

8. The Yom Kippur War

This is the eighth part of our acclaimed series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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Within months of the end of the Six Day War, Nasser embarked on the War of Attrition – a series of attacks by land, sea and air, predominantly on Israeli military targets. These were designed to be sufficiently frequent and deadly to force Israel to remain in a constant state of war-readiness, but on any particular occasion to be insufficient to provoke all-out war. Some of the aircraft participating in the war were flown by Soviet pilots who were among the 20,000 Soviet 'advisors' (in reality, soldiers and military technicians) who were stationed in Egypt.

Israel responded by shooting back, by building a line of massive fortifications along the Suez Canal, and also by retaliating harshly against both military targets and civilian infrastructure. Nevertheless the War of Attrition, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, cost Israel 1,524 dead and about 2,700 wounded.

Egypt sustained much higher casualties and enormous damage, and Israel showed no sign of withdrawing unconditionally. In 1970, Egypt and Israel agreed to a ceasefire proposed by the US, one of whose terms was that neither country would build new military installations within 50 kilometres of the Canal. Egypt immediately began doing so, installing state-of-the-art surface-to-air missile sites, supplied by the Soviet Union and manned by Soviet 'advisors'. A series of 'peace initiatives' by the UN and the US followed, all of which eventually dissipated because Egypt, supported by the Soviet Union, insisted on a promise of unconditional withdrawal as a precondition for negotiating. Nasser died suddenly, but his successor, Anwar Sadat, at first continued his policies unchanged.

Following the Six Day War, pan-Arab nationalism was in decline. Palestinian nationalism burgeoned. People who would previously have described themselves simply as 'Arabs', or 'Palestinian Arabs', became 'Palestinians', and most of them regarded the PLO as their national movement. A diplomatic and media campaign was launched in the West to legitimise the Palestinian nation, with the slogan 'a democratic and secular state in Palestine'. Arafat became

leader of the PLO. He said in 1970: "Our basic aim is to liberate the land from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. We are not concerned with what took place in June 1967 or in eliminating the consequences of the June war. The Palestinian revolution's basic concern is the uprooting of the Zionist entity from our land".

In addition to murdering several hundred Israelis between 1967 and 1973, the PLO globalised its terrorist campaign. PLO terrorists attacked Jewish and Israeli targets in Europe. They hijacked Western airliners and held passengers hostage. They tried to take over Jordan, and the Syrian army entered Jordan intending to assist them. After King Hussein secretly appealed to Israel for help, Israeli aircraft flew low over the Syrian tanks and the Syrians turned back without a shot being fired. As a result the PLO were violently expelled from Jordan by the Jordanian army and fled to Lebanon.

Under the pseudonym 'Black September' (named after the month in which they had been expelled from Jordan), the PLO attacked the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, holding eleven Israeli athletes hostage and then murdering them. Some of the terrorists were captured, but were released a few weeks later, allegedly in a secret deal between the PLO and the German government (under which Germany would be spared further terrorist attacks). Mossad tracked down the terrorists, and during the following years, killed all but two of them. One of those two was Abu Daoud, who in 1999 won the Palestine Prize for Culture for his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Palestinian Terrorist*.

In 1972, Sadat ordered all Soviet 'advisors' out of the country. Thus, in a move that was almost unparalleled during the Cold War, Egypt left the Soviet fold. Only four years earlier, Czechoslovakia's attempt to do something much more modest had been harshly suppressed by the Red Army. But on this occasion, the Soviets chose to comply. Syria now became, and remained until the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union's principal client state in the Middle East. Sadat's immediate motive was to give himself more room for manoeuvre – and in particular, the option of making war in his own time and in his own way, without having to clear each decision with his superpower sponsor.

On October 6, 1973, in a brilliant and meticulously planned strike, the Egyptian army crossed the Suez Canal, overwhelming or bypassing the supposedly impregnable defences, and advanced into Sinai. At the same time, the Syrian army attacked the Golan Heights, recaptured them, and began advancing towards the Israeli border. Israel was caught completely by surprise.

Many factors had combined to bring this about. Intelligence about the Arabs' military build-up had been overlooked or misinterpreted. The Israeli defences were severely under-manned. In May of that year, a similar build-up had occurred, the IDF's Chief of Staff, David Elazar, had ordered a partial mobilisation, and when no invasion materialised, he and the government had been criticised for wasting public money. In August, Syria had massed a huge force on the border; Israel had ignored it and the force had been withdrawn.

October 6 was Yom Kippur, a public holiday in Israel and the holiest

day in the Jewish calendar (hence this war is often called the Yom Kippur War), when many soldiers were home on leave.

On the morning of October 6, when the Mossad at last reported that an invasion would take place that evening (it actually came at 2pm), the government had refused Elazar's recommendation to launch a pre-emptive strike like that of 1967, because the US had warned Israel to confine itself to clearly defensive operations. The government also refused Elazar's request for full mobilisation, on the grounds that this might be interpreted as provocative. Only a partial mobilisation of 50,000 reservists was authorised. Later in the day, this limit was increased to 100,000. Elazar disobeyed these orders and sent out immediate call-up notices to 150,000 reservists, but even that was too little, too late.

The IDF's contingency planning had assumed that the Israeli Air Force could slow any enemy advance during the first 48 hours of an invasion. But in the event, Israeli aircraft suffered severe losses from the Soviet-built missile batteries on the Egyptian side of the Canal, and were prevented from flying low enough to affect the battle on the ground. The Syrians, too, had installed mobile missile batteries on the Golan Heights, with similar effect in that much smaller area.

The Syrians and Egyptians had assembled huge armies – a total of 1,150,000 soldiers. Only a small fraction of these were yet committed: the initial Canal crossing had been accomplished by an elite force of only 8,000 (against defenders numbering fewer than 500) immediately followed by a few tens of thousands. Syria had attacked with 1,200 tanks against the defenders' 170. On both the Egyptian and the Syrian fronts, the advances were slowed by the tenacity and sacrifice of small IDF units – most of whom had never seen combat before – and by the skill of local IDF commanders.

Israel appealed to King Hussein not to join the fighting – reminding him of his misjudgement six years earlier. Though at first he seemed to be heeding the warning, the IDF still had to deploy some of its overstretched forces (which by the end of the second day had reached 200,000, two thirds of its fully-mobilised strength) to defend against possible attack from Jordan. The Lebanese armed forces remained inactive, though PLO forces in Lebanon shelled Israeli towns that lay in the path of the Syrian advance.

During the second day, IDF reinforcements reached the Golan Heights and began to drive the Syrians back, but at the cost of heavy losses in lives and equipment. In Sinai, complex battles raged, but the Israeli reinforcements made no headway, succeeding only in preventing the Egyptians from advancing beyond the range of their anti-aircraft missile sites.

Both sides were now using ammunition and supplies at a prodigious rate, but the Soviet Union was replenishing the Arab armies in massive airlifts. Israelis were shocked when Britain refused to meet even existing contracts for ammunition. Britain had imposed

another arms embargo 'on both sides', except that it continued to supply Jordan (which it considered a 'non-combatant'), and to train Egyptian military pilots.

About a week into the war, huge tank battles began – the second largest in history (the largest being the battle of Kursk in the Second World War). The Egyptian Army, having been reinforced and re-supplied, made a determined breakout from their positions on the eastern side of the Canal, heading for the passes through which Sinai could be crossed. The Syrians fighting on the Golan Heights were reinforced by 15,000 Iraqi troops and hundreds of tanks, as well as elite forces, with tanks, from Jordan.

The IDF eventually won both these battles, destroying a significant proportion of the Egyptian and Syrian tanks, and nearly all the Iraqi ones, though again at great cost in Israeli lives. But it had now run critically short of ammunition and equipment. In particular, its British-made Chieftain tanks, a key weapon on both fronts, were about to run out of ammunition and become useless. US President Richard Nixon, after long hesitation, decided to end his own embargo and re-supply Israel. However, Britain refused to allow its airfields or airspace to be used for this purpose. Portugal was persuaded to allow US aircraft to land en route to Israel, but most of these supplies arrived too late to be used.

IDF General Ariel Sharon, who had been urging an out-flanking counterattack across the Suez Canal since the second day of the war, was finally given permission to launch one on the ninth day. On its way to making the crossing, his force had the bad luck to run into two Egyptian divisions that had just been deployed there following the previous day's battle. It fought its way through and crossed on a pre-fabricated bridge. Its first priority then was to attack and destroy the missile batteries. The second was to cut off supplies to the Egyptian army on the east side of the Canal. This was eventually achieved, and with that, the war against Egypt was won.

Meanwhile a last, all-out counter-attack by the Syrians, Iraqis and Jordanians was defeated at the Golan Heights. The Arab armies were no longer capable of effective resistance. The roads to Damascus in the east, and to Cairo in the west, were open to the IDF. The UN Security Council convened and ordered an immediate ceasefire.

Despite the military victory, Israelis were profoundly shocked by the Yom Kippur War. 2,688 of them had been killed, thousands wounded, and it seemed to many that their world had come closer to being destroyed than at any time since the Holocaust. Israeli society and politics were permanently changed. Some concluded that the policy of retaining Sinai and the Golan as buffer zones had been vindicated, since a similar war starting at the 1948/9 ceasefire lines would have been fought out in Israel's cities, whose populations would have had nowhere to flee to. Others concluded that the war had proved that the concept of a 'buffer zone' was outdated and that the territories had no great military value: the enemy had crossed the border with apparent ease despite Israel's

massive fixed defences, and victory had been achieved not through any defences but through counterattack. The huge scale of the war, the role that had been played by the Soviet Union and the decisive effect of advanced weapons (such as anti-aircraft missiles), made it clear to most Israelis that for the foreseeable future Israel's security would depend on a close relationship with the US.

The cost of the war – the equivalent of Israel's entire gross national product for one year – forced Israel to apply to the US for loans and aid. All this was demoralising in a culture that deemed itself to be predicated on self-reliance and self-defence. The ruling Labour coalition suffered a severe loss of public confidence, which it has never fully regained. There was a mood of national pessimism.

The effect on the Arab world was in some ways the mirror image of the effect on Israel: despite the catastrophic military defeat, heavy casualties and stupendous economic cost, the consensus among Arabs was that honour had been regained and that a significant strategic victory had been won. But on the other hand, Sadat, along with many Egyptians, also concluded that if even this assault had been repelled, despite its good planning, good cooperation among Arab states, surprise, modern weapons, force of numbers, enthusiastic superpower assistance, and good luck, then Israel was there to stay. Also, Israel's new relationship with the US would make it all the stronger.

Four years later in 1977, after a series of successful US-brokered 'disengagement agreements' in which Israel returned parts of Sinai in return for Egyptian promises to keep it demilitarised, Sadat exploited the new mood in Egypt in a way that astounded the world: in a speech to the Egyptian Parliament, he declared his willingness to make peace with Israel.

Part 9: The Rise of the PLO

Thu, 06/19/2003 - 18:07 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

why?

The only comment that I have is that this website talks for Israel more than it does to the Arabs, and that is not a nice thing to do I think. If you guys like Israel that much the just at least do not say bad things at the Arabs because the Arabs are not just animals , but they are human just like you are. In my opinion, the Arab were fighting in the Yom Kippur war not because they hated Israel, but because they wanted to take their lands back. Thank you.

by [manar](#) on Wed, 04/13/2005 - 14:13 | [reply](#)

Re: why?

In this document we have done nothing other than summarise the history of factual events.

However, your opinion that "the Arabs were fighting in the Yom

Kippur war [...] because they wanted to take their lands back” – in other words, attributing to the Egyptian and Syrian governments in 1973 the basic Israeli position of land-for-peace – is completely ahistorical. It is incompatible with, for instance, the Declaration of Khartoum (see [Part 6](#)) and with the entire conduct of Egyptian and Syrian military and foreign policy during the run-up to that war and long afterwards.

by [Editor](#) on Fri, 06/03/2005 - 16:29 | [reply](#)

I think you should reconsider

I think you should reconsider your last comment, that the Arabs were fighting to recapture lost lands was completely ahistorical. Any student of Israeli-Arab history can see that the Arabs ventured to war in 1973 for two reasons: to erase the stigma of defeat after the 1967 war and to recapture the Sinai and the Golan. I think you should look again at the entire conduct of Syrian and Egyptian military and foreign policy leading up to the war. In fact, they differed immensely. Syria believed Nasser, that what had been taken by force could only be taken back by force. Egypt hoped instead to shock the Israelis into accepting his overtures for negotiations over the Sinai. These divergence of war aims led to the Arabs' ultimate defeat, as the Egyptians carried out only limited attacks into the Sinai after their initial crossing of the Suez and Israel could fight the Arabs piecemeal. At the end of the war, Israel had Egypt by the throat, but not Syria. Syria, in fact, made life very uncomfortable for the salient of Israeli forces had pushed into their front. But the war, as you mentioned, woke the Israelis up. After '67 they thought of themselves as a mini-superpower. But the war, far from shocking the Israelis to the negotiating table, alarmed them. They knew they could no longer let the Syrians and Egyptians wage a war against them on two fronts. This led Kissinger to include as a foreign policy objective the intention to drive a wedge between the two countries, for Arab independence and Arab unity, especially after Nasser turned apparent defeat in '56 into victory, was anathema to the IDF.

Dear Editor or Manar: If you disagree with my comment, please email me. I'll be glad to discuss this with you. If you issue a response, also email me please.

by James on Sat, 05/13/2006 - 02:28 | [reply](#)

Any assistance would be great

I am currently in my final year of high school and i am studying at the moment Arab-Israel history. I am presently completing an assignment on the Yom Kippur War and subsequently i am surfing the web looking for information. So my question is would you be able to guide me to some other sources of information if at all possible.

And by the way this site has been extremely helpful thus far in

regards to research.

Any assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Roy

by a reader on Mon, 07/24/2006 - 02:12 | [reply](#)

yom kippur war

this is good and has some sources listed at the bottom

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/myths2/1973War.html>

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/blog/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Mon, 07/24/2006 - 04:59 | [reply](#)

Re: Any assistance would be great

Martin Gilbert's book is good. So is Elliot's link above.

<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF> is an archive of documents relating to the UN/LoN and Israel/Palestine. Can be searched, but also browsed by date. So you can impress your examiners by citing primary sources.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 07/24/2006 - 07:07 | [reply](#)

Assistance was very useful

I just wanted to thank you Mr Temple for your assistance and the site you guided me to was very helpful.

Thankyou

by a reader on Tue, 07/25/2006 - 13:09 | [reply](#)

YOm kippur

i just wanted to say that the main reason Egypt is said to have lost the Yom Kippur war is because of the US. The US provided the Israelis with enormous amounts of support. including the sat. pictures that stated to israeli generals that there was a gap between the 2nd and 3rd army. in addtion, If Saddat wanted to end the Israeli occupation of the Middle East he could have ended their existance if he had decided to eliminate his 3rd army along side the WHOLE israeli army. giving the arab nations involved an advantage because israel would have no defense and in at moment the world would notice the support that the US was giving Israel when they would immediatly defend israel with all their might.

by a reader on Mon, 11/13/2006 - 06:52 | [reply](#)

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