The Yom Kippur War: Forty Years Later

By HIC research assistant Philip Cane

Background

Yom Kippur, October 6th 1973, at five minutes past two precisely, 4,000 artillery pieces, 250 aircraft and dozens of FROG missiles struck Israeli positions along the Suez Canal and the Sinai, at the same time along the Golan Heights, 1,400 tanks advanced towards Israel. The equivalent of the total conventional forces of NATO in Europe, eleven Arab nations led by Egypt and Syria had begun an advance into Israeli territory gained in the 1967 Six Day War. The largest Arab-Israeli War would end in an Israeli tactical victory, but for the first week the fate of Israel itself would be doubted, ‘most Israelis still refer to it as an earthquake that changed the course of the state’s history.’ The war changed the perceptions of all levels of society in the Middle East and forty years later its ripples are still felt to this day.

The Yom Kippur War fell on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, a Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) when the alertness of Israeli forces were notably reduced and only a skeleton force would be on duty with radio and TV stations shut down hampering mobilisation. This has led some writers such as Trevor Dupuy and Chaim Herzog to state that this was the primary motive for any such attack. But it what is not often known is that October 6th is the tenth and holiest day of Ramadan, when the Prophet Mohammed conquered Mecca which resulted in all of Arabia being Arabic. 1973 was the 1,350th anniversary of the victory of the Arabs in the Battle of Badr and the connotations of Arabs liberating Arabia from oppressors was enough for General El Shazly to state ‘Operation Badr named itself’.

---

9 Dupuy, T. *Elusive Victory* (1978) p.391
10 Laquer, W. *Confrontation: the Middle East War and World Politics* (London, Wildwood House, 1974) p.89
12 Aker, F. *October 1973* (1985) p.16
The Military Campaign

The war inflicted one of the greatest surprises in military history on the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) by using one of the most detailed deception plans ever created; the use of double agents, false articles in the international press and pretend manoeuvres, tapped into Israeli arrogance about their “superiority” following their 1967 victory, creating the necessary conditions to prevent any alarm in Tel Aviv. The reasons behind the extraordinary military successes of Egypt and Syria from 6th-13th October ultimately lay in both Arab success and Israel failings. For the Arabs the long term planning and preparation of the Egyptian and Syrian war plans proved to be a key reason behind the initial success of the attacks. It is said that the Arabs learnt every tactical lesson learnt from the 1967 Six Day War and undertook rigorous training programmes and rearmament to fix those failings. Whilst following the 1967 Six Day War, Israel felt secure within its new borders, it had destroyed a superior multinational Arab attack, American support seemed assured, President Sadat’s Year of Decision had come and gone and Egypt had broken off the Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union and expelled Soviet advisors. “The Concept” as it became known was therefore a result of this calm arrogance. “The Concept” was based on Israeli intelligence belief that Egypt and Syria would not attack until it had suitable air force strength to destroy the Israeli air force on the ground, this precondition would not be met until at least 1975. It took immeasurable assumptions that the Arabs were incapable of joint political and military action, that intelligence would give at least 2 days warning of an Arab attack, the mobilisation of reserves would be completed and finally the air force would conduct a series of pre-emptive strikes on the Arab air forces whilst they languished on the ground. The culmination of “The Concept” was a Maginot mentality that the expensive and lavish fortifications built along the Golan Heights and in the Canal Zone (the Bar Lev Line), would deter or delay any such provocations. The 1973 war, however, failed to meet any of the preconditions; no advance knowledge, no time for mobilisation and no pre-emptive attack. As a result of the failure to meet any preconditions the Bar Lev Line was under manned, isolated and unable to hold their positions. General Dayan and the Intelligence Department became captives of a preconceived concept in the months leading up to the war.

Using overwhelming Syrian superiority in the Golan Heights, a total of 1,200 tanks and 600 artillery pieces along a 55 mile front struck against just 280 Israeli tanks. By nightfall on the 7th they had advanced 12 miles beyond the ceasefire line. In the Canal Zone over 10,500 shells fell on the Israeli positions at a rate of 175 per second, which was followed by the crossing of the Suez Canal by 8,000 Egyptian commandos within 25 minutes of the first shells landing and establishing a bridgehead 10km east of the Canal. The situation became so dire that Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Dayan

---

14 Smith, C. Palestine and Arab-Israeli Conflict (New York, St Martins Press, 1996) p. 228
17 Boyne, W. The Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that Saved Israel (2003) p.11
20 Boyne, W. The Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that Saved Israel (2003) p.25
attempted to persuade Prime Minister Golda Meir to authorise the preparations needed to allow a rapid use of Israel’s 10-20 nuclear weapons.23

Yet, against all odds, the war swung violently back in the Israeli’s favour. Tactical mistakes in the initial advance on the 6th prevented the Syrian High Command from advancing to capture all of the Golan Heights and push into the heart of the undefended Israeli mainland. As such the IDF exploited the haphazard halt in Syrian armour and within the next 24 hours, restored its authority over the Golan Heights. By Wednesday 10th October, the Egyptian 1st Infantry Brigade advanced for the first time outside the protective umbrella of surface to air missiles. Without firing a single shot in anger in its advance, the 1st Infantry Brigade lost 90% of its men and equipment to sustained and punishing Israeli airstrikes.24 The disastrous Egyptian attack on the 13th October, aiming to advance unnecessarily into the Sinai, had failed and the Arab armies began the long retreat which only ended 100km from Cairo.25

The Legacy

The war had an untold effect on the policymakers and elites of many countries. In Egypt today, the October War has left a profound legacy on the historical narrative of the state. After the complete and total victory in the 1967 Six Day War, Israel felt secure within its new borders, it had destroyed a superior multinational Arab attack and American support seemed assured, complacency and conceit dominated the political system. There was no desire to listen to Sadat’s 1971 and 1973 calls for negotiations.26 President Anwar Sadat understood that Egypt lacked the capability to re-establish control over the Sinai and that the Year of Decision brinkmanship had gone unanswered, as such he gambled that the crossing of the Canal would restart the stalled peace negotiations. Sadat would say ‘Let me get just five centimetres from Sinai, and I’m ready to negotiate anything’.27 The conclusion of the conflict may have ended with Israeli triumph and the encircling of the Egyptian Third Army but the humbling of the unbeatable enemy for just a week was enough.28 By 1978, the accords had been signed between Israel and Egypt, the Sinai was returned, peace would hold to this day and America gained another Arab ally.

The 1971 War of Attrition protests which engulfed Tahrir Square in Cairo condemning the Sadat government had been replaced by jubilation and pride. Even today the October War is viewed as one of the greatest Egyptian national achievements since the construction of the Pyramids. Commemorations are celebrated annually as Armed Forces Day, a day in which the military are praised and remembered, four cities carry the operations names, the longest bridge in Cairo was

---

28 Ibid.
built in its honour and so sensitive is that narrative that foreign documentary makers are repeatedly denied entry to the country.\textsuperscript{29}

Today the Muslim Brotherhood is planning to launch a “Great Counter-Coup” utilising the spirit of war and the turning in Egypt’s fortunes as a metaphor for its own predicament\textsuperscript{30}. With others like the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy, they will descend upon Tahrir to honour the memory of the heroes of the October 1973 Army and protest the ‘bloody perpetrators’ in today’s Army and their disrespect for their legacy.\textsuperscript{31}

In Israel, the legacy of the war exists in all branches of society, Golda Meir resigned and politics changed forever with Labor losing power for the first time and the newly established Likud gaining power.\textsuperscript{32} Society transitioned from secular socialists to the diverse Israeli culture and politics which exist now, making the war a landmark in national history. The IDF vowed never to be caught unaware as they did in 1973 and has so far succeeded. But most crucially Jerusalem learnt that supremacy is never assured and whilst the threat of another Arab-Israeli war is almost unthinkable, there are new threats to the state. This brought about the doctrine of pre-empting all threats to the nation, whether that is terrorism in Lebanon or Palestine, chemical weapons in Syria or nuclear weapons in Iraq and Iran.

Benjamin Netanyahu, a veteran of the conflict himself, is the voice of the fundamental conclusion of the war; ‘it seemed as if we were fighting for the very existence of the Third Temple... [but] within three weeks, we were at the gates of Cairo and Damascus... The strategic situation has changed a great deal since the Yom Kippur War: we signed peace accords with Egypt and Jordan and we are trying to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. None of this would have happened without our neighbours’ understanding that we cannot be defeated on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{33} This legacy, that Israel was ready and willing to defend itself against overwhelming unforeseen superior odds and with elites like Hosni Mubarak, the Assad family and the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, all veterans of the conflict has kept that fragile peace.

Although Israel has ascended to technological, democratic and economic hegemony as compared to its neighbours, as Shlomo Ben-Ami sadly proclaims ‘every major peace breakthrough has come only

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Anon, ‘How the #Oct73 War Anniversary Is Ruined For Me In 2013?’ , \textit{Egyptian Chronicles}, October 5\textsuperscript{th} 2013 \url{http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/how-oct73-war-anniversary-is-ruined-for.html} (accessed October 5\textsuperscript{th} 2013)
\item Maaroud, M., ‘Pro-Morsy alliance calls for rallies to commemorate 6 October War’, \textit{Egypt Independent}, October 4\textsuperscript{th} 2013 \url{http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/pro-morsy-alliance-calls-rallies-commemorate-6-october-war} (accessed 5\textsuperscript{th} October 2013)
\item Amotz, A. ‘Middle East: The Last War’, \textit{The Jerusalem Post}, 13\textsuperscript{th} September 2013 \url{http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Remembering-the-Yom-Kippur-War-40-years-on-326088} (accessed October 5\textsuperscript{th} 2013)
\item Translator, ‘PM Netanyahu’s Remarks at the Ceremony Marking 40 Years Since the Yom Kippur War’, \textit{Prime Minister’s Office}, September 15\textsuperscript{th} 2013 \url{http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechkippur150913.aspx#.UjYEIcXedz4.twitter} (accessed October 5\textsuperscript{th} 2013)
\item Lazareva, I. ‘Mubarak fired the first shots of the Yom Kippur war’, \textit{The Telegraph}, September 20\textsuperscript{th} 2013 \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10322814/Mubarak-fired-the-first-shots-of-the-Yom-Kippur-war.html} (accessed October 5\textsuperscript{th} 2013)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
as a consequence of war. In its 40th anniversary editorial Haaretz concluded that ‘now as then, 40 years later, Israel continued on its own way. It leans only on its military power and the support of United States. It continues to ignore its isolation and the limitation of power. The conflict in Syria and troubles in Egypt, the dangers of the Sinai and Golan Heights and unexpected threats continue to demonstrate that the danger that hit on October 6th 1973 still exists to this day.

How to cite this article:

The Humanitarian Intervention Centre is an independent foreign policy think tank based in London, which works with politicians, policy makers, journalists and human rights activists to promote and engage in a debate about the consequences of action and inaction in war and conflict zones. The Director and Fellows are available for interviews. For details, contact info@hicentre.org

Bibliography

- Anon, ‘How the #Oct73 War Anniversary Is Ruined For Me In 2013?’, Egyptian Chronicles, October 5th 2013 http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/how-oct73-war-anniversary-is-ruined-for.html (accessed October 5th 2013)
- El Shazly, S. The Crossing of the Suez (San Francisco, American Middle East Research, 2003)

• Insight Team of the Sunday Times, *The Yom Kippur War* (Garden City, Doubleday, 2002)
• Laquer, W. *Confrontation: the Middle East War and World Politics* (London, Wildwood House, 1974)
• Smith, C. Palestine and Arab-Israeli Conflict (New York, St Martins Press, 1996)
• Snow, P & D. 20th Century Battlefields: 1973 Middle East, BBC2, 9th July 2007
• Translator, ‘PM Netanyahu’s Remarks at the Ceremony Marking 40 Years Since the Yom Kippur War’, Prime Minister’s Office’, September 15th 2013 http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechkippur150913.aspx#.UjYEicXedz4.twitter (accessed October 5th 2013)