

18 December 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Another Arab-Israeli War: Motives and Capabilities

There is now considerable evidence that large-scale fighting could occur at any time without warning. The resumption of war appears to depend largely on the progress the negotiating parties make during the early stages of the peace talks. *If the Arabs come to believe that the conference will not soon promise early significant results and the cease-fire threatens to freeze the situation on the ground in the present positions, another round of war will be almost inevitable.*

There is a growing volume of war-scare reporting. Reports from Syria indicate that Damascus is on a war footing. The reports, including those about troop movements and civil defense preparations, are similar to ones received just prior to the outbreak of hostilities on 6 October.

On the Suez front, both Egyptian and Israeli forces are fully mobilized and fully capable of initiating large-scale hostilities on a moment's notice. With the military forces of both sides poised for combat, the possibility also exists that an incident could escalate into a wide-spread conflict.

Both the Arabs and the Israelis appear to have made up their major equipment losses. If fighting were resumed today, Israel's forces are believed to be better prepared than are either the Egyptian's or the Syrian's.

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I. Possible Motivations for Renewing the War

A. The Arabs

The Arab parties to the conflict retain the same basic motives for renewing the war that led them to initiate it on 6 October, with the added incentive of knowing that their troops and equipment are capable of inflicting damaging casualties on the Israeli forces, even if they may not be able to defeat them. Egyptian commanders are said to be gratified that their troops did so well against the Israelis while suffering relatively few casualties as compared with pre-war expectations. In both Syria and Egypt there is a strong feeling among the military that in another round they could do even better.

If peace talks drag on without significant apparent progress toward achieving Arab goals, this feeling is likely to grow and add to the pressures already being exerted by those who doubt that the talks can achieve anything without further applications of force. And there will be a point in the discussions beyond which Sadat and Asad themselves will not go without exercising their military options. Sadat probably hopes that the oil weapon will make this unnecessary, but President Asad appears to be under greater domestic pressures to take direct action.

Both Egypt and Syria appear willing to risk the renewed conflict that could grow out of the almost daily firefights, mostly Arab-initiated, which mar the cease-fire. Indeed, they appear to be following a deliberate policy of probing Israeli positions, sniping at Israeli forces, and reacting to Israeli activity with tank and artillery fire as a means of keeping pressure on Israel, which cannot absorb casualties as well as the Arabs.

B. The Israelis

In the short term, the Israelis have fewer incentives to renew hostilities than the Arabs. For the first time in nearly 25 years the Israelis have an opportunity for direct peace talks with their Arab neighbors.

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The principal disadvantage for Israel in renewing the war would be the risk of losing US support, which is vital to its existence. Israeli leaders recognize Israel's dependence on the US and have stressed that Israel must continue to strengthen, not weaken, that tie. The October War demonstrated more clearly than ever that the US is Israel's only reliable friend and supporter. Tel Aviv also is well aware that the Arab oil weapon will play an important part in the peace negotiations, and that renewed fighting would only aggravate that issue and increase US and European frustration over their dependence on Arab oil.

More hostilities would require new and perhaps heavier sacrifices by the IDF in personnel. The main body of Israeli domestic opinion would not support further losses on this scale, without serious provocation by the Arabs.

There are other deterrents:

--A renewal of hostilities by Israel might produce an even stronger and more united Arab response. The Israelis admitted that the Arabs fought better and were more united than previously.

--The resupply to the Arabs of air defense systems may again cost the Israeli air force heavily. Moreover, Scud ballistic missiles, not used in the previous fighting, probably would be used in a renewed war and could result in heavy civilian losses.

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While ready for peace talks, Israel also is preparing for an attack by the Arabs. Israeli leaders have publicly declared that Israel will not be surprised again, and military authorities there have been super-sensitive to indicators of an attack. If convinced that the Arabs were about to attack, these military leaders would press for a preemptive strike. Israel probably would first justify preemptive action by more pointed warnings, particularly to Washington, of the likelihood of an Arab attack.

If Israeli leaders lose confidence in Washington's long term support they might then be impelled to seize the initiative to reduce, by a massive stroke, the Arab

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military threat for years to come. In these circumstances, they might feel they had little to lose, and perhaps something to gain, by renewed war.

II. Military Posture and Objectives

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A. Egypt

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[REDACTED] Cairo has increased its armored forces in the Suez Canal area by at least 50 percent since mid-November. Currently there are more than 1,400 Egyptian tanks deployed in the area.

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Egyptian ground and air defense forces remain in the increased readiness posture they assumed when the talks at Kilometer 101 were broken off late last month.

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In the event of renewed hostilities Egypt probably would attempt to isolate the Israeli salient. The recently reinforced 2nd Army on the east bank probably would strike south to link-up with the encircled 3rd Army which in turn would attempt to launch an attack northward. Meanwhile, the large Egyptian force to the west of the Israeli salient would likely strike hard into the salient in an effort to keep the Israelis fully engaged. Should the Israelis become isolated, the Egyptians probably would hope to wear the Israelis down until they are either destroyed or surrender. On the east bank, Egyptian forces probably would fight a holding action against Israeli attempts to rescue their west bank forces. It seems unlikely that the Egyptians would try to seize any of the passes leading to the interior of the Sinai until the battle on the west bank was resolved and additional Egyptian forces were deployed across the canal.

B. Syria

Syria apparently has put its civilian population and military forces on a wartime footing once again. Reliable sources indicate that all Syrian forces at the front have been in a maximum state of alert since 8 December, and that there have been significant Syrian troop movements and reinforcements in the area. In addition, the Syrian Ministry of Planning reportedly has been put on a war basis and all other ministries and schools have been alerted to assume a similar status as soon as instructed. Syrian Army headquarters and military intelligence offices reportedly have been vacated, with all personnel being at the front, and