

The Yom Kippur War

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Elizabeth Stephens examines how the surprise invasion of Israel by Egypt and its allies started the process that led to Camp David.

Egyptian forces crossing the Suez Canal on October 7, 1973. The impact of the Yom Kippur War that erupted on October 6th, 1973, far outweighed its relatively short duration of twenty days of heavy fighting. It severely tested the détente between the United States and the Soviet Union as the superpowers sought to defend the interests of their Middle East clients: Israel on the American side, Egypt and Syria on the Soviet side. The result was the most dangerous moment of the Cold War since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. American support proved critical to the survival of Israel at this seminal moment as the US-Israel special relationship, begun in 1967, was consolidated. The conflict is also remembered for triggering the first energy shock as Arab oil producers unleashed the oil weapon to punish the United States and its allies for their support of Israel. Finally, it set off a chain of events that culminated in the 1978 Camp David Accords, the landmark peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

Israel's victory against the Arabs in 1967 had been swift and absolute, transforming the geographical contours of the Middle East. Israel's territorial gains tripled the country's land area and dramatically reduced its vulnerability to Arab attack. Egypt lost the Gaza Strip and Sinai, Syria the Golan Heights and Jordan, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In less than a week Israel had established itself firmly as the regional military superpower and secured considerable diplomatic and military support from the United States.

The fundamental cause of the Yom Kippur War was the diplomatic impasse that followed the Six-Day War. At the Khartoum summit of August 1967 the Arabs issued their 'three noes: no peace, no recognition and no negotiation with Israel'. This played into Israeli hands and when Golda Meir became Israel's first female prime minister in 1969 she obdurately refused to countenance withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. 'The Muslims', she proclaimed, 'can fight and lose, then come back and fight again. But Israel can only lose once.' She was acutely aware that Israeli survival depended ultimately on American support. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (passed on November 22nd, 1967, with US support), called for Israel's return to its pre-1967 borders, but also for respect for the sovereignty of every state in the area. Israel made its willingness to negotiate dependent on Arab recognition, while the Arabs made the return of the occupied lands a prerequisite for talks.

Jerusalem's intransigence, in response to the Khartoum Resolution, was compounded by the conviction, shared by the CIA, that the Arabs were incapable of successfully challenging Israeli supremacy. An Israeli joke had Moshe Dayan, Meir's minister of defence and architect of the 1967 plan of battle, bemoaning the lack of action: 'How about invading another Arab country?' asks a colleague. 'What would we do in the afternoon?' responds Dayan. Such complacency was reinforced by the construction of the Bar-Lev Line, an interlocking series of sand-based earthworks on the east bank of the Suez Canal which consumed \$500 million in 1971. Thought to be virtually impregnable by the IDF (Israel Defence Forces), by October 1973 it was thinly defended. The Israelis also assumed that any surprise Arab attack, wherever it came, could be repulsed by their air force, which had proved so devastating in the Six-Day War. Into this equation came Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Gamal Nasser as Egyptian president when the latter died suddenly in September 1970. Sadat was not taken seriously by either

Washington or Jerusalem, being regarded as a transient leader who made empty threats that were never acted upon. In 1972 Sadat's sabre-rattling saw him promise 'to sacrifice one million Egyptian soldiers', which was palpably absurd. Yet such contempt also extended to his intimation made the previous year that, if Israel acted on Resolution 242, Egypt was ready for peace. Sadat turned to Washington in an effort to break the stalemate.

The key figures in the White House were President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor in Nixon's first term (1969-73) and Secretary of State in his second (1973-74). Kissinger had Nixon's ear, with some dubbing him 'president of foreign affairs'. A German émigré who fled Nazi persecution in 1938, Kissinger was an advocate of *Realpolitik* – ruthless pragmatism as the basis of national policy. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger was keen on staking American prestige on a Middle East peace settlement they were convinced was unattainable. Yet Nixon believed, as a Republican president, that he needed to find a solution to the conflict in his second term. He feared a completely pro-Israel Democrat successor would give the Soviets a chance to reinforce their influence among the Arabs.

Throughout 1972, however, Nixon's overriding concerns were negotiating the historic SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) agreement with Moscow, ending the Vietnam War and his re-election campaign. Consequently, he was not prepared to risk political capital on brokering peace between Israel and Egypt. Sadat's sudden and unexpected expulsion of most Soviet advisers from Egypt in July 1972 reduced Nixon's sense of urgency about doing anything.

In March 1973, when Meir visited Washington, Nixon and Kissinger tried to devise ways and means of drawing Israel into talks with Egypt, thus breaking the deadlock. The previous month she had rebuffed Sadat's latest peace initiative. As Kissinger perceived, 'the longer there was no change in the status quo the more Israel would be confirmed in the possession of the Occupied

Territories'. Although Sadat repeatedly warned Washington that the status quo would provoke another war which could bring a renewed Soviet military presence in Egypt, Kissinger remained convinced that he was bluffing. As he reflected in his memoirs, 'our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect'.

The diplomatic option closed, Sadat now set in motion plans for war, Operation Badr. Recognizing that he needed a partner, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria was brought on board to confront Israel with a two-front war. Where Sadat wanted war to kick-start the peace process, Assad – his armed forces re-equipped by Moscow – sought to recover the Golan Heights from Israel. To deceive Israeli intelligence, large-scale military exercises were staged by Egypt during 1973, twice provoking Israeli mobilization. The fact that two thirds of the Israeli army were reservists had a tremendous dislocating impact on the civilian economy which the Israeli leadership now became anxious to avoid. The seeming rift with Moscow also played into Sadat's hands. While the Kremlin remained unwilling to provide fighter-bombers, from late 1972 it furnished an array of deadly defensive armaments including SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) and the Sagger anti-tank guided missile. Israeli intelligence overlooked the potential for these defensive weapons to aid offensive operations, gambling instead that war would only come once Egypt acquired the offensive capability provided by fighter-bombers.

When Egypt and Syria launched an overwhelming surprise attack that began on Yom Kippur (October 6th, 1973), the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Israel was utterly unprepared. October also coincided with Ramadan, the month of fasting in the Muslim calendar, providing yet another justification to the Israeli analysis of why the Arabs would not want to fight. Just before hostilities, the Egyptian Army held exercises on its side of the Canal. At the eleventh hour, after repeated warnings, Israeli intelligence finally

realized this was not an exercise. On the morning of the 6th, Meir convened an emergency cabinet meeting to weigh the options. The IDF chief of staff, Lieutenant-General David Elazar, urged Meir to sanction a repeat of the pre-emptive air strikes that had destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the ground during the first morning of the Six-Day War. For his part, Dayan could not bring himself to believe that Egypt and Syria were about to strike the first blow. On this occasion, the message coming out of Washington was not to pre-empt and Meir elected to come down on the side of Dayan and the Americans.

At the onset of hostilities – in what became known as The Crossing – 80,000 Egyptian troops negotiated the Canal in small craft. Explosives and high pressure water cannons were used to breach the Bar-Lev Line. Egyptian forces then penetrated fifteen miles into the Sinai. Many Israeli combat aircraft fell victim to the radar-guided SAMs while Israeli tanks were knocked out by the sophisticated Soviet-supplied anti-tank weaponry. It was a similar story on the Golan Heights. Reeling under the twin assaults, Israel was forced to abandon its doctrine of fast-moving attacks with armoured columns backed by devastating air power and instead to fight a static defence.

Twenty-four hours into the war, as Arab armies advanced, it looked as if Israel might be brought to its knees. So traumatic was the experience that on October 8th Meir reportedly ordered thirteen tactical nuclear weapons readied as a last resort if the tide could not be turned. In her heart, though, she looked to Washington for salvation.

The US response to the crisis was threefold. The highest priority was given to preserving détente and averting a direct confrontation between the superpowers. Second, and to Israel's chagrin, Nixon and Kissinger tried to ensure that neither Israel nor Egypt secured an outright victory. If the conflict produced a standoff it could pave the way for fruitful peace negotiations, just as Sadat hoped, and possibly lure Egypt out of the Soviet camp.

Third, in the midst of the Watergate crisis, diplomatic manoeuvres might draw the public's attention away from criticism of Nixon. Between October 6th and 9th Kissinger became the principal official overseeing diplomatic exchanges with the Israelis and Soviets about the war. In the early hours of October 9th the Israeli ambassador, acting on Meir's instructions, pressed Kissinger for significant arms supplies as Israel desperately needed to replenish its arsenal. Kissinger consulted Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who warned a major rearmament of Israel was liable to provoke an Arab oil boycott. As a result, no firm decision was taken. With Nixon mired in the Watergate scandal, Meir was aware that Kissinger was calling the shots. She sought to circumvent him, contacting Nixon directly and reminding him that she had vetoed a pre-emptive air strike that would have saved many Israeli lives.

The situation was more complex than this. Nixon and Kissinger sought the withdrawal of Israel from the Occupied Territories, but not as a consequence of a major Arab victory – one that would make the Arab states even less willing to negotiate a lasting peace. Furthermore, on October 10th, with the Egyptians and Syrians still holding their own, the White House suspected the Soviet Union of stalling on supporting a UN ceasefire resolution. An Israeli defeat would be likely to increase Moscow's influence in the Middle East. Watergate, US fear of an oil embargo and Nixon's stake in détente may have encouraged the Soviets to overplay their hand.

Nixon's critical decision to launch a massive military resupply operation to Israel in the second week of the war came in response to the failure of UN ceasefire initiatives, the Soviet arms airlift to Egypt and Syria and his need to bolster his faltering backing among domestic supporters of Israel. It was the logistical aspect of implementing the president's decision that was problematic. Since October 15th, El Al planes, their markings concealed, had been collecting armaments from depots in Virginia

but the quantities were insufficient to replace Israeli losses. On October 19th, after insurance companies refused to cover Israeli chartered aircraft flying into a war zone, it was decided to use US C-5s to transport equipment to Israel. The proviso from the White House was that the take-offs and landings should take place under cover of darkness.

It was at this juncture that Nixon's attempts to maintain the image of America as an 'honest broker' between Israel, the Arabs and the Soviets unravelled. For refuelling purposes the C-5 aircraft were flown to Israel via Lajes Field, the Portuguese air force base in the Azores. However, adverse weather conditions delayed their departure, with many arriving in Israel at dawn and not in the dead of night. Visual proof of the huge US re-supply operation delighted the Israeli public and the media, but the surrounding publicity unleashed the wrath of the Gulf States in the form of an oil embargo.

Before the war Sadat recognized the value of being able to exert some pressure on Washington through a third party. On August 23rd, 1973, Sadat had secretly met King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and convinced the head of the world's largest oil-producing state to use the oil weapon in a future Arab-Israeli conflict. Since 1967 the US had become a net oil importer. As a consequence, bargaining power shifted from the US oil companies in favour of the producing nations, thus giving Sadat's strategy a realistic chance of success.

Saudi Arabia was a crucial swing producer within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC). With the tide of the war starting to turn in Israel's favour, the Saudis were prepared to use the termination of oil supplies as a form of leverage against the West. On October 13th Nixon received an ominous letter from the chairmen of the oil majors Mobil, Exxon, Chevron and Texaco, warning of Faisal's dismay with the course of events.

Three days later, the New York Times reported that Faisal had demanded that the White House terminate arms supplies to Israel and that Israel withdraw to its pre-1967 borders; otherwise US-Saudi relations would become 'lukewarm'. Next day, the 17th, when a positive response was not forthcoming, OAPEC announced that it would cut 'oil production by 10 per cent and 5 per cent a month thereafter' until Israel withdrew from the Occupied Territories. Two days later, after Nixon's official request to Congress for an appropriation of \$2.2 billion to cover the cost of the airlift, Faisal imposed an embargo on oil shipments to the US, a policy soon replicated by other Arab oil producers.

The coordinated efforts of OAPEC did not have as profound an effect on White House policy as Sadat had envisaged. The administration prioritized relations with Moscow and the survival of Israel, not the rising cost of oil.

Between October 6th and 19th the superpowers furnished the combatants with aircraft, artillery and other weaponry. This competition ultimately favoured the Israelis who, recovered from the trauma of the opening week, focused first on defeating the Syrian forces nearing towns in Galilee. Between October 11th and 14th the IDF pushed the enemy from the Golan Heights and back into Syria. Damascus asked Cairo to relieve the pressure.

Brushing aside the protests of senior commanders, Sadat ordered Egyptian forces forward. On October 14th, now out of range of their SAMs, they were decimated by Israeli aircraft and armour, losing around 200 tanks. The following day the IDF began a sustained counter-attack, exploiting the point where the flanks of the Egyptian Second and Third Armies met.

By the second week of the war, with Israel in the ascendancy, the Soviet Union gave support to a cease-fire. Now it was the American position that became more ambivalent. On October 20th, as Kissinger flew to Moscow, Nixon informed President Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, that the Secretary of State had full authority to negotiate on his behalf. Kissinger was

outraged that Nixon had deprived him of the ability to stall. He had intended to tell the Soviets that he would have to consult the President before agreeing to the terms of a cease-fire. Such a delay would have enabled Kissinger to buy the Israelis more time to consolidate their position on the battlefield and for him to find a way to exclude the Soviets from the negotiations. Yet a telephone conversation with Joseph Sisco, Assistant Secretary at the State Department, restored Kissinger's confidence in his own authority. Nixon was so preoccupied with Watergate and his own self-preservation that he did not have time to think about the Middle East, thus enabling Kissinger to ignore his instructions.

On October 22nd the superpowers brokered UN Security Council Resolution 338. It provided the legal basis for ending the war, calling for a cease-fire to be in place within twelve hours, implementation of Resolution 242 'in all its parts' and negotiations between the parties. This marked the first occasion the Soviets had endorsed direct negotiations between the Arabs and Israel without conditions or qualifications. Meir, who was not consulted, was offended by this *fait accompli*, though she had little option but to comply.

Nevertheless, Meir was determined to gain the maximum strategic advantage before the final curtain came down on the conflict. Given the entanglement of the Egyptian and Israeli armies, the temptation was too great for the Israelis to resist. After a final push in the Sinai expelled the Egyptians, Meir gave the order to cross the Canal. The IDF was soon threatening to cut off the retreating 40,000 soldiers of Sadat's Third Army. Kissinger was incensed because he had assured the Soviets that Israel would respect the latest cease-fire. Both superpowers were monitoring the fighting through satellite surveillance photography. Brezhnev, for the first time during the Nixon presidency, used the hotline to request presidential intervention. Soviet and American credibility was at stake. As Kissinger cautioned the Israeli ambassador: 'There were limits beyond which we could not go,

with all our friendship for Israel, and one of them was to make the leader of another superpower look like an idiot.'

Israel, after breaching a second UN ceasefire, took the US to the brink of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Brezhnev threatened unilateral military intervention if Washington found it 'impossible to act jointly'. The message came through when Nixon, 'overwhelmed by his persecution', as Kissinger described his mental state, was in bed. Kissinger elected not to wake the President but to convene National Security officials to formulate a response. After a three hour White House meeting, ending at 2am, it was agreed to move US forces to DefCon 3, the highest state of peacetime preparedness. On a psychological level, the impact was immense. Washington had signalled its willingness to go to war with Moscow to preserve both Israel and its position in the Middle East. The alert had the desired effect as the Kremlin backed off. Yuri Andropov, KGB chief, encapsulated the Soviet attitude: 'We shall not unleash the Third World War.'

The military alert was also successfully employed to force Israeli cooperation. As Meir came under increasing pressure from Washington to leave the trapped Egyptians unharmed, with great pragmatism she acquiesced. She understood her obligation to safeguard Israel's relationship with 'the only real friend we have and a very powerful one'. As she acknowledged, 'the trouble with friends is not what they can do for you, but what they prevent you from doing for yourself.'

On October 25th the UN Security Council passed Resolution 340, calling for an immediate cease-fire, a return to the October 22nd lines and the implementation of Resolution 338. This time the ceasefire held and the war was finally brought to a close. The associated oil embargo on the US was lifted in March 1974.

Kissinger moved to centre stage to kick-start a peace process. At a news conference the morning after the alert, he presented his position: 'The conditions that produced the war were clearly intolerable to the Arab nations, and ... in a process of negotiations

it will be necessary to make substantial concessions.’ The following day he convinced Israel to permit the resupply of the Third Army, thereby preventing a decisive victory for Israel and delivering the military stalemate for which he had worked throughout the war. A grateful Sadat took due note.

The effects of the Yom Kippur War echoed throughout the Middle East and across the world. A quadrupling of oil prices to \$12 a barrel by 1974 reflected the strength of the Arab producers’ punishment strategy. In the American case, imports derived from Arab sources plunged from 1.2 million barrels a day to just 19,000 barrels. Petrol rationing, speed restrictions and Project Independence, a plan to make the US energy independent, were the result. The first oil shock brought the ‘Long Boom’, the era of commercial growth dating from 1950, to a juddering end.

In Israel, the war became known as ‘the Earthquake’. The public clamour for answers over what went wrong led Meir to establish the Agranat Commission to look into the conduct of the war. Its interim report exonerated Meir and Dayan of any intelligence and operational failures but recommended the dismissal of Lieutenant-General Elazar and Eli Zeira, the head of military intelligence. The political fallout did not stop there. Disgruntled reservists, appalled by the heavy loss of life, demanded Dayan’s resignation, which came the following month, and then began targeting Meir who resigned shortly thereafter, on April 11th, 1974, forever haunted by the thought that she should have authorized pre-emptive air strikes. In that event, Kissinger subsequently remarked, Israel would not have received ‘even a nail’ from Washington.

Although Nixon, with Kissinger’s blessing, tried to claim the kudos for managing the crisis, it did not save his presidency and he resigned in disgrace in August 1974 to avert impeachment. The ultimate loser was Moscow. The momentum in the peace talks that ensued carried Sadat into alignment with Washington, the superpower he considered able to deliver Israel to the negotiating table. Kissinger engaged in ‘shuttle diplomacy’, flying between the

interested capitals. Under Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, he put into action the 'step-by-step' diplomatic strategy he considered would deliver a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. In November 1977 Sadat travelled to Jerusalem to address the Knesset. This encouraged the Democrat President Jimmy Carter to put his personal prestige behind reaching an Egyptian-Israeli settlement. The outcome of the Camp David negotiations, involving Sadat and the Israeli leader Menachem Begin in September 1978, was the signing of a peace agreement the following year, removing the largest and most populous Arab state from the anti-Israel Arab alignment. Israel returned the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt; in return, Egypt recognized Israel. The agreement transformed Egypt into the second largest recipient of US foreign aid, after Israel.

Before October 1973, Washington had continually restated its commitment to Israel's security but this rested on little more than words. When words needed to be backed by action, as they did in May 1967 and the first week of October 1973, American policy-makers responded by arguing, agonizing and weighing their moral commitment to Israel against a range of diplomatic and strategic objectives. Congressional approval of a \$2.2 billion commitment to Israel, in the midst of the Yom Kippur War, finally ended this debate. America was now signalling to the world that it stood behind Israel's survival and security regardless of the consequences, a position it has maintained ever since.

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