

The Arab-Israel War of 1973 and Its Legacy

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Featured image: The Crossing. Egyptian forces moving across the Suez Canal en route to an assault on the "Bar Lev Line".

Each of the full-blown wars between Israel and its Arab neighbours have carried a great measure of significance. The War of 1948 led to the creation of the modern state of Israel, a cause for euphoria among the world's Jews in the post-Shoah-era, in contrast to the Nakba inflicted on the Arabs of Palestine.

The War of 1967, during which Israel routed three Arab armies in six days established Israel as a regional hegemon while its defeated Arab neighbours stewed in their humiliation and the Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza came under occupation.

The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, known either as the "October War" or as the "Yom Kippur War", is one which created the impetus for the Camp David Accords of 1978 which paved the way for the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. But the war that commenced on October 6, 1973, by the surprise attack on Israel by Egypt and Syria, is also worth examining because it provides a framework towards understanding what has changed and what remains unchanged so far as the dynamics of conflict in the Middle East is concerned.

1. The Preconception. The Israeli rout of Arab armies in the "Six Day War" of 1967 led to laxity borne of overconfidence and arrogance pertaining to Arab military capabilities. The prevailing view was that Arab armies would not attack Israel until they could develop the capability to match Israeli air power. Although hubris was widespread, criticism quickly focused on one person. Moshe Dayan, who had held the portfolio of minister of defence since that war, was largely held to blame for not predicting the Arab attack and the level of unpreparedness the attack exposed. Although a cunning and ruthless general, he was decidedly not a very competent peacetime administrator.
2. The failure of intelligence. Israel's inability to predict the Arab attack was not simply because the Egyptians had successfully employed Russian-derived deception techniques enshrined in the military doctrine of *Maskirovka*. It had a lot to do with the monopolization of all-source intelligence by Israeli Military Intelligence. Added to that were a number of false warnings, including one given by Ashraf Marwan, an Egyptian Mossad spy who was the son-in-law of the late Egyptian president, Gamal Nasser. The astronomical costs involved with the mobilisation of the Israeli army may have also contributed to a psychological fatigue and caution in responding to continued warnings in the lead up to the actual attack.

3. The war was not intended to destroy Israel and liberate Palestine. As was the case with the wars of 1948 and 1967, the often propagandized danger of annihilation by combined Arab forces was not present. The armies of both Egypt and Syria had limited objectives. The former wished to breach the “Bar Lev Line” and retake territory across the Suez Canal, while the former hoped to retake the Golan Heights lost to Israel during the “Six Day War”. There was no overarching plan to destroy Israel and proverbially “sweep the Jews into the sea”. The intended limited gains were simply to restore a degree of Arab pride and to use the war as leverage in negotiating the return of land occupied by Israel.
4. The oil crisis. Under the auspices of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Arab states enforced an embargo on oil sales to the United States and any country giving aid to Israel. A five percent reduction in oil production led to an increase in the cost of fuel and contributed to a period of economic stagnation in the West.
5. The world may have come to the brink of nuclear catastrophe. The Soviet Union is claimed to have deployed Scud missile brigades armed with nuclear warheads, while Moshe Dayan is said to have ordered the preparation of at least one ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. In his book *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Seymour Hersh** wrote that Israel's missive to the administration of **President Richard Nixon** requesting an arms airlift, was accompanied by the threat of deploying nuclear weapons onto the field. Although the recollections of **Arnan Azarhayu**, an Israeli political insider, portray a more restrained reference to recourse to nuclear weapons in cabinet discussions during the war, it is nonetheless established fact that the United States placed its Strategic Air Command, Continental Air Defense Command, European Command and the Sixth Fleet on DEFCON 3 alert because of fears that the Soviet Union might intervene in the conflict on the side of its Arab allies.
6. The war ended as a victory for Israel, although the Arabs declared it a victory. The Egyptians, protected by surface-to-air missiles, crossed the Suez Canal and breached the “Bar Lev Line”. They held onto their gains after the failure of an initial Israeli counter-attack. The Syrians also made gains on the Golan Heights. However, Israeli successes after a counter-attack in the Golan theatre of war meant that **President Hafez Assad** sent a missive to **President Anwar Sadat** requesting that the Egyptians attack further into Sinai so as to relieve the pressure on his army. A refusal on Sadat's part would have left the Syrian front liable to collapse with the effect that the Israelis would have been able to redeploy a substantial portion of its armed forces against the Egyptians.

Meanwhile as the Israeli High Command mulled over the difficult decision of whether to attack across the canal, Mossad received a message from an informant indicating that three Egyptian paratroop brigades were planning to land at specific locations behind enemy lines. But the garbled transcript provided no decipherable information which provided a logical rationale for the Egyptians to make this military decision. However intelligence previously received from **Marwan Ashraf** filled in the gaps. Earlier in 1973, Marwan had sent his

Mossad handlers an Egyptian Army war plan setting out that sending Egyptian special forces behind Israeli lines was to serve as the prelude to the crossing of the canal by attacking formations of armoured divisions.

An Egyptian attack meant that part of its army would need to come out of the protected 'umbrella' within which the Israeli Air Force was vulnerable to Russian-made surface-to-air missiles. It also meant that the Israelis could engage the Egyptians in a defensive action during which they would aim to significantly reduce Egyptian tank strength before launching an attack across the Suez. In the ensuing battles, the Egyptian Third Army became encircled and part of the east bank of Suez recaptured. The Israelis also proceeded with an attack across the canal. The Egyptian failure to hold on to much of their initial gains was offset by the slithers of territory they retained on the Eastern bank of the Canal. However, the war ended with Israeli forces about 80 kilometers from Cairo and approximately 40 kilometers from Damascus.

There are a number of matters to ponder.

A. The threat of nuclear war emanating in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 were both fought by nations allied with the two main contestants of the Cold War. And each conflict, particularly the 1973 war, had the subtext of the threat of Soviet intervention if Israeli gains at the expense of its Soviet-backed Arab foes exceeded an acceptable threshold.

But the ending of the Cold War has not removed the spectre of nuclear war from the Middle East. Israel, a nation which for a long time has acquired a nuclear capability, but has not made itself subject to the international treaties and protocols covering nuclear proliferation, has in recent times continually argued that Iran's nuclear programme poses an existential threat. This is in spite of the fact that Iran is a signatory state to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and has consented to the regime of inspections by the relevant regulatory authorities. Over and above that are the conditions placed on Iran's programme by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action reached between Iran and the 'Five Plus One' countries. Moreover, the intelligence community in the United States and even Mossad have declared that no evidence exists of Iran's nuclear programme extending to the development of weapons. There are those who argue that part of the rationale for manufacturing these concerns over Iran's nuclear programme are a strategic ploy aimed at diverting attention from the question of a settlement of the Palestinian issue.

Today, the threat of nuclear confrontation emanating from the Middle East comes not from Iranian intentions, but from the delicate and intermittently strained relations between the United States and the Russian Federation over the Syrian conflict. The Russians are contributing to a military coalition of Shia powers in aid of the government of Bashar al-Assad against an insurrection by Sunni Islamist groups who are supported by America's regional allies.

B. The question of Arab solidarity. The limited objectives of the war of 1973 demonstrated, as did the war of 1948, that Israel's neighbours have consistently been more preoccupied with their own national interests than that of the Palestinian people. The Arab protagonists during the war of 1948 were concerned with acquiring territory and not with the creation of a Palestinian state. Jordan reached a secret agreement with representatives of the Jewish Agency not to attack the soon to be declared state of Israel after the expiry of

the British Mandate. Jordan acquired the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip.

The Camp David agreement and the subsequent peace treaty between Israel and Egypt went counter to Palestinian interests. This is based on the logic that their ability to achieve statehood would be better assured within the context of a comprehensive agreement between Israel and all its neighbours rather than through separate agreements. Palestinian resistance to Israel has suffered because Arab opposition to Israel has been weakened by the policies followed by their leaders. After expulsion from Jordan in the early 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) suffered the same fate in Lebanon. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, it did so on the assurance from Arab states, other than Syria, that it would not be challenged in its quest to purge Lebanon of Palestinian guerillas. Today, the Arab League possesses neither the will nor the ability to break the blockade and sanctions against Gaza. It is also impotent or indifferent to the building of settlements on the West Bank.

It is also pertinent to note that Saudi Arabia has effectively renounced the idea of using an Arab embargo on oil sales as an option in the cause of Arab and Palestinian grievances. The terms attached to the embargo enforced in 1973 expressly referred to the restoration of the “legitimate rights of the Palestinian people”. While some have subsequently written about the myth of the oil weapon and highlighted the drawbacks to its use, the malign effects of the joint Arab action was clear enough to see. That Saudi Arabia, in recent years, has seen fit to use it against Russia and Iran while disavowing its use as a bargaining device in relation to the Palestinian cause, is indicative of the lack of Arab solidarity.

C. A different coalition threatens Israel’s regional military hegemony. With the peace treaty with Egypt continuing to endure, Syria weakened by internecine strife, Jordan effectively a protectorate state of Israel, as well as the developed symbiotic relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Israel has less worry about the revival of the coalition of nations who fought her in the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973.

This is why its focus is on the perceived threat of Iran, which is allied to **Bashar al-Assad’s** secular government in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This arc of resistance to Israel domination is often referred to as the “Shia Crescent”. The destruction of the Syrian state would be welcomed by Israel on the grounds that none of the succeeding balkanised entities would be able to revive Syria’s claim to the Golan Heights.

Destroying Syria would also lead to the isolation of the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon which is the only military organisation in the Arab world capable of taking on the Israeli Defence Force. Indeed, it was Hezbollah, an organisation that grew out of Lebanese resistance to Israel’s brutal invasion and 18-year occupation, which forced Israel’s withdrawal in 2000 from southern Lebanon, an area Israel has long coveted because of the resource of the Litani River. In the war of 2006, Hezbollah outmanoeuvred Israel in the intelligence war, and held off Israeli ground incursions to the extent that Israel was eventually forced to withdraw its forces.

D. Contemporary geopolitical circumstances. The Palestinian West Bank and the Syrian Golan Heights still remain under Israeli control. The West Bank continues to be colonised by the creation of Israeli settlements, which is gradually achieving the Zionist goal of a ‘Greater Israel’, a project undergirded by the belief that the territory encompasses that part of the ancient land of Israel known as Judea and Samaria. Continued expansion has meant that the Palestinian population continues to be squeezed into increasingly smaller enclaves. The

Golan Heights, which was illegally annexed by Israel in 1981, was recently declared by **Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu** to be permanently and irrevocably under Israeli sovereignty.

Examining the 1973 war and comparing the circumstances of the present to the past provides an idea of what has changed and what has not. Hezbollah's alliance with Iran, some would argue, has meant that the dynamic of the region has evolved from an Arab-Israeli conflict to an Iranian-Israeli conflict, albeit one so far fought on behalf of Iran by a 'proxy' army in the form of Hezbollah.

But what has not changed from all the wars dating back to the one of 1948, is the matter that forms the historical basis of Arab antagonism towards Israel: the plight of the Palestinian people. And with the prospects of statehood diminishing with every expansion of illegal Israeli settlements on the West Bank, the issue of Palestine remains a festering wound at the heart of the Middle East.

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