

Excessive Reliance on Deterrence Theory:
the American Intelligence Failure to Anticipate the
Yom Kippur War in 1973

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When the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a coordinated attack on Israel on 6 October 1973, both the Israeli and American intelligence communities and their civilian leadership were caught entirely by surprise. To both the Israeli and American intelligence agencies the idea of an Arab attack on Israel appeared highly illogical in light of Israel's overwhelming military superiority. Thus, despite the availability of a great deal of intelligence indicating an attack was probable, the operating assumption of the U.S. Government right up until the Arab attack was that Israeli deterrence would hold. American policymakers and intelligence analysts allowed the theory and practice of deterrence to blind them to Egyptian President Sadat and Syrian President Assad's decision to go to war.

The failure of the United States to anticipate the outbreak of war placed the world at a heightened risk of U.S.-Soviet nuclear confrontation, and severely limited the ability of the United States to exercise its influence in the Middle East to steer the course of events away from armed conflict. Israel's failure to anticipate the surprise attack was just as complete, and far more costly. Unlike the U.S., Israel paid the price of its intelligence failure in the blood of more than 2,500 dead and 7,000 wounded. These represent extremely high casualty figures for a country that in 1973 had a population of a little

more than three million people.¹ By comparison, in a country as large as the United States today, this would represent at least 250,000 dead, and 700,000 wounded. Such a dramatic failure exposed numerous systemic weaknesses in both intelligence communities. This is extremely relevant in light of Israel's continued reliance upon deterrence theory as a significant aspect of its security strategy.

In 1973, much of America's geopolitical strategy was premised upon deterrence theory and its presumed ability to overcome the challenges of the Cold War. For Israeli leaders, deterrence was regarded as a crucial way for a country with a small population and territory to avoid having to fight long wars or to keep a large portion of its citizen army constantly mobilized and ready to fight. For these reasons, this paper will use deterrence theory as an intellectual template with which to explain the American intelligence failure in 1973. For the purposes of this discussion, deterrence can be defined as a function of perceived capability and perceived intention ($D=pc*pi$). Deterrence theory argues that an adversary will not attack if the prospective costs of an attack outweigh the prospective benefits. The American and Israeli intelligence failure lay at its root in a miscalculation of Arab perceptions of self-interest. The American and Israeli intelligence communities made the costly mistake of assuming that just because Egypt couldn't win an outright military victory, Egypt wouldn't derive sufficient benefit from armed conflict to justify fighting.

This paper will focus on three major threads of argument. In the first section, we will demonstrate that the Nixon Administration had access to intelligence indicating the likelihood of an Arab surprise attack. In the second, we will show that both intelligence reports and policy were skewed by geopolitical theories of deterrence. In the third, we

will show how high-ranking officials who strongly believed in Israeli deterrence engaged in bureaucratic maneuvering that resulted in the suppression of vital intelligence that would have caused the intelligence community to take the threat of an Arab attack more seriously.

In the lead up to the Yom Kippur War, the American intelligence community had access to a variety of information indicating the likelihood of an Arab attack, and even demonstrated a certain amount of analytical savvy in interpreting some of this information. The Nixon Administration should have had no doubts about Sadat's intentions. As early as May 1973, the CIA had "credible information" from "knowledgeable Egyptian observers" that "Sadat is serious and that to consider he is bluffing is unrealistic and naïve."² It is unclear why these warnings were not taken seriously since the sources were reputed to be trusted. Furthermore, a National Intelligence Estimate reported that Sadat believed "hostilities would stimulate more active U.S. and Soviet involvement in the settlement process."³ Clearly, the U.S. Government was cognizant that Sadat might have a motive for initiating hostilities even when Israel maintained a military edge.⁴ Such cognitive dissonance cannot be explained in the absence of a comprehensive intellectual framework through which analysts assessed information. This paper argues that it was a simplified version of deterrence theory holding that no weaker adversary would ever attack a stronger adversary that convinced analysts and policymakers to disregard important information.

Similarly, the U.S. was aware that Anwar Sadat would face increasing domestic pressure for war if he were unable to make diplomatic progress over the course of 1973 in recovering the territory that Egypt had lost in 1967.⁵ Twice before he had proclaimed a

“year of the decision”, and failed to take action. To continue to speak of war while doing nothing would also have dramatically undermined the Egyptian bargaining position, and convinced the Israelis that the path to security and even peace lay in occupying the Sinai until Egypt was prepared to accept Israel’s terms for peace and for dealing with the Palestinians.

Critically, the U.S. was aware of ample evidence indicating Arab states were making substantive preparations for a military offensive. Though Egypt had bluffed before, and the Israelis had mobilized at considerable expense, there was reason to believe that this time was different. The *CIA Weekly Summary* on 11 May 1973 made explicit note of the fact that “Egypt and other Arab states have taken a number of measures that could be interpreted as preparations for hostilities against Israel.”⁶ Five days later, in the President’s Wednesday briefing, the CIA noted huge transfers of weapons between Arab states.⁷ These included the shipment of over fifty Mirage aircraft from Libya, Iraq and possibly Saudi Arabia to Egypt, the transfer of Algerian aircraft to Egypt, a promised Algerian aircraft transfer to Syria and a Moroccan commitment to station troops in Syria. The CIA also reported on “related training on new equipment, especially in Egypt and Syria, and an upgrading in the alert status of the armed forces.” These weapons transfers and training exercises came at great expense, and would not have been justifiable for Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Morocco unless there was the expectation of an Egyptian or Syrian attack.

The Nixon Administration also knew the Egyptians had made strides in improving their military capabilities, though they still completely underestimated them.⁸ In the 11 May *CIA Weekly Summary*, the author notes that “Military moves by other Arab

governments seem in harmony with Sadat's purpose".⁹ Finally, in the last weeks before the war, the U.S. became aware of massive troop buildups in the Golan Heights, even as the Egyptians were engaging in a troop buildup of their own.¹⁰ This should have provoked alarm. However, since analysts judged that Egypt would not attack because of Israeli deterrence and that the Syrians wouldn't attack Israel unless Egypt did, they chose to characterize the Syrian buildup as purely "defensive positions" constructed due to an "action-reaction cycle."¹¹ Despite the availability of a great deal of information indicating the possibility of an attack, such an outcome was repeatedly dismissed as highly unlikely because of Israeli military deterrence.

The U.S. intelligence community dismissed the possibility of an Arab attack not simply on the basis of Israeli military superiority, but also because they believed that the larger geopolitical situation was in Israel's favor. They viewed Egypt and Syria not as independent state actors, but as mere players in the larger Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and the West. Hence, intelligence reports were interpreted through a Cold War lens in which the Arab states, lacking sufficient Soviet support, would not attack Israel, which enjoyed strong American support.

U.S. intelligence officials considered an attack highly unlikely because they believed that the "Soviet position in the region would suffer if the Arabs, using Soviet weapons, were beaten again." They also believed that the Soviets wouldn't want to "endanger détente with the U.S.—the centerpiece of Brezhnev's foreign policy" by risking direct Soviet and U.S. involvement in a conflict.¹² Intelligence reports describing an apparent rift between Egypt and the Soviet Union only reinforced the American belief

that the Soviets would not support an Arab attack. Thus, U.S. intelligence officials concluded that an Egyptian attack was unlikely because of a lack of Soviet support.

Tellingly, a CIA memorandum to policymakers from 1 December 1972 argued that Sadat's decision to expel the Soviet pilots and technicians in June of 1972 undercut "Egypt's already meager military options" and that this indicated that Egypt would not attack.¹³ Again, on 11 May 1973, the CIA downplayed the potential of an attack in its weekly summary. It began by acknowledging how "Egypt and other Arab states have taken a number of measures that could be interpreted as preparation for hostilities against Israel." The summary then proceeded to downplay the significance of these measures by stating that Egypt's "military options are poor at best" and that a failed Egyptian attack might bring down Sadat and his regime.¹⁴ Both of these reports demonstrate how the U.S. intelligence community believed that Egypt would not act without substantial Soviet help.

Even on 6 October 1973, the very day Egyptian and Syrian forces launched their attack on Israel, the American intelligence community remained blinded by these geopolitical assumptions. The CIA released a bulletin listing all the indications of a conflict. It cited the Soviet evacuations of its dependents from both Egypt and Syria, a build-up on the Suez Canal of Egyptian artillery and tanks, a mobilization of reserves that is "more realistic" than any past military exercise Egypt had conducted on the border, and reports that Syria was redeploying its ground forces in the Golan Heights as evidence of a potential confrontation. However, even after presenting all this evidence, the report argued that, "a military initiation makes little sense at this critical juncture of President Sadat's reorientation of domestic and foreign policies." It goes on to state that an Arab

attack would be “suicidal” for the Assad regime and that it would destroy Sadat’s efforts to strengthen the domestic economy and strengthen his relations with Gulf States.¹⁵

These reports are prime examples of how analysts and policymakers were blinded by their conceptual framework of deterrence theory and the geopolitical situation. Because the U.S. officials viewed the conflict in the context of the Cold War, they paid too much attention to the intelligence reports on Soviet involvement in Egypt and not enough attention to intelligence about the actual situation on the ground. The intelligence community continued to view Arab motives through the prism of the overall balance of power. To the CIA, it appeared irrational for the Arabs to start a war they could not win. However, they failed to acknowledge other factors affecting Arab intentions, including domestic pressure to regain Egyptian pride and Sadat’s belief that a limited war could prove highly successful in convincing Israel to take the peace process seriously.¹⁶ In the end, it was these factors, and not the overall balance of power, that proved decisive in Sadat’s decision to attack.

The U.S. intelligence community relied so heavily on this conceptual framework and geopolitical theory partly because it helped to explain the situation in the Middle East in the larger context of the Cold War. In the very years leading up to the Yom Kippur War, American policymakers and intelligence analysts were focused on countering Soviet influence on a wide range of issues across the globe. At the very time the administration was receiving numerous intelligence reports on the possibility of an imminent Egyptian attack, it was deeply engaged in the Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War. At the same time, Nixon was meeting with Chinese leaders in an attempt to warm relations with the People’s Republic of China and pit China against the Soviet

Union to change the Cold War balance of powers, while the CIA was involved in inciting a coup in Chile. All of this Cold War maneuvering influenced how the U.S. intelligence community viewed the events leading to the Yom Kippur War, causing them to view the Arabs not as independent actors but rather as pieces in a global game of chess between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the process, American intelligence overlooked other factors that influenced Arab intentions and behavior.

Because the American intelligence community looked at the events in the Middle East from a Cold War perspective, it saw America's geopolitical ally Israel as an extension of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps naively, the U.S. assumed that they shared most vital interests, priorities, and beliefs with Israel and therefore made very little distinction between Israeli and U.S. foreign policy objectives. The American intelligence agencies trusted the intelligence Israelis relayed to them as if it were their own, failing to take into account the fact that the intelligence reports Israel passed on to the U.S. were potentially biased. As a result, they failed to realize that Israel was selective about what intelligence information it relayed to the U.S, giving American intelligence officials the impression that the Israeli military was stronger, and the Arab threat weaker than they really were. This in turn reinforced the American assumption that Israel's military prowess would deter any Arab strike.

It is important to note that Israel's foreign policy objectives did in fact differ from those of the U.S. Israel realized that if the U.S. knew that the Israeli military might not deter an attack and that there was a higher possibility for conflict, the U.S. would be likely to pressure Israel to make territorial concessions to Egypt on terms that would be disadvantageous to Israel. Hence, it was in Israel's best interest to conceal any and all

weakness so that the U.S. would not put pressure on Israel to make undesirable concessions.¹⁷

Despite a few instances where CIA reports mentioned the potential for bias in Israeli intelligence, the American officials did not account for this possibility when analyzing Israeli intelligence reports. Even the intelligence reports that acknowledged that Israel might be withholding information, such as the *Weekly Summary* from 11 May 1973, which stated, “Tel Aviv may be less relaxed than it has indicated”, failed to treat this potential bias as a serious threat to the credibility and accuracy of their intelligence reports.¹⁸ A CIA Post Mortem Report acknowledged that part of the U.S. intelligence failure was because the intelligence community trusted Israeli reports and analysis which “turned the analyst’s attention principally toward political indications that the Arabs were bent on finding non-violent means to achieve their objectives.”¹⁹ Henry Kissinger also acknowledged that one of the key mistakes of the American intelligence effort was that it failed to realize that Israel “acquired a vested interest in belittling Arab threats lest the United States use the danger of war as a pretext to press for concessions.” These examples show that the intelligence community’s reliance on the geopolitical situation not only blinded them from realizing that Egypt would act independently from the Soviets, but also that Israel had differing interests from the U.S.

In the American foreign relations bureaucracy, jockeying for power at the top of the hierarchy during President Nixon’s administration had a powerful ripple effect all the way down. In 1973, Henry Kissinger, who strongly believed in the effectiveness of the Israeli deterrent, engaged in bureaucratic maneuverings that resulted in the suppression of vital intelligence that indicated war was on its way.

Soon after the elections of 1968, President-Elect Nixon named Henry Kissinger as his National Security Advisor. Less than a year earlier, Kissinger had served as the foreign policy advisor to Nixon's opponent in the Republican primaries, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and the appointment surprised many. Nevertheless, by December 1968, Kissinger had established himself as the central player in U.S. foreign policy, assuming sole briefing duties for the President, and directing that no National Intelligence Estimates go directly to the President.²⁰ This both restricted and altered the overall flow of information to the President, almost all of which had to flow through Kissinger. It is important to note that in the run up to the Yom Kippur War, both President Nixon and Kissinger were highly distracted; Nixon was preoccupied with Watergate, while Kissinger was busy dealing with other foreign policy crises, particularly Vietnam. Thus at the time, the Middle East was not at the forefront of the administration's thoughts.

As Kissinger assumed more power in the administration, his own opinions about the nature of the geopolitical situation became increasingly influential. He was a strong believer in the power of Israeli deterrence, and thought that so long as Israel maintained its overall military superiority, no Arab army would dare attack it. To Kissinger, the prospect of war appeared exceedingly unlikely, and the status quo seemed favorable to the United States. Once the Arabs realized that they had no military option and that the Soviets couldn't deliver Israeli concessions, his reasoning went, the Arabs would have no choice but to "come to us" seeking American help for a negotiated settlement.²¹ For this reason, Kissinger strongly opposed the approach taken by the State Department under the direction of Secretary of State William Rogers, in which the State Department pushed for an interim agreement between Israel and Egypt. Such an agreement, Kissinger thought,

would undermine American influence by reducing the pressure on the Arabs to seek American help in negotiating a final comprehensive settlement.

Because of his strong beliefs and lust for power, Henry Kissinger resorted to tactics of bureaucratic infighting to delay the implementation of the Rogers Plan throughout his time in the Nixon administration. As Nixon's National Security Adviser, Kissinger was not shy about exerting direct pressure on the State Department, at one point excoriating then-Undersecretary for Near Eastern Affairs Joseph Sisco to abandon the interim approach and leave Middle East policy in his hands. "I mean goddamn it, it took us two years to get the Egyptians in the frame of mind where they were pleading with us to get into it and now we are acting like puppy dogs...I will tell you something-I haven't lost one of these yet. And I'm not losing it—I will not tolerate it—and you remember this—I will not tolerate anything being segregated as the exclusive jurisdiction of anybody."²² The element of threat and boastful confidence in Kissinger's words cannot be ignored, and though chilling, they were only a foreshadowing of his behavior to come.

In a bureaucracy, knowledge is power, and Henry Kissinger was highly reluctant to share either. Through his position as a back-channel diplomatic medium, Kissinger had access to privileged information unavailable to the intelligence community. In early May meetings at Zavidovo and later again at a June summit, Brezhnev and Gromyko warned Kissinger that "the Arabs were serious and that war was coming."²³ Private dialogue between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, and various private messages from Sadat also indicated Sadat's serious intent.²⁴ However, Kissinger failed to share this valuable information with the intelligence community. If the CIA had been informed of this, they would have almost certainly reassessed the situation, given how much weight

they attached to Soviet intelligence. On 30 September 1973, after becoming alarmed at the concentration of Syrian tanks on the Israeli border, Henry Kissinger requested an interagency estimate on the possibility of war as soon as possible.²⁵ According to Lawrence Eagleberger, then a senior assistant of Kissinger's, "Henry reading some fairly raw intelligence came to the conclusion that Sadat was going to start a war before the Intelligence Community itself did, but too late all the same."²⁶ William Colby, Director of Central Intelligence, later wrote Kissinger in a memorandum that it would have been easier for the CIA to predict the surprise attack if Kissinger hadn't shut him off from certain privileged information.²⁷

It is a strange paradox that even though Kissinger's bureaucratic maneuvering was intended to give the U.S. (and himself) greater influence in the Middle East, it had the opposite effect. His bureaucratic maneuvers unintentionally resulted in the forfeiture of intelligence that indicated an oncoming war. As a result, the United States was unable to exert influence to prevent the outbreak of fighting in the first place, and unprepared to exert influence to stop it once it had started.

The American intelligence community's failure to predict the surprise Arab attack on Israel in October 1973 stemmed not from a general lack of information but from a generally faulty analysis of the facts available, in which the theory and practice of deterrence blinded the intelligence community to Anwar Sadat's decision and preparation for war. Stunningly, almost 40 years later and more than 20 years after the Cold War's end, Israel's security strategy and the American assessment of it are still premised on deterrence theory. Part of the rationale for fighting the 2006 Lebanon War, conducting Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in the winter of 2008/2009 and conducting Operation Pillar

of Defense in 2012 was to ensure that Palestinian militants in Gaza and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon would be deterred in the future from firing large numbers of rockets into Israel. Likewise, if Iran was ever to successfully develop and use a nuclear weapon against Israel, Israeli submarines armed with nuclear warheads give Israel the second-strike retaliatory ability to cause thermonuclear devastation across Iran.

Traditional deterrence theory would argue that the Iranian regime would never use nuclear weapons against Israel for fear of massive retaliatory annihilation, both from Israel and the United States. However, traditional deterrence theory has failed Israel before, both in preventing the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and more recently, in preventing rocket attacks from Gaza, because a determined adversary cannot always be deterred. Israeli military planners must be painfully conscious of this fact. The conventional wisdom of deterrence theory holds that Israel is unlikely to preemptively strike Iran's nuclear facilities because the costs of Iranian retribution and global condemnation would be too great. However, Israel has shown a willingness to take risks to ensure its regional nuclear supremacy twice before, in conducting airstrikes that destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, and doing the same to a North Korean-constructed nuclear reactor in the Deir ez Zor region of Syria in 2007.²⁸ Though neither operation was intended as a permanent solution, the prospect of a nuclear-armed adversary was simply unacceptable to Israel and thus preemptive strikes were judged necessary. Given the theocratic and unpredictable nature of the Iranian regime, it is possible that Israel does not feel certain of the effectiveness of its deterrent against Iran. If Israel has indeed lost confidence in its deterrent capabilities, perhaps a preemptive strike against the Iranian

nuclear facilities, even coming at great cost, is more likely than the conventional wisdom of the U.S. intelligence community assumes.

The Yom Kippur War demonstrated clearly that the Israeli strategy of security through deterrence is not infallible. In light of this fact, Israel's security planners of today considering how to deal with the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon might be less willing to take a chance on deterrence theory than their predecessors. The American intelligence community should bear in mind that Iran's perceived ability to deter a preemptive Israeli strike on its nuclear facilities by a determined and desperate Israel could prove just as illusory as the perception that Israeli deterrence would hold against a similarly determined and desperate Egypt in 1973.

¹ Jewish Virtual Library. "Population of Israel, 1949-2012". 2012.
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&Culture/Population_of_Israel.html> (Dec 3, 2012)

² CIA. "Views On the Probability that Egyptian President Sadat seriously is considering launching hostilities against Israel." (Washington D.C.: May 1973).

³ CIA. "National Intelligence Estimate: Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities." (Washington D.C.: May 17, 1973).

⁴ CIA. "National Intelligence Estimate: Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities." (Washington D.C.: May 17, 1973).

Curiously, even in the very same document that asserted this potential motivation, this fact was not reflected in the overall assessment of whether Sadat would actually attack.

⁵ CIA. "National Intelligence Estimate: Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities." (Washington D.C.: May 17, 1973).

⁶ CIA. "CIA Weekly Summary". (Washington D.C.: May 11, 1973).

⁷ CIA. "President's Wednesday Briefing". (Washington D.C.: May 16, 1973).

⁸ CIA. "National Intelligence Estimate-Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities" (Washington D.C.: May 17, 1973).

⁹ It is interesting that the author doesn't say what Sadat's purpose actually is. However, what else could coordinated military preparation, which comes at considerable expense, be for, other than war?

CIA. "CIA Weekly Summary". (Washington D.C.: May 11, 1973).

¹⁰ CIA. "Judgment that Syrian Military Preparations are Defensive in Nature". (Washington D.C.: Oct 3, 1973)

¹¹ CIA. "Judgment that Syrian Military Preparations are Defensive in Nature". (Washington D.C.: Oct 3, 1973)

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- ¹² CIA. "Middle East Military Situation" (Washington D.C.: May 5, 1973)
- ¹³ CIA. "Israeli Thinking on a Peace Settlement with the Arabs" (Washington D.C.: Dec 1, 1972)
- ¹⁴ CIA. "CIA Weekly Summary" (Washington D.C.: May 11, 1973)
- ¹⁵ CIA. "Central Intelligence Bulletin" (Washington D.C.: Oct 6, 1973)
- ¹⁶ Richard K. Betts "Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning" The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 1982. 69. "CIA Weekly Summary" (Washington D.C.: May 11, 1973)
- ¹⁷ CIA. Harold P. Ford. "Chapter 3: The Yom Kippur War of October 1973" *William E. Colby As Director of Central Intelligence 1973-1976*.
- ¹⁸ Henry Kissinger. *Years of Upheaval*. Boston: Little Brown, 1982. P461. Quotation found in Harold P. Ford. *William E. Colby as Director of Central intelligence 1973-1976*. P 32
- ¹⁹ CIA. "The Performance of the Intelligence Community Before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report (Washington D.C.: December 12 1973)
- ²⁰ CIA. "Intelligence Support for Richard Nixon". (Washington D.C.: Jan 1, 1996).
- ²¹ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Little Brown and Co (T), 1982, 368.
- ²² National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger: Telephone Conversations, Transcripts, (Telcons), Chronological File, Box 18.
- ²³ Harold P. Ford. CIA History Staff. "William E. Colby as Director of Central Intelligence". (Washington D.C.: Aug 10, 2011), Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Little Brown and Co (T), 1982, 461.
- ²⁴ Harold P. Ford. CIA History Staff. "William E. Colby as Director of Central Intelligence". (Washington D.C.: Aug 10, 2011)
- ²⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Little Brown and Co (T), 1982, 463.
- ²⁶ Lawrence Eagleburger, to John Ranelagh, as cited in Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 582-583.
- ²⁷ William Colby, Memorandum for Kissinger, "Critique of Middle East Crisis, Oct 27, 1973.
- ²⁸ BBC News Middle East. "IAEA: Syria site bombed by Israel was likely nuclear". May 24, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13530945> (Dec 3, 2012), BBC On This Day. "1981: Israel Bombs Baghdad nuclear reactor". <
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid_3014000/3014623.stm> (Dec 3, 2012).