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WE DOWNPLAYED THE SIGNS OF PEACE, THEN DOWNPLAYED THE SIGNS OF WAR

The October War came as a shock to the Israeli leadership and security community. Their failure to take Sadat's peace approaches and the imminent threat of war seriously led to changes to both the regional and domestic Israeli political landscapes

By Yossi Alpher

From an Israeli standpoint, the 1973 October War can be understood through several parallel narratives. Following the wars of 1948 and 1967, it was the last all-out clash between Israel and a coalition of Arab states. It represented a horrendous intelligence, logistic, and diplomatic miscalculation on Israel's part, resulting in extensive loss of life and unparalleled national trauma.

For a few critical days early in the war, Israel collectively feared for its future. Senior generals were contemplating “the destruction of the Third Temple”—Moshe Dayan's phrase that echoed the destruction in ancient times of the first and second temples, ending earlier episodes of sovereignty for Israel and Judea. That trauma in turn ushered in dramatic domestic political change—the advent to national leadership of the Likud—that prevails to this day.

Nowadays, Israelis are intensely aware of the fifty-year commemoration of the war. Its devastating intelligence failure resonates at a time when, in the view of many, the current government is ignoring warnings that it is leading the country down an anti-democratic path that threatens to weaken the entire security community and invite enemy aggression.

The October War (for Israelis, the Yom Kippur War) and the peace process that followed were key steps on Israel's road to expanded regional and global relations. That road began with Egypt, then expanded, as an indirect but vital by-product, to a host of additional Arab countries and major powers like Russia, China, and India.



The peace with Egypt represented for Israel the abandonment, for the first time since 1948, of the perception of an “existential threat” posed by virtually the entire Arab World. Today this sense of relief is increasingly compromised by Iranian and Islamist threats to Israel’s existence, coupled with concern in many quarters that the absence of a solution to the Palestinian issue is leading Israel and Palestine toward a violent, conflicted one-state reality.

△ Former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan crouching in a bunker during an Israeli counter-attack on the Golan Heights. October 1973. *Magnum Photos*.

I served in the Israeli intelligence community from 1965 to 1981, the years that preceded and followed the October War. I will discuss the pre-war period when the Israeli leadership foolishly ignored or belittled Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s peace feelers while Israeli intelligence, paralleled by the leadership, missed or dismissed the signs of war. This will be followed by a look at the post-war period, when secret diplomacy produced the November 1977 Sadat trip to Jerusalem and the subsequent peace. The great powers of the day, the United States and the Soviet Union, are present throughout—at times unhelpfully.

Intelligence Failure

For most Israelis, the October War constituted a jarring and painful awakening from the hubris that pervaded society in the aftermath of the 1967 victory. Back then, a disparaging undertone infected the way Israel looked at Arabs in general.

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“Why would Egypt and Syria start another war? We’ll break their bones” was the overwhelming sentiment among the public, the Israel security community, and the political echelon prior to October 6.

After all, since 1967 Israel had strategic depth: the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. It was certain that it could win any war and conquer even more Arab territory. Head of Intelligence of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Eli Zeira spoke of “low probability of war” right up until the war began, at 14:00 on October 6.

Israeli military intelligence, with its monopoly on the early warning and assessment processes within the Israeli system, contributed to the pre-1973 euphoria of ignorance. The IDF’s Egypt experts were openly disdainful of the Mossad’s human sources, including the now renowned Ashraf Marwan—the debate regarding whether he was a double agent or the greatest spy of his day continues to this day in Israel, at times acrimoniously—but also additional well-placed agents in key Arab countries. When in September of 1973 King Hussein of Jordan traveled to Israel to warn the leadership of the impending war, IDF intelligence for the most part doubted him, too.

Furthermore, IDF intelligence fell victim to its own conception which held that Egypt would not cross the Suez Canal without first attaining air superiority, which it was understood to lack. IDF intelligence dangerously underestimated existing Egyptian air defense and anti-tank missile capabilities. Accordingly, an Arab attack was deemed unlikely and in a worst-case scenario could be rebuffed within days.

The additional signs of impending war that the IDF contrived to ignore make, in retrospect, for painful recollection for members of the security community. Those include the Egyptian and Syrian military buildups virtually under our noses, and the hasty Soviet evacuation from Egypt and Syria of advisers and their families, among other things.

This experience of wholesale intelligence early-warning failure generated, in Israel’s post-war stocktaking, far-reaching reforms. The Mossad and foreign ministry would be enjoined to develop intelligence analysis units in the spirit of pluralism; IDF military intelligence would create a function dedicated specifically to challenging accepted assessments or “conceptions”. Prime ministers would be exposed not only to refined intelligence assessments but also to raw intelligence such as intercepts and human intelligence reports.

These reforms overall have been useful. However, the late-1987 outbreak of the First Intifada, for example, was still a total intelligence surprise.

Miscalculated Diplomacy and Intelligence

Prior to the 1973 War, U.S. National Security Adviser—soon to become secretary of state as well—Henry Kissinger had tried to generate a bilateral peace process between Egypt and Israel. He met with a high-level Egyptian emissary, national security adviser Mohammed Hafez Ismail, and transmitted President Anwar Sadat's proposals to Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

Kissinger's mediation effort failed, a failure that would contribute directly to the October War. For one, it was not entirely clear to Meir and Dayan whether Sadat was offering, via a third party and without direct negotiations, full peace or only non-belligerency in return for all of the Sinai Peninsula that Israel had occupied in 1967.

Regardless, that was not the main issue. Whether or not Sadat was then sincere about offering genuine peace in return for all of Sinai, Meir and Dayan clearly were not prepared to accept such a deal. Prior to October 1973, they were still too immersed in the euphoria of the 1967 victory to consider it. Dayan's hubris led him to make public statements like "Better Sharm [al-Shaykh] than shalom (peace)." Under his security stewardship, readiness for war—operationally and logistically—declined.

In February 1972, Israel was considering offering Egypt, via Kissinger, far less: an interim arrangement comprising a non-belligerency pact and a limited withdrawal from the Suez Canal sufficient to enable Egypt to reopen it for global maritime traffic. On the other hand, Meir reportedly sent via international emissaries a number of offers to Sadat, to which he did not respond. These offers included undertaking secret, bilateral and unconditional peace negotiations face-to-face—the consistent Israeli position toward all its neighbors.

With elections scheduled for late 1973, Meir and Dayan told Kissinger they would entertain the Egyptian proposals only after getting a renewed mandate for their Labor party from the Israeli public, at which point they could examine the possibility of concessions to Egypt without incurring political risk. Kissinger agreed, but extracted from the Israelis—following a May 1973 false alarm in Israel regarding an Egyptian attack—a commitment not to preempt a war and not to contribute to any escalatory process in the meanwhile.

This exchange with Kissinger presumably helped persuade Israeli leaders that a peace process with Egypt, rather than war, was in the offing, thereby further lulling them to the signs of an Egyptian-Syrian attack. In this sense, one could

argue that Israel's failure to anticipate war constituted a lapse of diplomacy as well as an intelligence fiasco.

Kissinger and Israel's Responses After the War

Then, immediately following the devastation and loss of October 1973, and having won a narrow electoral victory before the Israeli political process could fully absorb the import of the war, Meir and Dayan again postponed a diplomatic process with Egypt via Kissinger. They were too concerned about their political futures and too preoccupied with the commission of inquiry that had been set up to examine the reasons for the "October surprise".

Kissinger was also resented by the Israeli leadership for ostensibly delaying U.S. emergency arms shipments to Israel to replace initial huge ordnance losses when absorbing the brunt of the Egyptian-Syrian two-front attack in the first half of October. This, it was alleged in some Israeli quarters, was intended to ensure a sufficiently devastating war for Israel to persuade it to enter post-war peace talks—a charge Kissinger has consistently denied.

The dissonance between the effort invested by Israel in retaking the combat initiative from mid-October and bringing the war deep into Egyptian territory on the one hand, and the lingering sense that the U.S. secretary of state was manipulating events at a huge cost in Israeli losses on the other hand, was palpable to the public. Kissinger again pressured Israel after the war, when separation of forces agreements with Egypt and Syria were being negotiated, by invoking "reassessment" and delaying arms shipments.

Yet, to Kissinger's great credit, the October 28 post-war kilometer 101 talks, followed by separation of forces agreements, constituted the true beginning of an Israel-Arab peace process that continues to this day. Like so many issues surrounding this war, Kissinger's role cannot be painted only in black and white.

Like Rabin before him, Dayan, too, made at least one secret trip to Morocco to meet with Tuhami and advance the negotiations with Egypt, donning a fedora and removing his signature eye patch. Rabin had worn a blond wig.

The Road to a Peace Agreement

Yitzhak Rabin became prime minister and minister of defense in 1975, thereby replacing both Meir and Dayan. Prior to October 1973, as Israel's ambassador in Washington, he had served as a conduit for the Kissinger-Ismail-Israel contacts. Now he entered into secret peace negotiations with Sadat's representative, Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister Hassan Tuhami. The talks were held in Morocco, which

had good relations with Egypt and a solid clandestine relationship, managed by the Mossad, with Israel.

In May 1977, Menachem Begin and the Likud were elected to lead Israel. Begin appointed Dayan his foreign minister. Together, they took over the secret track from Rabin. Like Rabin before him, Dayan, too, made at least one secret trip to Morocco to meet with Tuhami and advance the negotiations with Egypt, donning a fedora and removing his signature eye patch. Rabin had worn a blond wig. They both succeeded in traveling incognito, courtesy of the Mossad. Additional communications were passed between Egypt and Israel through the good offices of the Shah of Iran and President Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Jimmy Carter had been elected president and took office in January 1977. His approach to peacemaking in the Middle East was different from Kissinger's. Rather than trying to advance bilateral Egyptian-Israeli negotiations, Carter wanted to convene a major international conference in Geneva, Switzerland, where Israel and all its Arab enemies would be seated around the table, along with the United States and the Soviet Union.

Confronted with Carter's concept, neither Egypt nor Israel confided fully in Washington regarding their secret Moroccan peace discussions. Egypt had left the Soviet bloc and wanted a strategic relationship with the United States. Israel, too, saw the Soviets as an impediment to peace, at Geneva or elsewhere. Moreover, both Egypt and Israel viewed the presence of other hostile Arab states such as Syria and Iraq, as well as the PLO, at a Geneva roundtable as a potentially dangerous complication to their discreet attempt to reach a bilateral peace.

The notion of an "international solution" to the Arab-Israel conflict had a long history prior to 1977, generally involving the United Nations. Israel's boundaries with the West Bank and Gaza Strip are to this day armistice lines negotiated at Lausanne under UN auspices in 1948-49. The Geneva conference idea adopted by Carter was born after the 1967 Six-Day War. A Swedish diplomat, Gunnar Jarring, served between 1967 and 1973 as UN special envoy charged with implementing UNSC Resolution 242 and developing a formula for a multilateral international approach to Israel-Arab peace.

Israel was almost pathologically suspicious of an initiative in which the USSR and the United States would compel it to withdraw from the territories conquered in 1967 without genuine peace with the Arabs and without adequate security guarantees. In general, it recalled with anxiety and disappointment its experiences with multilateral UN initiatives and UN peacekeeping forces following the wars of 1948-49 and 1956.

Moreover, the Soviet Union was in Israeli eyes nothing less than an enemy. On July 30, 1970, Israeli Air Force combat aircrafts had shot down five Soviet MiG-21s in a dogfight over the Suez Canal. That clash, with its successful outcome

from Israel's standpoint, was kept secret for months by Israel fearing intimidation by Moscow. Indeed, one of the scenarios contemplated with trepidation at the time in Israeli security circles was the "Finlandization" of Israel.

The Soviet military presence along the Suez Canal, both air and ground forces, ended shortly after the dogfight. So did the Egypt-Israeli War of Attrition. Subsequently, Israel was more than happy to see Jarring—who incidentally was then also Sweden's ambassador to the USSR—fail.

Israeli-American tensions over Carter's Geneva initiative peaked in early October 1977. The US and the USSR issued a joint statement that appeared to Begin and Dayan to present Israel with a *fait accompli*. The Soviets and Americans would consult regarding the details of a new Middle East peace process, with PLO participation, to be dictated at Geneva. Dayan traveled to the United States in October 1977 to lobby Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance against a Geneva conference. He recruited the American Jewish lobby, which had helped get Carter elected, to support the Israeli position.

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This was the backdrop to Sadat's surprise announcement on November 9, in which he was inviting himself to Jerusalem to speak before the Knesset and make peace. Now,

not only Begin and Dayan but Sadat as well were undermining Carter's Geneva initiative. On the other hand, one could argue that great power pressure to submit to a Geneva summit had perhaps forced Sadat's hand.

Sadat's dramatic visit to Israel, beginning November 19, was a masterstroke. By telling Israelis "we were wrong to reject you," he converted Israeli public opinion overnight from Dayan's "better Sharm than shalom" mantra to a readiness to withdraw from Sinai in return for peace. But he apparently had not worked out all the details. When he returned to Egypt on November 23 after a successful Israel visit, it was not clear precisely how the now overt Egypt-Israel peace process would play out.

Within days, Sadat proposed to Begin, presumably through the Moroccan channel that the Israeli prime minister place an "American" in the U.S. embassy in Cairo. I was informed by Head of Mossad Yitzhak Hofi late on the night of November 30 that I had been selected to carry out that mission. I

would for all intents and purposes be seen as an American, my Israeli identity known only to the U.S. ambassador and to Sadat. I would liaise between Sadat and Begin.

Note that Egypt and Israel were still officially at war, and that varying degrees of anger at Sadat over his peace move were brewing both in Egypt and throughout the Arab World. What exactly I could do at the United States' Cairo embassy to further the peace was not entirely clear and was ultimately irrelevant; the simple fact of my presence there under U.S. auspices was all Sadat needed. After all, American agreement to my mission would mean, effectively, that Carter was abandoning his Geneva multilateral initiative and endorsing what both Sadat and Begin wanted: a bilateral peace track sponsored solely by the United States.

Yet, by December 1, a day after my late-night talk with Hofi, the Carter administration had offered only the faintest blessing even for Sadat's visit, which had concluded eight days earlier, much less for a bilateral Egypt-Israel peace process. The Americans were focused on Geneva and had been caught completely off guard. They proceeded to deal with the Sadat initiative, however briefly, with monumental ignorance.

As Carter's Middle East adviser William B. Quandt wrote in his 1993 book *Peace Process*, "on November 9, when Sadat publicly revealed his intention to go to Israel, Washington was caught by surprise [...] there was some concern that negative Arab reactions, coupled with Begin's essential rigidity on the Palestinian issue, would cause the initiative to fall [...] short."

Needless to say, negative Arab reactions, the Palestinian issue, and the Soviet position were precisely the reasons why Israel and Egypt had decided to go it alone. "It took some weeks," Quandt concludes diplomatically, "for American officials to correctly assess Sadat's reasons for going to Jerusalem."

Small wonder, then, that Carter refused Sadat's request to connive in the posting of an Israeli to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. In any case, had I been posted there, my stay would have been short. The Americans came around in late December by sponsoring a face-saving roundtable at Ismailia in Egypt. The bilateral peace process was launched, and Israelis began traveling openly to Egypt. Carter made amends for his initial opposition to an Egyptian-Israeli bilateral peace by contributing at Camp David in 1978 to bridging the stubborn gaps still separating Begin and Sadat.

Israeli Presence in Africa

Sadat had masterminded the October War and choreographed Egypt's role in the subsequent disengagement process. He had managed the Soviet departure and welcomed the Americans. He needed to outflank and neutralize Carter's

Geneva initiative, to negotiate with Begin and Dayan, and to ensure a bilateral Egypt-Israel peace process that would cement an Egyptian-American strategic relationship. He was prepared to lose Arab support temporarily.

Were other regional factors at work here as well? In retrospect, it would appear that in the heart of Africa to Egypt's south, where Cairo was being outflanked strategically, Sadat had yet another rationale for seeking peace—this one linked directly to Israel.

Since the 1950s, Israel's "periphery doctrine" had enabled it to develop a foothold in African countries south of Egypt, in addition to embracing Iran and Turkey on the Arab World's eastern and northern borders.

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was intended, inter alia, to signal to Cairo that it could not isolate Israel and ultimately would have to deal with it diplomatically rather than militarily.

Three Israeli periphery operations, in particular, had alerted Egypt that Israel was able to operate militarily at or near the sources of the Nile River, Egypt's existential lifeline. One was prolonged military assistance to Ethiopia, source of the Blue Nile. A second operation, assistance to the South Sudanese Anya Nya movement fighting for independence from the Khartoum government during the late 1960s to early 1970s, placed Israeli military advisers on the shores of the White Nile in southern Sudan, deep to Egypt's south.

Perhaps most impressive was the Entebbe rescue operation of July 4, 1976. An Air France aircraft carrying 248 passengers had been hijacked to Uganda by terrorists from Waddie Haddad's breakaway branch of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, along with the radical German Revolutionary Cells. Uganda and Libya collaborated with the terrorists. In a spectacular move, the Israel Air Force and Israeli commandos rescued the hostages with minimal losses after landing stealthily at Entebbe, Uganda, near the very source of the White Nile.

Both operationally and in terms of intelligence capabilities and clandestine contacts, the Israeli outflanking presence deep in Egypt's African strategic depth appears to have been a constant preoccupation of Egyptian strategic thinkers. It seems that the Entebbe Operation genuinely shocked them. To what extent this may have influenced Sadat's post-October War peace initiative scarcely a year later might be an interesting topic for Egyptian scholars to research.

An Eagle's Eye View of the October War

From Israel's standpoint, the October War with its devastating losses and trauma was a consequence of tragic mistakes made by its democratically elected leaders and its military. Ultimately, the Israeli "system" dealt successfully with the war's aftermath, thus launching—not without painful fits and starts—an era of peace between Israel and a growing number of its Arab neighbors that prevails to this day.

For roughly thirty years, Egypt had been Israel's principal enemy. It was responsible for most of Israel's wartime casualties, leading the Arab anti-Israel wartime alliances. Between 1973 and 1977, this reality changed dramatically. It must be noted that the era of great Middle East leaders like Sadat, Begin, and Rabin appears to be over. The region, like much of the rest of the world, no longer seems to produce outstanding national leadership. Ultimately, a leadership deficit has strategic consequences. ©