive and blinding. Such a powerful *concept* could only be destroyed and not disproved.

Israeli presence in the sovereign Egyptian territory, especially along the Suez Canal, was politically unacceptable for Nasser as well as Sadat. Egyptian hopes of the US repeating its 1956 performance and ensuring Israeli withdrawal were quickly dashed. On the contrary, the June war saw the emergence and consolidation of an alliance between Israel and

the US. Before long Egypt realized that what was lost in a war cannot be recovered peacefully, especially when it was reluctant to embark on direct negotiations with Israel.<sup>8</sup> Sadat also recognized that the Super Powers would not abandon the Arab–Israeli status quo unless their interests were affected by a military confrontation with Israel. Having pronounced 1971 as a decisive year, the absence of follow up actions even two years later could only undermine his domestic authority and regional influence.

If he were to pursue a military option, Sadat understood that his preparations would elicit only limited external support. The Soviets were not willing to endorse his strategy, let alone provide the necessary offensive capabilities that he demanded. His regional options were also limited. While the participation of Syria was essential for military as well as political reasons, the usefulness of Jordan was rather marginal. His limited trust in King Hussein proved accurate as the Jordanian monarch personally cautioned Prime Minister Meir of an impending joint Egyptian–Syrian attack against Israel. The failure of Meir to act on this prior warning significantly enhanced Sadat’s strategic surprise. As Avraham Sela argues, the establishment of a formal Arab coalition would have significantly compromised his intentions and sabotaged his principal arsenal: strategic surprise. Hence even though he significantly moderated Egypt’s policy towards conservative monarchs such as Saudi Arabia, other than Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, he did not take any Arab leader into confidence about his war plans and objectives.

For its part the army was confident of repeating and improving its June 1967 accomplishments. Any military confrontation would be quickly carried into the enemy territory and away from Israel’s population centres. Even the possession of a vast area following the 1967 war and the need to defend so many strategic points and geographical areas did not basically dilute this desire and confidence. The economic and social cost of full mobilization seemed to outweigh the military advantages. The joint Egyptian–Syrian offensive exposed the fundamental weaknesses of the prevailing strategic doctrine. Even if deterrence failed, the security establishment, especially the intelligence authorities, were confident of advance warning. Largely to ensure Israeli presence and control of the waterline along the Suez and partly to provide advance warning, Israel opted for the establishment of a series of observation posts and fortifications. Completed in March 1969, this defensive arrangement, known as the Bar-Lev line, was expected to hold any Egyptian attempts to cross the Canal until the mobilization of the reserves.

When the war broke out, the isolated fortifications were unable to hold on to their positions against the massive Egyptian invasions. In so doing, they failed to perform their primary role: to hold and defend the 1967 cease-fire lines until the complete mobilization of the reservists. As a result the Bar-Lev line witnessed some of the heavy casualties suffered

by Israel in the southern front.<sup>9</sup> As Stuart Cohen argues, the absence of sufficient advance warning proved to be costlier and, as a result, the mobilized reservists were directly sent to the battlefield with little coordination and limited logistical support.

When the Yom Kippur War broke out, the US was in the midst of domestic turmoil over the Watergate scandal. President Richard Nixon's apprehensions over possible impeachment and removal from office, however, did not inhibit him from taking decisive actions in support of Israel. Even a quarter of a century later, speculation about the person responsible for the initial delays in an American airlift remains inconclusive. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was often seen as the prime culprit.<sup>10</sup> In this volume Simcha Dinitz, Golda Meir's close confidant and Israel's ambassador in Washington during the Yom Kippur War, rests the blame on the shoulders of Secretary of Defence James Schlesinger. Prime Minister Golda Meir's eagerness to secretly visit Washington amidst the hostilities for expediting the arms supply underscored the acute military situation on the ground. During the month-long operation, Israel received nearly 24,000 tons of arms, ammunition, tanks, missiles, howitzers, and a host of other non-combatant logistics. Continuing even after cease-fire came to force, the airlift underscored the American resolve, determination and ability both to replenish the military losses and to underscore a strong political message to Israel's neighbours.

Sadat's desire to abandon Nasser's pro-Soviet policies and his dramatic expulsion of Soviet advisers in July 1972 did not win him expected favours in Washington. Even when he returned to Moscow the following year for arms supplies the results were minimal. The Soviets were neither willing to abandon the newly established détente with Washington nor willing to endorse his war military option. As Galia Golan argues the Soviets, however, were reluctant to abandon their Arab allies and once the hostilities started they not only initiated critical arms supplies to Egypt and Syria but also were instrumental in the preservation of the Egyptian Third Army from being annihilated or humiliated by Israel.

Even if the prime failure rests on the shoulders of AMAN, one cannot ignore that Prime Minister Meir's cabinet had as many as four former generals and chiefs of staff and none of them differed with AMAN's assessment of low probabilities of a war.<sup>11</sup> As Gabriel Sheffer analyses, the Mapai/Labour dominated political and military elite which shaped and governed Israel since 1948 bore the brunt of the Yom Kippur War. Their prolonged exclusion from power and hence their involvement in the 'earthquake' partly contributed to the electoral success of the Right in 1977. The position of the national religious bloc was somewhat different. As members of the ruling coalition, they were responsible for the 'earthquake' but their defection to the Right in 1977 and their desire to view the war as a success against heavy odds and initial reversals, had

partly diluted any adverse response to their role and involvement in the Yom Kippur War.

The war also extracted a high political price in Israel. The commission of inquiry led by the President of the Supreme Court Shimon Agranat examined the question of intelligence failure and submitted its preliminary report on 2 April 1974. On the same day Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General David (Dado) Elazar submitted his resignation and a week later Prime Minister Golda Meir and her entire cabinet, including Defence Minister Dayan, bowed out. This was followed by Zeira's premature departure. Dayan did make a comeback to national politics when he joined Prime Minister Menachem Begin's cabinet in 1977 as Foreign Minister, and by playing a critical role in the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreements at Camp David he partly restored and rehabilitated his reputation. For the rest, however, the Yom Kippur War proved to be their political Waterloo. Besides these visible leadership changes, as Susan Hattis Rolef suggests, the war had accelerated various social changes that were taking place since the 1967 war.

The Agranat Commission, nonetheless, had its limitations. It did not look into the role of political leadership and its overall responsibility in the 'unpreparedness'. In other words, the Commission 'did not consider it to be our task to express an opinion as to the implications of their parliamentary responsibilities'. Some of its findings have since been questioned in the light of new information. Some of the crucial data that challenge its findings were apparently not available to the Commission. The 'intelligence failure' was systematic and widespread.

As outlined by the Agranat Commission Report, 'the Conception' was based on one basic premise: Egypt would not initiate a war against Israel before it had acquired sufficient air power to conduct a deep strike into Israel, particularly its principal airfields, so as to paralyze the Israeli air force. With hindsight it is obvious that this assumption was based on Israel's operational successes in the June war and on the Arab strategic calculations and postures. While Egypt would not be able to attack Israel proper without air power, this capability was not a pre-condition for any operations within Sinai. A limited operation along the Canal as envisaged by Sadat instead required an effective air defence system to prevent Israel from repeating its pre-emptive strikes against Egyptian positions. The SAM batteries along the Western banks of the Suez Canal would provide the necessary air cover to cross the Canal. Since the Bar-Lev line was a cluster of isolated, defensive and poorly manned positions, an effective air defence system could minimize if not neutralize Israel's air superiority. In short, 'the conception' did not consider the possibility of a limited and even symbolic Arab objective aimed at political rather than military victory over Israel.

The domination of the political concept, coupled with AMAN's inability to read the April-May noises, camouflaged the Egyptian intentions and planning. Following a few false alarms in early 1973, the

Egyptian military build up in September was dismissed as part of a planned military exercise. Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's repeated pledges of 'year of decision' had become 'noises' for domestic and inter-Arab consumption. As Gabriella Heichal suggests, as the only centre for the evaluation of military intelligence, AMAN enjoyed the complete monopoly over the flow of information and assessments. This monopoly coupled with the attitude of some senior officials in stamping out and silencing dissenting assessments clearly led to an incorrect assessment about the Arab objectives and plans.

Its success in warding off an offensive in May 1973 further consolidated AMAN's position. Following reports of a combined Egyptian-Syrian military build up, Chief of Staff Elazar ordered a total mobilization of forces that cost about \$35 million, a huge sum in 1973. Since the war did not materialize, the military leadership came under criticism from a number of Cabinet ministers, especially Finance Minister Pinhas Shapir, for 'needlessly' wasting so much money when the earlier mobilization passed off without any hostilities. Since the events proved AMAN right, its assessment in September became credible. AMAN 'was "right" (in May) for the wrong reasons and this was the root of the problem (in October)'.<sup>12</sup> The Egyptian war plans were cancelled because of the Soviet pressures on Egypt and since this was not read correctly by AMAN it proved to be a false alarm. An internal study conducted in 1985 concluded that the real mistake was made in May and not September.

If (AMAN) had assessed the situation in May, as did the Chief of Staff and Minister of Defence, and as it should have, given the available information, concluding that war was imminent, then when it (AMAN) discovered that it was 'mistaken' and there was no war by June or September, it would have sought the reasons for its error. And it would have undoubtedly discovered the reason, because the information that was available from May through August made it clear why war had not broken out.

Things went tragically wrong. 'When you decide that there would be no war in May because enemy does not have the capability or the intent to go to war, then you do not look for the reason why there was no war.'<sup>13</sup>

Even the military performance was not always optimal, and there were unnecessary and avoidable delays, deaths and destruction. The failure of the counter-offensive on 8 October has been regarded as the most critical phase of the war, especially as it led to Dayan's reported option to nuclearize the conflict. Shmuel Gordon suggests that the previous day was critical for the air force. Having been surprised by the Arab offensive, on 7 October the air force was asked to operate against the advancing enemy forces first in the Egyptian front and later in the Syrian front. However, because of inefficient and insufficient operational planning, the air force was unable to neutralize the enemy missile



batteries. Most of the air force losses during the war happened within the first 48 hours when they were employed in uncoordinated operations.

The War also brought the nuclear genie out in the open and ushered in an intense debate over Israel's nuclear capabilities and strategy. There is no convincing evidence to suggest that Sadat's limited war objectives were influenced by his assessments and apprehensions over Israel's perceived nuclear capabilities.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it is widely suggested that faced with military reversals Israel seriously contemplated exercising the nuclear option to turn the tide of the battle. On 8 October after the first Israeli counter offensive was routed, Prime Minister Meir called a meeting of her inner cabinet which reportedly issued an order to nuclearize the war and to deploy missiles with nuclear warheads. This meeting, first reported by *Time* magazine in April 1976, has since been picked up and commented upon by various authorities. In the absence of primary sources, any assessment can only be a conjecture. Yair Evron suggested that, deeply disturbed by the failure of Israeli counter-offensive, Dayan

did indeed raise in a rather *tentative* manner some ideas connected with Israel's nuclear capability. However, both Israel Galili and Yigal Allon strongly and vehemently opposed Dayan's idea. ... Golda Meir, who usually relied heavily on Galili's views, accepted their advice and ruled against Dayan's *tentative* proposals.<sup>15</sup>

Others have challenged that Dayan had ever issued such orders.<sup>16</sup>

The 'decision' of the kitchen cabinet apparently was not motivated only by the reversals in Sinai but also by Israel's frustrations with Washington. Israel was desperate for emergency supplies of arms and ammunition from the US to sustain the all-out war. Even though the initial request was made shortly after the outbreak of hostilities, the request was not approved, let alone implemented. Faced with military reversals, the cabinet 'decision' was seen as a pressure tactic, if not blackmail, to expedite the US airlift.<sup>17</sup> Implementation of the 'decision' of the kitchen cabinet would not only have nuclearized the conflict but also undermined the non-proliferation policies of the US.

Furthermore, angered by Israel's attempt to expand its gains after both the superpowers had agreed to a cease-fire and its desire to encircle and annihilate the Egyptian Third Army, Moscow sought direct military intervention. This unexpected twist led to the US declaring a state of nuclear alert which was subsequently cancelled following the Israeli acceptance and implementation of the cease-fire. In short, the Yom Kippur War nearly brought the region to the nuclear threshold, thereby underscoring the stakes involved.

Unlike other Arab-Israeli conflicts and hostilities, this war has many names: Ramadan war, October war or the more neutral 1973 war. This volume is primarily an introspection of the war and its impact upon

Israeli society; hence it opts for the more specific expression, the Yom Kippur War. In presenting a comprehensive understanding of the war and its impact upon Israeli society, the editor is grateful to all the contributors for their co-operation and participation. Recognizing the import and delicate nature of the subject, they worked amidst extremely tight schedules and commitments. I have enjoyed the support and hospitality of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, and its library staff Ben-Arieh, Greenhouse and Schwed have been exceptionally helpful. For long Professors Irene Eber and Avraham Altman have functioned as my intellectual springboards and I remain indebted. Above all I am grateful to Efraim Karsh for his trust, confidence and encouragement. Any omissions and commissions are mine alone.

## NOTES

1. Ariel Sharon with David Chanoff, *Warrior: The Autobiography of Ariel Sharon*, London: MacDonald, 1989, p.333.
2. Charles S. Liebman, 'The Myth of Defeat: The Memory of the Yom Kippur War in Israeli Society', *Middle Eastern Studies* 29/3, July 1993, p.409.
3. Edgar O'Ballance, *No Victor, No Vanquished: The Arab-Israeli War, 1973*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997, p.182.
4. Amit's first person account in Richard B. Parker (ed.), *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996, p.140.
5. *Ibid.*, p.152.
6. Yoel Ben-Porat, 'The Yom Kippur War: A Mistake in May Leads to a Surprise in October', *IDF Journal* 3/3 (Summer 1986) p.61.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.60-61.
8. For a recent discussion on the possibility of a peace settlement prior to the Yom Kippur war, see Mordechai Gazit, 'Egypt and Israel: Was there a Peace Opportunity Missed in 1971?', *Journal of Contemporary History* 32/1 (1997) pp.97-115.
9. For a detailed discussion, see Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, 'The Bar-Lev Line Revisited', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 11/2 (June 1988) pp.149-76.
10. For example, see Matti Golan, *The Secret Conversations of Henry Kissinger: Step-by-Step Diplomacy in the Middle East*, New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Books, 1976, pp.45-62.
11. They were Yigal Allon (Deputy Prime Minister); Moshe Dayan (Defence Minister); Haim Bar-Lev (Commerce and Industry); and Israel Galili (Minister without Portfolio). Moreover, Transport Minister Shimon Peres had a long association with the defence establishment and from 1953 to 1965 had run the ministry first as Director-General and then as deputy minister of defence.
12. Ben-Porat, 'The Yom Kippur War', p.53.
13. *Ibid.*, p.60.
14. However, based on his conversations with Egyptian writer Mohammed Heikel, Seymour Hersh claimed that the Soviet reports about the Israeli nuclear arming 'were taken very seriously (but they) had no impact on the overall Egyptian military operations'. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Random House, 1991, p.235n. For a sceptical view of this argument see Yair Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.286n.
15. Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*, p.72, emphasis added.
16. Shlomo Aronson, *The Politics of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: Opacity, Theory and Reality, 1960-1991 - An Israeli Perspective*, New York: SUNY Press, 1992, p.147.
17. Hersh, *The Samson Option*, pp.225-40. It is in this context that one would view Meir's suggestion to undertake a secret visit to the US right in the middle of the hostilities.

