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ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES DID NOT SEE THE 1973 WAR COMING

Israel's mistaken pre-war assumptions about the 1973 War caused it to fail to foresee the potential outbreak of a war with Egypt and Syria. What were these calculations based on and why did the United States follow suit?

By Zaki Shalom

In early October 1973, Israeli intelligence agencies began to receive information regarding Egypt's (and Syria's) intention to launch a war against Israel in the coming days. The timing of the expected offensive was not yet known. Only in the early morning of October 6, 1973, would a highly reliable intelligence agent of the Mossad inform Israeli authorities that war would begin in the late afternoon hours.

The exact time was not mentioned, but for one reason or another the Israelis believed the Egyptian military offensive would begin at 6:00 pm. Concurrently, Egypt began to deploy massive military power along the Suez Canal, very close to Israel's military forces on the other side of the canal. The war broke out at 2:00 pm—four hours before the expected time.

On Yom Kippur, October 6, 1973—the holiest day in the Jewish calendar—the Egyptian and Syrian Armies launched a massive military operation against Israel. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the United States were both caught by surprise. The Egyptian forces were far larger than those the IDF had deployed in strongholds along the canal.

The costs of Israel's strategic failure were steep. The Egyptian Army killed most of the Israeli forces along the Suez Canal in the first hours of the war, and went on to injure and kill many more Israelis in the fierce military confrontations that took place until a ceasefire agreement was finally reached.

◀ Israeli Defense Forces on their way to the Suez Canal bridgehead. October 1973. *Magnum Photos*

It is safe to say that the Israelis and their allies did not anticipate the outbreak of the war. Israel had consistently denied the possibility of an Egyptian attack. The United States followed the Israeli assessments and policies in the period that preceded the war's outbreak and accepted ongoing Israeli assessments about the low probability of war. Not only that, the United States also supported an Israeli policy which aimed to preserve the status quo that had been created after the Six-Day War.

Israeli Assessments in the Pre-1973 War

The low likelihood of war

Israeli intelligence agencies believed—at least since the ceasefire agreement to end fighting along the Suez Canal in August 1970, which concluded the War of Attrition—that the likelihood of war initiated by Egypt was quite low. At the initial stages of the military escalation at the beginning of October 1973, Israeli intelligence stuck to this assessment. It argued that the Egyptian Army was conducting annual exercises and that its deployment was defensive in nature. In the preceding years, the Egyptian Army carried out such exercises almost every year. In each case, a fear crept in Israel that Egypt was secretly planning to carry out an invasion into Sinai. Each time, nothing happened. It was only natural to believe that in October 1973 the Egyptian forces would again follow this routine.

Therefore, Israeli intelligence considered it highly unlikely that Egypt would launch an offensive against Israel soon. This long-enduring assessment was based on seemingly solid assumptions, including, among others, Israel's military superiority. The dominant narrative within Israeli intelligence in the period that preceded the war was that Israel had acquired an overwhelming military superiority over its Arab enemies. What is more important is the fact that the Egyptian leadership was well aware of Israel's superior military capabilities. This was due, among other things, to the highly sophisticated arms Israel received from the United States and Israel's control over Sinai. The United States had supplied Israel in 1972 with 90 skyhawk and 42 phantom jets, which were the most advanced jets at the time. Thus, Israel estimated that any military confrontation with Egypt would almost certainly end in yet another Egyptian defeat.

Egypt had suffered a series of humiliating defeats in the War of Independence (1948), the Sinai War (1956), the Six-Day War (1967), and the War of Attrition (1968-1970). As a result, Israeli officials claimed that Arab states would act in a rational manner and would not want to suffer another defeat. Those wars, many Israelis believed, created a solid and very powerful deterrence against war.

The great powers opposed a war

In the period which preceded the Yom Kippur War, the leading assumption in Tel Aviv was that the great powers opposed a military confrontation in the Middle East. During that period, the United States and the Soviet Union were carrying out a policy of détente. Some hoped this policy would bring an end to the Cold War and lead to the establishment of peaceful relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

At the time, Egypt had very close relations with the Soviet Union. Most of the arms provisions of the Egyptian Army were produced in the Soviet Union. Thousands of Soviet officers and experts lent their support and expertise to the Egyptian Army. Consequently, many Israelis believed that once Egypt realized that the Soviet Union was opposed to a military conflict in the Middle East, the Egyptian leadership would not dare launch a war against Israel.

Divided Arab World

In the period before the war, the Arab World seemed to many Israelis to be more divided than it had ever been. Some experts on Middle East affairs went so far as to claim that hostility between Arab states might even escalate into military confrontations. A civil war broke out in Jordan in 1970 between King Hussein and his loyalists on one side and militant Palestinian groups who sought to topple the Hashemite kingdom on the other side.

Jordan suspected that Egypt supported the Palestinian organizations that operated against the king. Syria was openly hostile toward the Jordanian monarchy, and its army even invaded Jordan during the crisis of September 1970 known among Palestinians as “Black September.” Only a concrete threat by Israel to intervene militarily, accompanied by some strikes on Syrian targets, eventually led the Syrians to withdraw from Jordanian territory. This state of division, Israeli intelligence believed, would impede any thought of launching a war.

Sadat, a weak leader?

Israeli intelligence believed that Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, who came to power after President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s sudden death, was a weak president who would not be able to exert leadership on his ministers. Israeli intelligence judged that Sadat only became president because powerful groups within the Egyptian leadership could not agree on who should take the lead, so they decided to nominate an intermediary to occupy the position until they could agree on a “real” leader.

Caught By Surprise

All these considerations led the Israeli intelligence authorities to assess that Israel was far stronger than Egypt and that the Egyptians were aware of that reality. The rational conclusion therefore was that Egypt would not dare to get involved in a military confrontation with Israel. As already mentioned, eventually Israel learned that this assessment was not valid. Thus, when the war broke out, Israel was caught almost completely by surprise.

The U.S. administration was also caught by surprise on that very day. In his memoirs, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated that his assistant, Sisco,

In his memoirs, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated that his assistant, Sisco, woke him up at 6:00 am that morning (12:00 pm Israel time) and told him that Israeli authorities had complete certainty that Egypt would launch an attack on Israel within a few hours. He was dumbfounded.

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In his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir on October 6, 1973, United States Ambassador to Israel Kenneth Keating essentially blamed Israel for failing to foresee the war. The initial U.S. assessment, he said, reflected a real panic

at indications of the imminent war. However, U.S. officials approached high-ranking IDF officers who reassured the U.S. administration that there was no real reason to worry.

Later on, Ambassador Keating told Golda Meir, “we asked the Israelis if they knew of any ‘non-scheduled’ Soviet flights to Syria and Egypt’—an event which raised our suspicions. Israel’s response was that it did know about them but was not clear about their purpose.”

Again, Keating said, we asked the Israelis: what were the goals of the Egyptian deployment along the canal? Israel replied: we know about the Egyptian deployment; we know it looks threatening. However, we estimate it is defensive in its character. We asked the same thing about Syria and got a similar response. We asked if they knew about the return of the Sukhoi bombers to the airfield north of Damascus. They confirmed the validity of this information but admitted they could not explain its meaning.

Keating’s report seems to imply that the tremendous reliance on Israel’s intelligence capabilities at that time led United States intelligence personnel to show complacency in the face of the rapidly approaching offensive. The State Department’s intelligence chief Ray S. Cline claimed during the war that “we

were brainwashed by the Israelis, who brainwashed themselves.”

To understand why Israel was blindsided by Egypt’s surprise attack on October 6, 1973, requires a quick examination of the events leading up to this war, including the cementation of a status quo within Israel not only around its invincibility, but around the fact that Israel had to retain the territory it occupied in the Six-Day War at the cost of peace.

A few years earlier, in mid-May 1967, Egypt had begun concentrating massive military forces in the Sinai Peninsula. A short time later President Nasser announced that Egypt would block the passage of ships through the Straits of Tiran heading to the Port of Eilat in contravention of the rules of international law.

The Israeli government was stunned by those Egyptian moves. Nobody really knew the motives behind the massive deployment of the Egyptian troops and tanks in Sinai. The Egyptians could certainly estimate that Israel would not be able to tolerate these moves and might undertake military measures that could escalate into an all-out war.

The Israeli government, headed by Prime Minister Levy Eshkol, decided to exhaust diplomatic options in order to bring about a settlement that would prevent the outbreak of another Arab-Israeli war. The U.S. administration under President Lyndon Johnson was intensively involved in these efforts. However, it soon became clear that such efforts were fruitless and so Israel decided to go to war.

On June 5, 1967, Israel’s air force launched a preemptive strike against the air forces of Egypt and Syria. Later on, it attacked the Jordanian Air Force. In this attack, Israel managed to destroy large parts of the Egyptian and Syrian air capabilities. This attack was followed by an all-out military confrontation with the armies of those states.

After six days of fighting, a ceasefire was reached. The confrontation, which came to be known as the Six-Day War, dramatically changed Israel’s strategic status. Israel not only defeated the Arab armies but also occupied new territories: the West Bank, Sinai, and the Golan Heights. Israel’s status in the international community and the IDF’s distinction suddenly skyrocketed.

Following the war, the United States, with support from other states, carried out efforts to bring about an Israeli-Egyptian political settlement with different levels of intensity. All these efforts failed.

Following its great victory in the Six-Day War, Israel was highly confident

that the occupied territories were a vital strategic asset. Therefore, it believed it should try to keep those territories under its control at least until a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and Egypt could be concluded. Israel's leadership believed that due to its overwhelming superiority over the Arabs and its close ties with the United States, nobody—either by military or diplomatic means—would be able to force it out of the territories it had occupied in 1967.

Consequently, in the eyes of Kissinger, Israel actually adopted a strategy in which it was convinced that sustained control over the occupied territories would best serve its national interests. He believed that Israel should have known that this policy could not lead to peace with Egypt, which demanded complete withdrawal from the occupied territories.

Kissinger repeatedly stressed that Israel's intransigent policy was based on overconfidence and underestimation of its adversaries' abilities. Israel was certainly aware that in pursuing that policy it would block the conclusion of peace with its neighbors. Implicitly, Kissinger claimed, the expectations of Israel with regard to the pursuit of peace were higher than those applied to the Arab states. The United States was expecting Israel to do its utmost for the sake of peace. Israel, the United States administration believed, was far from standing by these expectations.

Kissinger recalled a meeting he had with Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban a few days before the outbreak of war to try and promote a peace process. According to Kissinger, Eban claimed that "there was no real need for a peace initiative...because the military situation was absolutely stable and could not be changed, and politically there was nothing to be gained by a peace initiative." Kissinger said that he tried to persuade Eban of the necessity of a political solution but failed.

Indeed, most Israelis tended to accept the doctrine adopted by the majority of Israeli leaders—both left and right wing—that the extant status quo was the best option for Israel and that Israel would be ready to withdraw from occupied territories only in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement. Prime Minister Golda Meir was quoted as saying that "[if] we retreat an inch from the canal....[we] will in no time go back to the international border."

Indeed, the new territories gave Israel significant strategic advantage over its enemies. The threat of an Arab military invasion into the populated centres of Israel, which was very real before the 1967 War, almost completely disappeared. In addition to this strategic advantage, the abilities of the IDF in terms of science, technology, and motivation gave Israelis reason to believe that there was a wide gap between the military capabilities of the Israeli and Arab armies.

Under these circumstances, there can be no doubt that Israel wanted to retain the occupied territories under its control. An advertisement plastered all over Israel before the October 30, 1973 election showed an Israeli soldier swimming in the Suez Canal, with the caption: “look at this, our position has never been better.” That was the crux of the Israeli position before the outbreak of the war.

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U.S. Status Quo Policy Pre-1973

In our view, there is much validity to the claim that the United States supported the status quo policy of Israel at the time. In the period which preceded the Yom Kippur War, the Nixon administration tried to broker an Israeli-Egyptian peace settlement. However, the United States soon realized that the gaps between the parties were huge and unbridgeable.

The only way to overcome these gaps was through exerting pressure on the parties to moderate their positions and show willingness to make concessions. Since the United States’ leverage over Egypt at that time was limited, the only remaining option was to exert pressure on Israel.

Various considerations led the Nixon administration to refrain from exerting significant pressure on Israel, thus enabling Israel to maintain its status quo strategy. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan stated in his autobiography that the “United States failed to engage in intensive diplomatic activity during the decisive years of 1972-73 when the Arab military build-up reached its peak.”

What considerations led the United States to adopt Israel’s policy?

Israel’s formidability and making the first move

Compared to the rest of the region, Israel was a strong state with a powerful military and advanced scientific-technological capabilities. In a meeting between President Nixon and Golda Meir on March 1, 1973, a few months before the outbreak of the war, Nixon said, “You are in a strong position—you can take care of yourself.”

Although formally the U.S. administration made clear its expectations that Israel would show readiness to withdraw from territories, there seems to have been an understanding in the administration that a state with such formidable capabilities could not be expected to make concessions to its rather weak enemies.

Furthermore, the administration realized that Israel's strength would eventually enhance the United States' position in the Arab World. The Arabs would discern

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that only the United States could bring Israel to make concessions, which is why they later showed an inclination to promote their relations with the United States. President Nixon reflected this assessment in his saying to Prime Minister Meir: "You are so strong that Egypt is coming to us."

U.S. could not go against Golda Meir

The United States was well aware that Israel had a very powerful and stubborn leader. Golda Meir was an authoritative figure who faced no real opposition within the

government. Ministers admitted they were afraid to adopt views that were not identical to hers. Golda Meir was very popular with the Israeli public. This certainly led the administration to believe that exerting pressure on her would not be effective. Rather, it would be better to carry out a dialogue with her that might eventually lead to an understanding.

Finally, it should be stressed that Meir adopted a sophisticated formula with regard to a possible settlement. She never opposed the option of withdrawal from the occupied territories. However, she made it clear this would only take place in the framework of direct dialogue with Egypt leading to a comprehensive peace agreement. The administration found it difficult to oppose such a formula. Egypt, at the time, was not willing to go so far as to establish a thorough peace settlement with Israel. Moreover, the United States' leverage over Egypt was limited. Thus, in practice, the U.S. ability to impose on Israel a withdrawal from territories was not high.

These factors eventually led the Nixon administration to adopt a strategy that was inclined to support Israel's aspiration to maintain the status quo as long as there was no dramatic change in the Egyptian attitude toward Israel. In an interview with the press, Israel's ambassador to the United States Simcha Dinitz, just two weeks before the outbreak of the war, outlined the following main principles guiding U.S. policy toward Israel:

- a) The United States is committed to ensuring Israel's military superiority over its enemies. This will guarantee a high level of deterrence which will likely prevent the outbreak of war.
- b) The United States does not believe in an imposed settlement on the parties

to the conflict in the Middle East. The settlement should be agreed upon by the partners in the conflict through intensive dialogue.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the U.S. administration adopted *de facto* the “status quo vision” which was a central pillar of the strategy of Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan in the period preceding the Yom Kippur War. Kissinger himself admitted that the administration did not act decisively to change the status quo created after the Six-Day War: “Before the war,” Kissinger said in a meeting with congressional leaders, “Israel thought that any war conflict would be similar to what happened in the Six-Day War in 1967. Israel thought it was in the best position it could be. There was no real pressure on them to change their positions.”

Kissinger’s conversation with then-Ambassador to the United States Yitzhak Rabin gave unequivocal evidence of the policy of the American administration under Nixon and his Secretary of State Kissinger to maintain the existing status quo. In response to Ambassador Rabin’s assertion that the situation in the Middle East was “fine,” Kissinger clarified that “the stability that has existed in the Middle East over the past year is based on our ability to create the illusion that we will do something [to advance a political settlement] when we all know that nothing has been done. That’s been my strategy since 1969.” 

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