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Arab-Israeli Hostilities: Two Scenarios

The Arab-Israeli war is approaching a decisive turning point. Because of the lack of detailed information concerning several critical variables, it is impossible to predict with great confidence how events on the battlefield will develop. We have, however, in this paper constructed what seem to be the most likely alternative scenarios and their implications.

Scenario I: Israeli RetributionIntroduction

When the fighting began on Saturday, the Israeli reserves were not mobilized. Only blocking forces were deployed in the areas where the Syrians and the Egyptians attacked. Israel's strategy was to hold on until their mobilized strength could be pressed against the Arabs. This strategy appears to be working. The small number of Israeli troops initially deployed on the Golan Heights held long enough for the mobilized force to get into position and the tide of battle has turned in Israel's favor. Along the Suez Canal, the Bar Lev defense line has done the job of tripping the Egyptian offensive. The attacking Egyptian forces have not driven deep into the Sinai.

The Israeli strategy at this point appears to be to destroy the Syrian military forces while simply containing the large Egyptian force that has crossed over to the east bank of the Suez Canal. Once the job on the Syrian front is completed--probably within a few days--the Israelis will most likely attempt to launch a major offensive against the Egyptians.

Assessment at Mid-Week

On the Golan Heights, the Syrians have fought better than anticipated. To stop the drive, the Israelis relied primarily on their air power, but this has proved to be costly in aircraft losses. Time was bought, however, and sufficient armor

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strength is now in the area for the Israelis to press the counterattack across the 1967 cease-fire line and on to Damascus. The highest Israeli priority will be the destruction of the Syrian forces rather than additional territorial gains.

In the Sinai, the overall level of action has been less intense. The Egyptians moved quickly and easily across the Canal and were able to rapidly establish several bridgeheads. The Israeli forces along the Canal itself at the time numbered only a few thousand men, equipped with about two hundred tanks. These outnumbered units fought a delaying action before being forced to abandon virtually all the Bar Lev Line outposts on the east bank of the canal.

Israel's main force in Sinai has not yet been committed, however. It now appears that the Israelis are holding back until the reserves from Israel can link up. When all is in place, the Israelis will strike back with a counterattack intended to destroy the Egyptians forces now in Sinai.

Israel's Capability to Do It

The major determining factor in the overall strategy is whether Israel still has the strength to launch major counterattacks. Because the Arabs have fought well, Israel's losses have been higher than anticipated. Measured against the size of the total force, however, it still appears that the Israelis have sufficient numbers of aircraft, tanks, and men to achieve their objective--to roll back the attackers to the 1967 line and destroy the attacking Syrian and Egyptian forces.

A Jordanian entry into the war would draw off Israel's strength from the Syrian front. The Israelis can probably handle the Jordanian forces without heavy losses, but they would be forced to alter the timetable of their plans on the other more important fronts.

Israel's aircraft losses are probably the most serious element in the equation. About 100 planes have been lost out of Israel's total inventory of some 350 combat aircraft. The Israelis reportedly have now cleared most of the SAM defenses from the Golan Heights; unless the Syrians receive major re-supply of SAM's Israeli aircraft losses probably will be low on the Syrian front.

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On the Egyptian front, the Israelis can expect to lose more planes. Egypt's SAM defenses are still largely in place and only a small part of its air force has been committed. Once the Israelis begin counterattacking in force, however, the total strength of the Egyptian air force should enter the battle. To conserve their aircraft, the Israelis may rely on their armor to destroy the Egyptian forces in Sinai.

In terms of tanks, the Israelis have lost some 600 tanks. Although their loss is about 30 percent of the total tank inventory, the Israelis have more tanks now than they did when the 1967 war broke out. In the absence of a new threat on the Eastern Front, the Israelis have sufficient ground and air combat strength to destroy the Egyptian forces in the Sinai. The Israelis also may decide to cross the Canal to destroy the remaining elements of the Egyptian Army, even at the expense of heavy casualties.

And finally manpower. The Israelis may have suffered losses of more than 1,000 men--already several hundred more than were lost in the Six Day War. This is still a small percentage of Israel's entire mobilized force of some 300,000 men, however. Manpower losses are not likely to be a determining factor in Israeli strategy at this stage of the war. The losses will only fill the Israelis with greater resolve to strike back hard.

Conclusion

In the Israeli mind, this war is the "Day of Judgment War". It has become a no-holds-barred affair, and the Israelis are determined to punish the Arabs. Chief of Staff David Elezar has said that the objective now is to "break their bones."

Given this mental state, the Israelis probably are willing to pay the high cost in men and equipment necessary to demonstrate the consequences of attacking Israel. This war is becoming increasingly bloody, and from Israel's point of view, cannot continue over a long period of time.

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Each day that goes by without significant Israeli success in defeating or dislodging the Egyptian forces from the east bank of the Suez Canal strengthens the Arab resolve and increases the possibility of additional Arab forces joining the war. The prospects that the Egyptians will be able to continue to hold their positions on the Suez Canal over the next week are fair to good, and, as time elapses, the Egyptians probably will become stronger and extend their positions even deeper into Israeli-held territory. The factors favoring the Egyptians are:

- the momentum derived from the success thus far of attacking the Israelis without instant defeat and disastrous losses;
- the sheer weight of numerical advantage in equipment and manpower;
- the climate of international opinion, especially African and Western European;
- a much improved air defense system that has denied the Israelis the kind of complete air superiority they had in 1967;
- a better logistic situation than that of the Israelis;
- the prospects of the support of other Arab countries in terms of men, equipment, and supplies;
- the option of using oil for political leverage.

Momentum

It has taken the Israelis five days of very heavy fighting to dislodge the Syrians from the Golan Heights and they have thus far been unable to turn back the Egyptian forces occupying the east bank of the Canal. Both the Arabs and Israelis have sustained heavy losses, but the impact of these losses appears to be greater on Israel than on the Arabs because the Israeli manpower and equipment base is much smaller. The Israelis appear to have lost about 30 percent

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of their tanks and nearly 25 percent of their aircraft. Other Arab countries, however, have significant quantities of both that can be made available to Egypt and Syria.

Although the Syrians have been dislodged from the Golan Heights, the fighting in that area has required the commitment of large quantities of Israeli resources. The Israelis, however, will probably have to maintain large parts of their ground forces in this area in the event the Syrians, either by themselves or with reinforcements from other Arabs, launch a counterattack. The fact that the Syrians have successfully tied up a substantial portion of the Israeli forces for about five days has not only given the Arabs a crucial boost in morale, but has facilitated the Egyptian operation to place and maintain troops into the Sinai.

On the Suez Canal front, the Israelis claim the Egyptians have put some 40,000 troops and 700-800 tanks across the canal into the Sinai. The Israelis have put some of the tanks out of operation but they have not been successful in knocking out the bridges across the canal. They concede that the Egyptians continue to reinforce their bridgeheads.

Numbers

Egypt and Syria together have greater quantities of military equipment than Israel. When war broke out, Egypt and Syria had a 2:1 edge in tank inventory and a 2.5:1 edge in aircraft inventory over the Israelis. After nearly a week of fighting, both sides have sustained heavy losses, but the ratio of inventories has shifted slightly in favor of the Egyptians and Syrians. Those Arab countries now hold a 2.15:1 edge in tanks and 1.65:1 edge in aircraft. Other Arab countries that are not now directly involved in the fighting have significant quantities of equipment that can be made available to Egypt and Syria.

The implication of this kind of Arab superiority in equipment is that the Arabs can afford heavier losses than the Israelis. In fact, Arab losses have been only slightly higher than those of the Israelis--certainly in a much smaller ratio than the equipment holdings at the beginning of the war. If the two sides were to continue to suffer losses at the present rate for a period of a few weeks, the attrition would be far more serious for the Israelis than the Arabs.

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The Egyptians and Syrians have greatly improved their air defense networks. Large quantities of sophisticated SAM equipment have been sent to and deployed in both countries. Although the Israelis may ultimately be able to neutralize these systems, the Israeli loss of aircraft will be high.

Pilot and equipment fatigue is another important factor. The Israelis have been logging long hours in the air while the Arabs and especially the Egyptians have committed relatively few of their aircraft to the battle.

Logistics

Although the evidence is not firm, there are indications that the Arabs are in a better supply position for ammunition and petroleum than Israel. The Israelis reportedly are seeking additional supplies of 105 mm and 155 mm ammunition. Conversely, the Egyptians are expending ammunition and missiles at a rate that suggests to the Israelis that there is no shortage. Furthermore, at least 33 Soviet military-related AN-12s have flown to Syria in the past several days and five AN-22s have gone to Egypt, all probably with military supplies. Additional AN-12s are scheduled to fly to Egypt.

Support by Other Arab Countries

As the fighting rages, other Arab countries are showing signs of supporting the Egyptians and Syrians. Although the individual contributions may not be large, commulatively they could be significant. If the present combatants are able to continue the battle and are not defeated by the Israelis, the other Arabs could become infected with the smell of victory and join in.

The Libyans still have about 60 Mirage aircraft in their inventory, and there is evidence that a few of these have been made available to Egypt. The Moroccans have announced that they will send another 2,500 or so troops to the fighting. Baghdad has indicated that it will provide SU-7s and MIG-21s to the Syrian front and perhaps as many as 16,000 Iraqi troops and 100 tanks are on their way to Syria. Algeria has sent air units to Egypt. Saudi Arabia reportedly intends to send a combat brigade to Syria and may provide some aircraft. Tunisia, Sudan, and Kuwait reportedly have provided small elements to the fighting, or may do so.

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If support comes to Egypt and Syria from virtually all of the Arab countries, it is going to be difficult for King Husayn to remain on the sidelines. This is especially true if the Arabs continue to be able to prevent a total defeat by the Israelis. A decision by Husayn to enter the fighting on the side of the Arabs would place a good deal of pressure on the Israelis.

Conclusion

The Arabs are approaching the point where, if they are willing to pay the price, they might be able to wear down the Israelis to the extent that the Israelis would be willing to settle for a cease-fire roughly along the present lines of battle. This would be tantamount to a victory in Arab terms since it would shatter the myth of Israeli invincibility. Moreover, while the Arabs may hope to ultimately regain Palestine, even a few kilometers of Sinai could be regarded as positive movement in that direction.

For the Israelis a stalemate along the present lines of battle would be tantamount psychologically to a military defeat.

Implications for Third Parties

The interests of outside parties will be affected to varying degrees by the current hostilities. The US and the USSR, with the deepest involvement in the Middle East, are both the most vulnerable and have the most at stake. In general, US interests in the Middle East will suffer, at least in the short run, and they could be seriously damaged in the Arab states. The Soviets stand to lose the influence they have built up in the area if they appear to be absent in a time of dire Arab need. The West Europeans prefer to remain uninvolved, but they are highly dependent on Arab oil and in the final analysis are prepared to do what appears necessary to protect their oil supply. Japan's low profile, aimed at preserving good relations with oil producing states, will keep it largely unaffected unless the Arabs impose a general oil embargo.

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Two important general implications should be noted:

-- Time is a critical element. The longer the fighting continues the greater will be the pressures on the US and USSR to intervene and for other Arab states, like Jordan, to become involved in the fighting. There will also be an increasing tendency to look for scapegoats and foreign interests to lash out at. Also, the more destructive the war, the more difficult will be the post-war peace settlement effort.

-- To the extent that the superpowers become involved in major military supply to the combatants, the chances of a US-USSR confrontation will increase, as will the Arab threats to embargo oil shipments and other anti-US actions. At the same time, because of their identification with different sides of the conflict, the US and USSR both have a need to demonstrate a willingness to fulfill commitments if they wish to be taken seriously in the future.

Implications of Scenario I: Israeli Retribution

If the Israelis are able to destroy the Syrian army within the next few days and then demolish the Egyptian armed forces now in Sinai, US problems in the Arab world will increase. Anti-US reaction will be greatly magnified if there is coincidence between US resupply of Israel and a decisive turn in the tide of battle against the Arab forces. The Arab states would, in these circumstances, see the US as a major instrument in causing the Arab forces to lose the fruits of the one victory they have won over Israel--a victory which involved the retaking of previously captured Arab territory. The objective circumstances of an Arab defeat would matter little.

More specifically, the following would probably occur:

-- Oil producing states would attempt to embargo oil shipments to the US or at least reduce total oil output by an amount equal to that normally shipped to the US. This would greatly increase competition among oil consuming states for available oil, since there is little spare producing capacity in the world. However, an effective embargo of oil to one country is very difficult to enforce, and the Arab oil producing states would be

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hesitant to harm Western Europe and Japan, even to get at the US, as long as Europe and Japan stay neutral in the current conflict. The greater the magnitude of the Israeli military success, the more likely it would be that oil producing states would reduce shipments to Western Europe. In this case the Europeans would have less refined products to export to the US which would have an immediate impact on our current supply problem. Even the threat of oil embargo would cause a number of European governments to deny US overflights for military resupply to Israel.

-- The chances of the US developing a cooperative long-range relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil states in the Gulf (whose output will be needed to supply 5 million bpd of projected oil imports by the late 1970s) would be put in serious jeopardy.

-- Pressure would mount on the USSR to come more directly to the aid of the Syrians and Egyptians. (In 1967, the USSR issued a vigorous warning to desist when it seemed as if the Israelis might be prepared to drive into Damascus.) If the Soviets backed away from the Arabs in their time of need, they would in effect be writing off an area of the world to which they have consistently given very high priority.

Implications of Scenario II: Stalemate

An outcome of the war in which Egyptian forces held some territory on the East bank of the Suez Canal and the fighting ended without significant new Israeli territorial gains on the Syrian front could be less damaging in terms of Arab attitudes toward the US than an Israeli victory that crushed the Egyptian and Syrian military forces. But this would only be the case if the Israelis decided on such a cease-fire soon rather than as a result of being repulsed in an attempt to take on the Egyptians in Sinai after destruction of the Syrian forces.

More specifically:

-- The Israeli strategic military situation would be relatively unchanged. They would still, for instance, retain unilateral control over most of the Sinai buffer, including the critical passes. The vulnerable Israeli flanks to the north (Syria and Lebanon) and east (Jordan) would still be protected by the results of the 1967 war.

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-- The Soviets would be off the spot with their Arab friends, at least enough to avoid further direct intervention other than the emergency resupply of expendibles. The Soviet position in the Arab world would also emerge from the war relatively unimpaired.

-- The threat of an Arab oil embargo would be significantly reduced.

-- A possibility might exist for starting a new effort to promote a final settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Israelis might finally come to realize that over the long run the odds against their survival increase unless they are able to reconcile their differences with the Arabs. The Arabs, having regained a measure of pride and confidence, might begin to also think seriously about going to the negotiating table. In any event the Arabs would not harbor the same bitter taste of complete defeat that they have felt since 1967 and which led them into the present fighting.

Over even the slightly long run it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the post-war situation in the Middle East. A catalytic event like a major war can result in very important changes in the political environment that present new opportunities for both the forces of peace and instability. But most of how the war ends and the role of the super powers in ending or extending will determine the future.

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