

Intelligence and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War

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To intelligence historians, the October 1973 War is almost synonymous with “intelligence failure.” On 6 October the armies of Egypt and Syria attacked Israel, catching the Israeli and US Intelligence Communities by surprise. A US multi-agency postmortem in December of that year, declassified in 2009, concluded that while the evidence of an Arab-initiated war had not been conclusive, the intelligence had been “plentiful, ominous, and often accurate.” The documents in this present collection attest that, for months before the war, the US Intelligence Community had received reports pointing to escalating Egyptian and Syrian hostilities. Contrary to conventional wisdom that analysts had not properly considered the evidence that war might be approaching, the archives show that the Intelligence Community received these reports—debated them and wrote about them. Analysts did consider that the Egyptian and Syrian military maneuvers might be more than just posturing. Analysts did entertain the idea that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat might initiate a conflict that he knew he would lose militarily. But ultimately, the analysts judged that there would be no attack. Or as the December postmortem put it, the conclusions “were—quite simply, obviously, and starkly—wrong.”¹

As the Intelligence Community investigated, so did outside scholars. No fewer than four books on the conflict were published in 1974. One scholar in 1975 remarked that he had cleared a space on his crowded bookshelf and labeled it “Kippur” in the anticipation of the coming literature. These early volumes attempted to recount the years of negotiation that preceded the war and the chronology of the war itself. The lack of warning was one of the themes, and remains so today. Edward R. F. Sheehan, in one of the early histories, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger* (1976), wrote that “The October war was a surprise to Dr. Kissinger—and to Israel—though it should not have been.... He did not ignore the evidence. Like the Israelis, and like the C.I.A., he misinterpreted it.” Passage of time and the release of once-classified materials have affirmed that statement. Yet even with some fine accounts of the war available at the time, points remained contested, and since then the war’s legacy has continued to be a subject of revision and reinterpretation. Not all US Government documents have been released (though this collection helps with that somewhat) and most of the Israeli holdings are still unavailable to researchers. In fact, a book review in 2001 commented that “It is still too early to understand this event,” a

¹ DCI Memorandum, prepared by the Intelligence Community Staff, “The Performance of the Intelligence Community before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report,” 20 December 1973; quote on plentiful and ominous, p. i; quote on starkly wrong, p. 4.

statement all the more remarkable when we consider that it only referred to the war itself and not its place in history. Even now we are seeing books with the ambitious claim of writing the history of the so-called Arab Spring. No doubt as time passes, the current regional unrest and changes in leadership will be subject to the sort of reinterpretations (and recriminations?) that major events of Middle Eastern history have engendered.²

Because much of the scholarship and many of the newly declassified documents in this collection attest to the intelligence failure, this article focuses on that topic. As intelligence historians know, intelligence failures can take different forms. A service or many services worldwide can be caught off guard by some major phenomenon or movement. The aforementioned Arab uprisings in the spring of 2011 serve as an example. An intelligence failure can be a tactical event, the planning and execution of which evaded collection efforts even when the intelligence services were well aware of the propensity for such attacks and when they had deployed intelligence resources to detect them. As some would have it, any terrorist attack anywhere is necessarily an intelligence failure. By any standard, the judgment as of 6 October was one.

Since then, various attempts have been made to understand why and how the Intelligence Community concluded what it did. Some of the most common are summarized here:

- *Over-reliance on Israel to know its own security posture.* The US Intelligence Community tended to assume not only that Israeli intelligence would be aware of any major attacks planned against its territory, but also that Israel would plead for US assistance to counter them. Neither was the case, and it was difficult for US analysts to break with Israel's judgments about its own security.
- *Preconceived notions.* One of the most common themes in examinations of the October 1973 War strategic warning issue is the absence of dissent against some of the most deeply held truths. One such conventional wisdom was that the 1967 Six-Day War had proven Israeli military superiority and Arab military inferiority to such an extent that the Arabs would avoid war at all costs. Another was that Arabs were tactically and strategically ill-suited for modern warfare and would not be able to fool analysts well enough to launch a surprise attack.

² Howard J. Dooley, "The Guns of October," *The Review of Politics* Vol. 37 No. 4 (October 1975), 576-81, quote on p. 576. Edward R. F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Readers Digest Press, 1976), 30. David Tal, review of P. R. Kumaraswamy, ed., *Revisiting the Yom Kippur War* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2000 in *Reviews of Books*, Vol. 23, No. 3: September 2001, p. 729. The Sheehan book drew on interviews with scores of participants to include Kissinger, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Syrian President Hafez al-Asad. The book stirred a controversy of the sort familiar to us today over "leaks," with two senior State Department officers reprimanded for their provision of information to Sheehan.

- *A plausible interpretation of the same evidence.* It was a reasonable analytic conclusion, with precedence on its side, that Anwar Sadat’s aggressive rhetoric was a negotiating tactic to force Israel to a settled solution. Sadat had “cried wolf” at many points during the previous two years, threatening war if no peace agreement was reached with Israel. It was a reasonable interpretation of the same facts that the Arab military maneuvers near the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal were the same sort of readiness drills and exercises underway in years past.
- *Faith in diplomacy.* Since 1967, the United States had expected that diplomacy and uneasy stalemates would prevent the outbreak of another war. After 1971—a year Anwar Sadat warned was the “year of decisions” —had passed with no major decision, and after a series of negotiations had seemingly averted an Egyptian attack in May 1973, the United States expected that potential belligerents would yield.
- *The “rational actor” fallacy.* Western analysts tended to conclude (though not dismiss entirely) that neither Sadat nor Asad would initiate a war he expected to lose. A “rational actor” model can fail because what seems rational to the analyst—or generally rational in that analyst’s culture—may not be rational to the actor in question. To Sadat and Asad, for example, it may have been irrational to attack Israel on a purely military basis, but it may have been rational to do so to restore Arab prestige or to force other countries to intervene and press for a settlement more favorable to the Arab side than if there had been no attack.
- *Organizational challenges within CIA.* For the Agency at least, part of the intelligence failure may be attributable to major organizational and personnel changes that had occurred just before the war. The new Director of Central Intelligence, William Colby, had initiated a major reorganization of the Agency’s intelligence estimative process, which was still in disarray in early October. At the same time, several of CIA’s most knowledgeable Middle East analysts and managers had left for other accounts and had been replaced by persons newer to the issue.

The documents in this collection will, for the most part, underscore what has been publicly known and written about the war, with some new nuances, discussed below. That analysts believed no attack was coming is clear. On 4 October, an Intelligence Community memorandum stated: “We continue to believe that an outbreak of major Arab-Israeli hostilities remains unlikely for the immediate future.” A particularly embarrassing passage, having been published the day the war began, said “neither side appears to be bent on initiating hostilities.” And from the same document: “For Egypt, a military initiative makes little sense at this critical juncture,” and “For...the Syrian President, a military adventure now would be suicidal.” Some of

CIA's intelligence reports demonstrate the fallibility of human intelligence. According to a Syrian officer, there was a Syrian build-up in the Golan Heights, but it was defensive.³

More interesting to the scholar are the documents that show the Intelligence Community grappling with reports that war might, in fact, be coming. In several, analysts considered signs that Egyptian and Syrian military maneuvers might be more than just exercises or gambits to prompt a settlement. Human intelligence reports from spring 1973 demonstrate that CIA sources had access to at least some of Syria's plans to assault the Golan Heights. Other human intelligence that spring said of Egypt's threats to attack: "Knowledgeable Egyptian observers... now believe Sadat is serious and that to consider that he is bluffing is unrealistic and naive." The source conceded that Sadat's preference was for a diplomatic solution but said that he would resort to hostilities should diplomacy fail.⁴

In May 1973, CIA issued a National Intelligence Estimate, "Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities: Determinants and Implications," declassified for this project, that draws on some of this reporting. The Estimate contained the following passages:

- "Sadat's new campaign of threats to renew hostilities involved public and private statements.... are consistent with both preparations to fight Israel and with political/psychological efforts to stimulate diplomatic activity leading to settlement."
- "The Egyptians believe deeply that progress toward solution of the Arab-Israeli problem on terms tolerable to Egypt can only come about through actions of the Great Powers.... If Sadat is once again disappointed, the temptation to resort to military action in order to force the US hand might prove irresistible."
- "Sadat himself could be trapped by building up an atmosphere of crisis to the point where failure to act militarily would seem to him more dangerous to his own hold on power than attacking and taking the consequences."

³ Combined Watch Report of the United States Intelligence Board, 4 October 1973. Central Intelligence Bulletin, 6 October 1973, p. 1 (neither side bent on initiating hostilities) and p. 2 (suicidal). Redacted CIA intelligence report, "Judgment [redacted] that Syrian Military Preparations are Defensive in Nature," 3 October 1973, p. 2.

⁴ Syrian contingency plans, CIA Memorandum for the Secretary of State: CIA Assessment of Purported Syrian Military Preparations. Knowledgeable Egyptian observers, CIA Intelligence Report, "Views [Redacted] on the Probability that Egyptian President Sadat Seriously is Considering Launching Hostilities against Israel," 14 May 1973.

- “If Egypt does decide to initiate hostilities, it will do so in spite of the military consequences, rather than in hope of military gains.”⁵

One of the more notable groups of documents is a series of CIA memorandum disseminations—CIA intelligence reports—that went to a highly restricted audience from late September and early October 1973 on the Syrian build-up on the border of the Golan Heights. Unlike the ones discussed above, they are from the days just before the war. One from mid-September, described the Syrian military movements to the Golan Heights area as preparations for war disguised as training exercises. It also said that senior Egyptian and Syrian military personnel had met and planned “a joint Egyptian/ Syrian operation for which the movement of forces would occur under the guise of training.” Another, from late September, discusses not only the Syrian plans to attack but also the Syrian preparations for an Israeli counteroffensive once the war started. A third report, on 29 September, recounted:

...a Syrian plan for a massive assault upon Israel involving at least four Syrian divisions. The proposed assault was to be launched upon the Golan Heights along a broad front 80 kilometers wide, and was aimed at occupying the Golan Heights up to the pre-June 1967 borders.... All Syrian units are expected to be in position by the end of September. Infantry Divisions 5, 7, and 9 have completed their deployment in their allocated sectors. Brigade commanders have the operations order now, and are briefing battalion commanders at their headquarters in secrecy.

The five-page memorandum dissemination stated the plans of Syrian units at the Division level and, in some cases, at the Brigade level. These reports, and the other indications that hostilities might break out, were insufficient to shift the analytic line to the position that war was imminent.

6

The documents from the crisis-management period beginning on 6 October show representatives of the US intelligence agencies, State Department, and White House functioning as a nexus of intelligence and statecraft in the form of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), details of which are recounted in an accompanying article in this publication. The WSAG minutes from 6 October, which were released in redacted form in 2006, document the conversation that can almost be imagined cinematically, as the participants discuss the policy implications of the events that have transpired over the course of the day:

Mr. Schlesinger: How about a joint position on a cease-fire?

⁵ NIE 30-73: Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities: Determinants and Implications, 17 May 1973. Sadat’s new campaign, p. 3; Egyptians believing deeply, p. 4; Sadat himself could be trapped, p. 4; if Egypt does decide, p. 5.

⁶ CIA Intelligence Report, “Completed Deployment of Syrian Units for Assault upon Israel,” 29 September 1973, portions redacted, quote on p. 2.

Mr. Kissinger: Yes, but Israel won't accept it until the Egyptians and Syrians are thrown out.... So our strategy is to go in with a ceasefire, status quo ante resolution. We will let the military situation go on until all parties want to grab the resolution.

Mr. Schlesinger: Even Israel?

Mr. Kissinger: If it is done with the concurrence of Israel, they can't very well ask us to pull it back.

Mr. Colby: If the Israelis have moved far ahead, we will have a bargaining point.

Mr. Kissinger: Even if Israel wins, we will stick to the resolution. If we can force Israel out of their forward position, it will be a good point with the Arabs---if Israel gets beyond the ceasefire line.

Mr. Colby: Israel isn't interested in territory this time. They're interested in beating up the Arab forces.

Mr. Kissinger: This is a very critical period in our relations with the Soviets. If the Soviets get themselves into an anti-US or anti-Israel position, they can kiss [Most Favored Nation] and the other things goodbye (sic)."⁷

The material on the period of the war itself attests to the range of issues, including tactical intelligence on the belligerents, US equities with Middle Eastern heads of state, the state of alert of other Middle Eastern militaries, the strategic interests of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Muslim opinion internationally, the strength of the US dollar in global financial markets, and the potential ramifications of a US energy shortage during the coming winter. Of course these documents do not settle every debate. Many were not declassified for this release due to continuing sensitivities. The materials in the release do not reveal the foreign sources from which Agency and other Intelligence Community entities obtained their information. They do not recount all of the secrets of Secretary of State Kissinger's meetings with foreign heads of state as he sought to de-escalate the crisis. They do not settle the issue of whether Israel activated or pretended to activate its nuclear arsenal. One document from as early as 19 October stands out, however, for speaking to an issue that would prove an important part of the war's legacy. It states that the war had "greatly strengthened President Sadat's political position in Egypt and in the Arab World generally," and that Sadat had "a respect and popularity that he never knew before."⁸ It would be this reputation for Sadat that would enable him in the ensuing search for a peace agreement between the Arabs and Israelis.

⁷ Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, 6 October 1973, 7:22–8:27 PM., p. 10.

⁸ Weekly Review, 19 October 1973, p. 3.

What this collection of documents cannot do—nor can any collection of documents on a discrete event—is place the issue in context. The Middle East had long been a conundrum for US policymakers who wanted to win the region’s proverbial hearts and minds for the Western side, but who struggled to do so given the US support for Israel. Almost from the outset, CIA had warned of the consequences in the Middle East should the United States back an Israeli state. On 28 November 1947, just five weeks after its creation, the Agency issued a major analytic piece that said that “[i]n the event that partition is imposed on Palestine, the resulting conflict will seriously disturb the social, economic, and political stability of the Arab world, and US commercial and strategic interests will be dangerously jeopardized.”⁹ The region was important to US policymakers for several other reasons: its vast energy resources, its placement on the land and sea transportation routes between East and West, the alignment of its leaders with the Great Powers, the emergence of Palestinian activity (which by 1972 had already prompted the United States and Israel to use the vocabulary of “the war on terror”), and the place of the war in the Middle East peace process. To CIA, an additional context of the October 1973 War is that it was one of a series of events that cost the Agency great regard in Washington—a tumultuous period in which revelations of Agency improprieties and an intense climate of scrutiny brought, for several years, many of the Agency’s programs abroad to a halt.

Perhaps one of the keenest insights from this document collection is from the December 1973 postmortem, and one with which we can identify today: “[W]hat may seem so clear now did not, could not, seem so clear then.”¹⁰ This seems a truth that would have a place in almost any retrospective, on the October War or otherwise. The intelligence business is a difficult one, especially if the standard is the accurate prediction of the future based on complex and sometimes illogical actors. The case of the October 1973 War is often studied in an attempt to learn from our past. We hope that this collection can facilitate that worthwhile endeavor.

⁹ CIA Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE)-55, “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine,” 28 November 1947, p. 1.

¹⁰ DCI Memorandum, prepared by the Intelligence Community Staff, “The Performance of the Intelligence Community before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report,” 20 December 1973. Declassified 4 March 2009, p. 4.

The Israeli losses were heavy and the course of the war seemed to lay squarely within Arab hands. But in less than 24 hours, Israel had mobilised two armoured divisions, which soon turned the Syrian advance into a retreat. The Israelis advanced, capturing territory deep inside Syria. As a result, units from the Iraqi, Saudi and Jordanian armies joined the fight on the Syrian front to face the counterattack. Still, the Israelis manage to achieve significant gains – advancing to within 35km of Damascus, and occupying new territories to bring to the bargaining table. Both the USSR and the America