



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Yom Kippur War: Much More than an Intelligence Failure

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,760, September 27, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Two messages continue to ring out on the eve of the anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. One concerns the severity of the intelligence failure at the time, and the other promises that the right lessons have been learned and the IDF is now prepared for any scenario. When the failure is portrayed as essentially the lack of an intelligence warning, it is easy to promise that it has been diagnosed and remedied in a way that prevent its future recurrence. But an in-depth look at the war shows that the reasons for the fiasco went far beyond the intelligence failure.

From the very beginning of the Yom Kippur War, an exaggerated emphasis on the intelligence failure served the IDF senior command. It made it possible to deny and cover up the many deficiencies that were revealed in the army's overall preparedness for the war, most of all a systemic erroneous view of the political constraints and the changes that had taken place in the combat theaters.

In analyzing the political constraints, the General Staff should have identified the tension between its desire for a preemptive strike and the political circumstances that made such a move nearly impossible. Instead, the conceptual fixation led to serious shortcomings in both the operational plans and the force buildup. As a result, the air and ground forces were deployed at the outbreak of hostilities in a flawed defensive posture.

By the time the fighting stopped, it was convenient for everyone to believe that if only an advance warning had been given and the IDF's order of battle had been mobilized two or three days earlier, the first days of the war would have gone differently. That may have been true regarding the Syrian front but not the Egyptian front, where President Anwar Sadat had instigated a

revolutionary strategic change in the approach to the war and the role of the offensive.

When the full extent of the IDF's debacle transpired after a few days of fighting, its military leadership was shattered. The IDF's operational doctrine and fighting methods, both in the air and on the ground, proved ill-suited to Egypt's innovative moves. Confronting a massive infantry advance rife with antitank missiles, and lacking adequate artillery cover, the Israeli armored forces lost the crushing momentum of the mechanized offensive. Against Egypt's anti-aircraft batteries with their sophisticated missiles, Israel's air force lost its superiority and operative effectiveness.

In his book *At the Center of Gravity*, Maj. Gen. (res.) Jackie Even, who served in the war as deputy commander of Ariel Sharon's division, tells of the crisis induced by the failed counterattacks of October 8 and 9. The ramifications of this failure went way beyond those of the intelligence surprise. Even's account indicates that even if an intelligence warning had been conveyed in time and IDF forces had been deployed on the Sinai front beforehand with a fully planned order of battle, the initial fighting might not have gone any better and it might have gone even worse.

A new study by the Historical Division of the General Staff focuses on the responsibility of Gen. Motti Hod, who executed the brilliant 1967 air gambit and retained command of the Israeli air force until May 1973, for its failures during the war. The air force's operational plans ignored major changes that had taken place in Egypt. The dense deployment of Egyptian surface-to-air missile batteries along the Suez Canal front since the War of Attrition (1969-70) should have prompted a rethinking of the exaggerated expectations that the air force could help repulse a future Egyptian offensive. No such rethinking occurred.

In a situation assessment on April 19, 1973, Chief of Staff David Elazar asked Hod what precautionary measures should be taken to deter the enemy from launching a war. Hod's reply was: "To exploit the advantage that lies in the air force... that will give us as much deterrence as we want. We can then cover like an umbrella for the shortage of tanks in the Sinai... The air force can hold off for 24 hours any beachhead they'll establish."

To this day, the IDF and the defense establishment have not considered all the factors that set the stage for the failure at the outset of the war. Historian Yoav Gelber recently maintained that the intelligence failure involved not only the lack of an advance warning about the impending war but also the fact that "Israel was unaware that it had lost its deterrent power." This view typifies

the overreliance on the notion of deterrence, a vain expectation that continues to bedevil Israeli strategic thought to date.

In reality, it was precisely Sadat's awareness of the power of Israeli deterrence that led him to craft a different blueprint for the war. Keenly aware of the Egyptian army's inferiority compared to Israel's air and armored forces, he creatively adjusted his war strategy to his army's basic limitations. It was here that the strategic shift occurred: namely, in Sadat's realization that Egypt could not regain the Sinai Peninsula through an all-out offensive and his opting instead for a limited goal that was within reach of the Egyptian armed forces. That goal was to undermine the Israeli security concept by instigating a momentum that would produce a new reality.

By failing to identify this sea change in the Egyptian president's strategic thinking, the Israeli military leadership was no less culpable for the war's catastrophic beginning than the intelligence corps.

Providing an advance warning about an impending war entails far more than finding a "golden piece of evidence" about whether and when a war will break out. It is no less important to comprehend the strategic logic of the war, as well as its possible nature and methods, and to prepare accordingly. In the summer of 1973, both the IDF's General Staff and the political echelon failed at all these tasks.

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the IDF reassured itself with the notion that the source of failure had been diagnosed and, as with a mechanical failure, once the necessary corrections had been made the country's security affairs would return to a sure footing. But a different professional perspective—one that takes a more comprehensive view to determine the causes of the failure—presents a troubling picture of the reality of 1973 (and one that the present-day Israeli mindset may find virtually impossible to digest). From that standpoint, a systemic failure of the magnitude that Israel experienced in the Yom Kippur War could certainly recur despite the IDF's efforts at rectification.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.