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# The United States, Israel, and the Yom Kippur War

David Rodman

At the end of the 1969-1970 War of Attrition, the Arab-Israeli conflict settled briefly into a brittle condition of "no war, no peace." The Arab states, especially Egypt and Syria, did not accept the postwar status quo, which left Israel in complete control of all of the territories that it had captured in the 1967 Six-Day War. They proved unwilling, however, to pay the costs — peace treaties with Israel — that would have been necessary to change the situation through diplomacy. Israel, to the contrary, felt satisfied with the postwar status quo; therefore, Jerusalem did not see any reason to revise it for anything less than peace treaties. This stalemate meant that all diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the early 1970s, including a major push in 1971, were doomed to failure.

Consequently, Egyptian and Syrian officials concluded that it would take a war to produce a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict conducive to the perceived national interests of their states, particularly with respect to the recovery of the Israeli-administered territories. Cairo and Damascus believed that, if their armed forces could inflict substantial losses on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), grab and hold slices of the Sinai and the Golan, respectively, and suck the superpowers into the fighting, they could achieve their goals, even in the likely event of ultimate defeat on the battlefield. Thus, Cairo and Damascus only required the means to implement their plan. Massive quantities of Soviet arms, especially in the form of sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons that could offset to a large extent the IDF's undisputed air and armored superiority, gave Egypt and Syria a feasible war option by the fall of 1973.

Up until the day that the Yom Kippur War actually broke out in early October, the Meir government remained convinced that Israel did not face an imminent prospect of war.<sup>1</sup> This belief rested on "the concept," a military analysis of the Arab-Israeli balance of power that held that the Arab world would not dare to attack Israel until it had the air power assets to hit the Jewish state's rear areas and to contest its mastery of the skies. In the absence of such assets, Jerusalem thought, the Arab world could not possibly win a war; therefore, it would not possibly start one. The Meir government, of course, neglected to consider the idea that the Arab world might accept defeat on the battlefield

in order to advance its political agenda. The fact that Cairo, in the early 1970s, had occasionally spoken about going to war in order to restore "Arab rights" but had not acted on its words further reinforced the perception that the Arab world did not pose an immediate threat. Blinded by its faulty thinking, Jerusalem systematically misinterpreted an immense amount of information that pointed to war in the fall of 1973. When Egypt and Syria mobilized and deployed their armed forces opposite IDF positions in the Sinai and on the Golan, Jerusalem reasoned that Cairo and Damascus were engaged in a military exercise or, perhaps, saberrattling (in response to a humiliating Syrian air defeat a few weeks earlier). When Soviet citizens departed Egypt in large numbers, it ascribed this development to a feud between Moscow and Cairo. Only at the last moment — literally hours before the Arab assault — did the Meir government recognize its terrible mistake. It took irrefutable proof of Egyptian and Syrian intentions to wrest Jerusalem out of its intellectual stupor.

Nevertheless, the IDF had enough time to carry out a preemptive air attack at the outset of the Yom Kippur War. Such a strike, senior Israeli officers thought, would put an unprepared IDF, which needed 24-48 hours to mobilize and deploy its reserve formations, the bulk of its warfighting potential, in far better shape to withstand the Arab onslaught. But Jerusalem refused to authorize a preemptive attack — a decision that had the full support of Washington. This choice, military analysts later asserted, had severe consequences for Israel. Had the Israeli Air Force (IAF) been granted permission to execute a preemptive air strike on Arab anti-aircraft defenses, they claimed, it could have heavily damaged those defenses at small cost to itself. Two military analysts, for example, calculated that the IAF could have destroyed 90 percent of the Egyptian and Syrian surface-to-air missile batteries "in a period of three to six hours for the loss of under ten aircraft." Once Arab anti-aircraft defenses had been neutralized, according to this line of reasoning, the IAF would have been free to intervene decisively in the land battle.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than potentially wresting the initiative away from the Egyptian and Syrian armies, the IDF suffered serious reverses during the early days of the war, losing ground both in the Sinai and on the Golan. Eventually, however, the IDF's considerable qualitative superiority over Egyptian and Syrian forces began to have an effect on the course of battle, particularly once its reserve formations entered the fighting. In the north, an IDF counterattack not only ejected the Syrian army from the entire Golan, but also brought Israeli forces to within artillery

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range of Damascus. Syrian forces had been crushed to the point of almost complete collapse. In the south, the IDF first smashed an Egyptian advance toward the Sinai passes and then crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt proper, encircling the Egyptian Third Army in the process. But, just as the IDF appeared to be on the verge of totally destroying the Third Army, Washington stepped into the fray. Washington suggested that the United States would stand aside while Soviet forces intervened to save the Third Army. Foreign Minister Abba Eban put Israel's choice this way: "Should we attempt the destruction of Egypt's Third Army at the risk of Soviet intervention, or should we ensure American support ... by allowing the Third Army to be saved?"<sup>3</sup> The Meir government decided to loosen the IDF's grip on the Third Army, thereby reducing the magnitude of Egypt's defeat in the war.<sup>4</sup>

Differences between Washington and Jerusalem continued after the guns fell silent. During postwar "disengagement" talks, the Nixon and Ford administrations put tremendous pressure on Jerusalem to make concessions to Egypt and Syria, especially in the shape of withdrawals from portions of the Sinai and Golan. Indeed, the Ford administration even threatened in one instance to "re-assess" the American-Israeli relationship — that is, to cut off further military, economic, and diplomatic assistance — if Jerusalem did not make the required concessions. Concomitantly, these administrations promised to strengthen the American-Israeli relationship if Jerusalem complied with their demands. Jerusalem, however reluctantly, agreed to make the necessary concessions in exchange for American military, economic, and diplomatic support.

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The conduct of the United States before, during, and after the Yom Kippur War stemmed from its perceived national interests, which remained essentially similar to what they had been in the Six-Day War and the War of Attrition: to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East, primarily in order to protect the oil resources of pro-Western Arab states; to avoid direct involvement in any fighting, because the United States was still tied up in Vietnam and because such a development would have strongly negative implications for American-Arab ties; and to ensure that Israel's fundamental security was not compromised. But, in contrast to the previous two wars, Washington saw in the Yom Kippur War a plum opportunity to alter the regional status quo to American advantage. The Nixon administration believed that the United States could actually roll back Soviet influence in the Middle East by gradually winning pro-Soviet Arab states, particularly Egypt, over to the Western camp. This regional realignment, though, would not occur if Israel were to register a crushing victory. Washington, therefore, sought to engineer a battlefield stalemate, especially between Israel and Egypt, in order to promote postwar negotiations, which the United States would then mediate to its own benefit. In the words of President Richard Nixon:

I believed that only a battlefield stalemate would provide the foundation in which fruitful negotiations might begin: Any equilibrium—even if only an equilibrium of

mutual exhaustion — would make it easier to reach an enforceable settlement. Therefore, I was convinced that we must not use our influence to bring about a cease-fire that would leave the parties in such imbalance that negotiations for a permanent settlement would never begin.<sup>5</sup>

To achieve this battlefield stalemate, Jerusalem's behavior had to be manipulated. Hence, Washington actively encouraged Israel to forgo a preemptive air attack; it dragged its feet at first in furnishing additional arms to Israel during the war; and it compelled Israel to release its grip on the encircled Third Army near the end of the war. Although Washington could not ultimately prevent an outright Israeli triumph, principally because the Egyptians and Soviets refused to consider a cease-fire until the IDF had turned the tide of battle, the United States did substantially reduce its magnitude, thereby sparing Arab "honor" and making it possible for American statesmen to mediate postwar talks without meaningful Soviet participation. Washington's foreign policy agenda also explains why the United States applied such pressure to Jerusalem to make concessions in postwar negotiations, while promising to enhance Israel's security if it did so.

The conduct of Israel in the Yom Kippur War, like its conduct in the previous two wars, is not comprehensible unless it is viewed in the context of the American-Israeli relationship. The decision to absorb an Arab attack may have been eased somewhat by the knowledge that the IDF occupied formidable defensive positions in the Sinai and on the Golan as well as by the conviction that the IAF had air superiority. The IDF high command, while in favor of a preemptive air attack, had assured the Meir government that Israel would not lose the war if the Arabs struck first. Clearly, however, the main reason that Jerusalem would not sanction a preemptive attack emerged from its concern that, if Israel struck first, the United States would not assist the Jewish state during the war. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, reflecting the general line of thinking among Israeli officials, argued that "if American help was to be sought, then the United States had to be given full proof that it was not we who desired war — even if this ruled out preemptive action and handicapped us in the military campaign."<sup>6</sup> Had Jerusalem been sure that American support would have been forthcoming in the wake of a preemptive attack, it would almost certainly have authorized such an attack. But, faced by a powerful Arab war coalition that had the unyielding support of the Soviet Union, the Meir government simply could not risk the loss of American assistance. Additionally, Washington's blunt threat to stand aside while Moscow intervened to save the Third Army had a decisive impact on Jerusalem's decision to loosen its grip on this army. To account for this decision, Prime Minister Golda Meir made explicit reference to the American-Israeli relationship:

There is only one country to which we can turn and sometimes we have to give in to it — even when we know we shouldn't. But it is the only real friend we have, and a very powerful one. We don't have to say yes to everything, but let's call things by their proper name. There is nothing to be ashamed of when a small country like Israel, in this sit-

uation, has to give in sometimes to the United States. And when we do say yes, let's for God's sake not pretend that it is otherwise ...<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Jerusalem felt that, in the aftermath of a very destructive war for Israel, one in which the state's internal capabilities had been severely sapped, it had no choice but to trade the concessions desired by Washington for continued American support. A cordial American-Israeli relationship, Jerusalem concluded, was more crucial to Israel's national interests than portions of the Sinai and the Golan.

The "security-for-autonomy" bargain in evidence during the Six-Day War and the War of Attrition, in short, also held during the Yom Kippur War. Washington demanded that Jerusalem surrender its freedom of action in return for American military, economic, and diplomatic support. Israeli officials complied with this command on the grounds that the Jewish state's national security interests would be better served by giving in to Washington than by insisting on Jerusalem's freedom of action. As it had in the past two wars, Israel had purchased security at the price of autonomy. •

Notes:

1. For general accounts of American and Israeli conduct before, during, and after the war see Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis: Israel, 1967 and 1973*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980; Nadav Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978, pp. 278-316, 476-560; and Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 219-314.
2. This argument may be found in Steven J. Rosen and Martin Indyk, "The Temptation to Preempt in a Fifth Arab-Israeli War," *Orbis* 20:3, Summer 1976, pp. 271-272.
3. Abba Eban, *Personal Witness*, New York: Putnam, 1992, p. 538.
4. Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis*, pp. 226-227; Safran, *Israel*, pp. 493-494; and Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 265. A high-ranking Soviet official later revealed that Moscow had not resolutely entertained the idea of dispatching its own troops to fight the IDF. Victor Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
5. Quoted in Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 248-249.
6. Moshe Dayan, *Moshe Dayan: The Story of My Life*, New York: Warner Books, 1976, p. 556.
7. Quoted in Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis*, p. 181.

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Y A H R Z E I T

ELLEN STEINBAUM

the months have returned  
the seasons  
and with them  
the light cold touch  
of absence

I am growing  
day by day  
more at home with  
being without  
more intimate with  
the shadowy edge  
of empty space  
that builds  
brick by brick  
against the wall  
of daylight

a ton of feathers  
heavier than lead  
drops one by one  
so innocently through the air  
almost unnoticed in their piling up  
I am not pinned to earth  
until the last one falls