

## **CIA's Middle East Task Force and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War**

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By about 0600 hours on the morning of 6 October 1973, the first indications started coming in that hostilities were about to break out in the Middle East. At that point, the Middle East Task Force (METF) was stood up and immediately began to coordinate the CIA's and the Intelligence Community's response to the crisis. A veteran manager in CIA's Directorate of Intelligence – the Agency's analytic unit – was tasked with “organizing, staffing and monitoring operations of an around-the-clock task force.” Within two hours (by 1430), the METF was fully staffed and a work schedule put together.

One of METF's primary responsibilities was to support the DCI and other high-level officials at meetings of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), an operational subgroup under the National Security Council that served as the main policymaking body throughout the crisis. The METF's first order of business on 6 October: to prepare a special preliminary assessment for the DCI's use at the WSAG meeting scheduled for 0900 that morning. At the same time, a Special Watch Committee meeting on the Middle East was scheduled to meet and Richard Lehman, both the Chief of the Interagency Watch Committee and the Director of CIA's Office of Current Intelligence (OCI)—the principal CIA office passing tactical assessments of the crisis to the White House—asked the METF for updates on the crisis every half hour while the meeting was in progress.

The METF's primary product during the crisis was the Middle East Situation Report, or SITREP, published up to four times per day during the height of the fighting. The first SITREP was sent to the typist at 0900 that day (Saturday, 6 October). There would be a total of 125 SITREPs published during the crisis, with the last disseminated on 19 November 1973. The SITREPs were used at every WSAG meeting, serving as the main intelligence update for the principals and their staffs. Another function of the METF was to coordinate the large number of taskings levied on the Agency during the crisis, making sure that all taskings were delegated to the proper offices and analysts, and then tracked to make sure the assignment was completed on time.

### **Saturday, 6 October**

On the first day of fighting, the DCI returned from the WSAG meeting at 1040 and immediately called for a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) to be ready for a second WSAG meeting already scheduled later that day at 1400 (or whenever Secretary of State Kissinger returned from New York). Drafting assignments were parceled out to senior analysts from the key DI Offices involved in the crisis—OCI, the Office of Economic Research (OER), and the Office of Strategic Research (OSR—and the SNIE, entitled *Arab-Israeli Hostilities and Their Implications*, was completed in time for the meeting, which did not start until 1500.

The DCI was a regular visitor to the Task Force, often to pass along what was said at the latest WSAG meeting downtown, or to pass along taskings that came up that day. At the end of a very long first day of the crisis, for example, DCI Colby stopped by at 2110 to thank the members for their work and to let them know that the next WSAG meeting was scheduled for 1900 the next evening. He requested that talking points be prepared by 1600 for him to use to brief the WSAG. He said that he (and others) was especially interested in the following:

- Soviet intentions and movements (particularly military movements);
- How long it might take the Israelis to push the Egyptians back across the Suez Canal;
- Whether the Israelis will engage in air attacks on Cairo;
- How far will the Israelis go in the Golan Heights—will they just knock out men and materiel, or go all the way to Damascus?

### **Sunday, 7 October**

By the next day, an OSR military analyst had written up a response to the questions and it was attached to the DCI briefing notes as an annex (see SITREP Number 8, as of 1700 EDT, 10/7/73). Sam Hoskinson (acting National Intelligence Officer, or NIO, for the Middle East) later reported that Colby was “ecstatic” over the annex to his briefing.

The taskings were coming in to the Task Force hot and heavy in the early days of the fighting. On the evening of 7 October, the DCI called in to say he wanted answers on the following issues by 0900 the following morning (8 October):

- The Agency’s best judgment on a detailed, day-by-day military scenario for the next three to four days, i.e., how will the battle unfold, in as much detail as possible.
- How many Egyptian troops and how much equipment, by type, did they get across the canal? How did they get them over and where are they going?
- How many bridges did the Egyptians put up across the Canal? What is their status and how many are still in place?
- Soviet advisors: how many are there in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, and what role are they playing?
- As precisely as possible, what are the losses (people and equipment) on all sides, Israeli and Arab?

A joint CIA-DIA paper (*Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Next Several Days*, 10/8/73) was prepared and disseminated the next day.

### **Monday, 8 October**

The Task Force got some positive feedback on 8 October when DCI Colby related how Secretary of State Kissinger, in that morning’s WSAG meeting, had held up a copy of the latest SITREP and said, “Have you all seen this?” When everyone nodded they had, he said, “Then we can dispense with the briefing.” By this time, two days into the

crisis, the White House was operating from SITREP to SITREP, keeping Kissinger and Scowcroft briefed on the crisis. The Task Force was having to rush the printing of every daytime SITREP (at this stage SITREPs were issued at 0630, 1200, 1700, and 2230 every day) to meet their requirements.

At 2235 on 8 October, the DCI called the METF requesting that the next morning's SITREP include an annex paragraph or two addressing the question: To what extent can the Arabs and Israelis sustain the military effort in view of their supplies and logistics? (see *Annex: Estimated Logistic Situation and Capabilities of the Middle East Combatants*, in SITREP Number 14, 10/9/73). He indicated that he fully recognized the difficulties involved in responding to this and did not expect a definitive answer. He was simply curious whether the forward Egyptian and Syrian forces could be supplied and how much ammunition did they likely have with them during the initial attack.

### **Wednesday, 10 October**

The DCI on 10 October requested a new assessment/estimate paper on how the war is likely to go, adopting the technique of having three different analysts take three different scenarios for the war and advocating them. Drafts were to be finished that evening, with revisions to be done the next day. It was noted in the METF Log that DCI Colby was scheduled to brief Congress the next morning (11 Oct) and that his briefer would use the lead section of that morning's SITREP and then would update the rest of the briefing from the 11 October morning SITREP.

### **Friday, 12 October**

On 12 October, Assistant Secretary of State Sisco requested through State channels that all SITREPs include maps, with all places named in the SITREP indicated on the maps. The DI's Office of Basic and Geographic Intelligence (OBGI), the main provider of maps for DI products, was already closely involved in the work of the Task Force. Analysts of the Office of Strategic Research (OSR), who produced the action portions of the SITREPs, took responsibility for providing all place names to OBGI as soon as possible in the drafting process to implement this directive.

### **Saturday, 13 October**

The WSAG met at 1045 and the DCI dropped by the Ops Center after the WSAG meeting to let the METF know he would be briefing at the next scheduled WSAG meeting, which was to gather the next morning (Sunday) at 0900. Specific items of interest to Colby were the following:

- Where are the Israelis going to go?
- What are Soviet intentions?
- Are reports of an Egyptian airborne move true and, if so, what effect could it have?

The DCI also requested that information on stocks of consumables (fuel, ammunition, etc.) for both the Arabs and Israelis—at the start of hostilities and the current situation—be included as soon as possible in a SITREP annex. The Office of

Economic Research (OER) provided a package of reports on oil shortages in combatant countries to be passed on to the DCI.

### **Sunday, 14 October**

After the morning WSAG meeting, DCI Colby came by the Task Force to request briefing notes for the next meeting, scheduled for either 0900 or 1100 the following morning.

He requested a SITREP annex answering the following questions:

- How long can or will the battle on the Syrian front go on (2 days, 5, 10)?
- Will Israel press on all the way to Damascus, broaden the front to destroy Arab forces, or stabilize it?
- Assuming Israel can stabilize the Syrian front, how long will it take them to shift their main effort to the Sinai front? An annex covering the last question was published in SITREP No. 39 Annex II, as of 1130 EDT, 15 Oct 1973.

The DCI also asked for a memo on reactions of the Japanese and Europeans to a general shut-off or cutback in Arab oil (OER with OCI support was tasked with this) and a memo on the impact of a stand-down of the Soviet airlift and of any US airlift. In addition to the morning WSAG, an NSC meeting had been scheduled for 1600.

### **Monday, 15 October**

Word came from the DCI and Sam Hoskinson that the immediate focus of the Task Force in the next few days should be in gauging Arab and Soviet reactions to US resupply of Israel.

- OCI was tasked with a memo (due by 0800 on 16 October) on observed and probable Soviet reactions for the DCI to use as backup (and can also be used as an annex).
- CIA (and the Task Force) was to observe and analyze Arab oil developments, particularly in reaction to US resupply efforts. Hoskinson will levy a specific requirement on OER.
- OCI will write a memo documenting CIA's assessment of when the Soviets knew about the impending hostilities, by 0800 Tuesday, for the DCI.

In addition to above items of interest, the DCI requested that the Task Force keep him abreast of significant reports on the situation so that he will be knowledgeable about any report that a WSAG attendee might mention during a meeting. Hoskinson suggested the Task Force start keeping a Cable summary list and giving it to the DCI every morning and before each of the meetings he attended. One "good writer" from each shift should summarize, in three sentences, all interesting (quotable, remarkable, pungent) reports that come in, and the list of summaries is then delivered to Hoskinson every morning at 0800. Subjects to focus on are Arab and Soviet reactions to US Airlift; Oil developments; and significant (or unusual) battlefield developments. This operation was to be handled by the DI's Central Reference Services.

### **Tuesday/Wednesday, 17-18 October**

Light days, with no meetings scheduled and little reporting. CIA and DIA analysts were scheduled to meet with DCI Colby at 1400 on 18 October to discuss progress of the war. During the day on 18 October, word came from DCI Colby that the “losses” needed a new baseline, as nearly everybody thought CIA’s tank and personnel loss numbers were too high. OSR was tasked with putting it together; if possible, by the end of the day, so it could be used at the WSAG meeting scheduled for the morning of 19 October. D/OCI Lehman asked that an OER oil analyst be available each morning at 0830 to “pump him up” for the DCI Morning Meeting.

### **Thursday, 19 October**

A WSAG meeting is scheduled for 0930 on 20 October and the DCI is slated to brief the House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, 24 October. At the WSAG held this morning, the CIA provided its updated losses table and late-breaking information of the hostages being held in Beirut. As a result of today’s meeting, OER and OCI have been charged with preparing a paper assessing the effect of oil cutbacks on Japan and Europe. In the afternoon, the TF spent two hours briefing Senator Jackson and his staff on the military situation and the Soviet role. At 2000, Sam Hoskinson dropped in to say the DCI met in the evening with Kissinger and (Defense Secretary) Schlesinger. Hoskinson said the fear in Washington now is that the Egyptian front is about to collapse. DCI Colby came in twenty minutes later to say the WSAG for the next morning was cancelled, but all charts and other material that had been tasked should still be prepared and delivered to the DCI’s office as scheduled. In addition, the evening SITREP is to be sent to the White House, to the attention of Scowcroft for Kissinger (who was leaving Saturday morning on a trip to Moscow). According to the DCI, senior policymakers are most interested in Soviet reactions to today’s events, and this should be reflected in all SITREPs over next day or two.

### **Friday, 20 October**

The cancelation of the morning WSAG meeting brought little respite in the burdens placed on the Task Force. DDI Proctor came in early to announce that the DCI had decided that it would be useful to support Kissinger on his trip to Moscow with a cable telling him what would be the best cease-fire lines to draw based on the terrain, social, and political considerations. OBGI would be the primary author of the study, but the Task Force was to call in OCI and OSR to assist. A rough draft was completed by 1800 and was sent to the White House for transmittal to Moscow. Sam Hoskinson asked that the annexes on Military and Non-Military Assistance by other Arab countries be updated by COB Monday so that the DCI can have the data for his appearance before the House Armed Services Committee on Tuesday. The DCI asked that the SITREP map on the Sinai show the dispositions of forces on both sides of the Suez Canal. The DCI also asked the Task Force to prepare a page-size map showing the disposition of the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean.

### **Saturday, 21 October**

Sam Hoskinson was delighted with SITREP map on the Egyptian front. He thought it was just what the DCI wanted. Richard Lehman and General Walters (DDCI)

dropped by about noon. Walters told the Task Force that he believes the Egyptians have had it and that they should break in the next couple of days. OBGI finished a graphic depiction of proposed cease-fire lines between Israel and the two Arab countries. Lehman praised the members of the Task Force and was concerned about how much longer they could keep up the furious, round-the-clock pace. The DCI called at 1810 to say he had just received a call from General Scowcroft at the White House. Scowcroft told him that the US and USSR had agreed to sponsor jointly a resolution in the UN Security Council that would call for a cease-fire in place. DCI Colby told the Task Force that he wanted to tell them the news first before it is announced to the public. He also wanted to express his personal appreciation to the members of the Task Force because he believed they were of great help to Dr. Kissinger in reaching this agreement with the Soviets. He said he understood how hard members of the Task Force and those who supported it worked over the past two weeks.

### **Monday, 22 October**

The DCI requested that an Annex be prepared for the 2230 SITREP summarizing reactions to the UN cease-fire resolution. The Annex should lead with reactions of the combatants in the War, reactions from other Arab states, China, European states, and important Third World countries. Lehman said that the DCI wanted a final summary that would estimate how each country was likely to go in the future on the cease-fire question. The Annex was to be given to Dr. Kissinger when he returned the next day (Tuesday). Lehman announced that the Task Force should be manned as usual on Tuesday morning, but that if a cease-fire begins to take effect during the day, the number of personnel may be scaled down.

Lehman called early in the morning to say that the DCI had ordered up a paper on the capabilities of the IC to monitor a cease-fire. Analysts from OCI and OSR were called in to work on the paper (along with reps from the DS&T). A paper on the limitations of photography in monitoring a cease-fire was completed by the end of the day and was typed up during the night to be held for the DCI in the morning.

### **Tuesday, 23 October**

The 1700 WSAG meeting was canceled, after all briefing materials were prepared. The meeting was rescheduled for Wednesday at 1000 and the materials will be held until then. DDI Proctor arrived to pass along a memorandum from the DCI relaying President Nixon's and Dr. Kissinger's praise and thanks for the work done by the Task Force to date (see WSAG Meeting Minutes for 23 October).

### **Wednesday, 24 October**

The DCI called from the White House to inquire about reports of fighting on the East Bank of the Suez Canal. Available reporting was provided to Situation Room for passage to Colby. Reporting nature and origin of continuing fighting in southern Suez area is made difficult by lack of reliable sources. Lehman passed on to the DCI the memo prepared the previous night (De Facto Middle East Cease-Fire Lines and Alleged Violations). Colby used the memo in his discussion with SecDef Schlesinger. A senior

OCI analyst is drafting a memo on post-cease-fire probabilities in response to a tasking from this morning's WSAG (memo is needed for Friday's WSAG).

During the evening of 24 October, a routine night shift was "enlivened" by a number of phone calls from DCI Colby concerning Soviet activities in the Middle East. OSR analysts working the night shift were able to answer the Director's questions.

#### **Thursday, 25 October**

OSR was tasked this morning to prepare a memo to recapitulate indicators to look for in identifying Soviet intentions to intervene in the Middle East. Analysts worked all day (in consultation with DIA) to complete the paper.

Following the WSAG, DCI Colby requested a memo be prepared on any evidence of Israeli subterfuge since the cease-fire in the southern sector of the Suez Canal. There is widespread impression among WSAG members that the Israeli military was seeking to consolidate its gains around the Suez and the Egyptian Third Army while blaming the Egyptians for continued hostilities. The memo is to confirm or correct that impression.

#### **Friday, 26 October**

As of today, the 2230 SITREP is discontinued. More cutbacks expected on Monday. At 1600, a crash request came in from Ambassador Scali (at the United Nations) for an assessment of hostilities and whether Egypt had a serious case for complaint about cease-fire violations. METF members prepared a draft, checked its judgmental portions with Lehman and Hoskinson, and had it delivered to the Ambassador in New York. TF members then briefed the assessment to DCI Colby, who passed it along orally to General Scowcroft at the White House, for Kissinger.

#### **Sunday, 28 October**

OBTI is in the final stages of drafting the memo on possible cease-fire or settlement lines, which is due by 1600 on Sunday. OCI and OSR analysts went over the text and cleared it as is. Final memo was reproduced and collated in 25 copies for delivery to DDI Proctor at 0600 the next morning.

#### **Wednesday, 31 October**

Analysts and cartographers from OCI and OBTI worked through the day on Jordan-West Bank settlement proposals memo, which was delivered by the end of the day to Hoskinson for transmittal to Hal Saunders at NSC. Word came down that SITREPS would be required throughout Secretary Kissinger's trip, which means the METF will continue at least two more weekends. The METF will also have to produce an abbreviated cable version to match Kissinger's schedule.

The METF started to wind down in November as the focus shifted to monitoring the cease-fire and getting an agreement signed between Israel and Egypt. SITREPs continued on a reduced schedule into November and the TF continued to operate, although on a reduced schedule. President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger recognized the outstanding work of the TF at the end of the 17 October WSAG meeting, when the

President called the principals to the Cabinet Room to express his appreciation for the excellent work which had been done in this crisis period. Secretary Kissinger also conveyed his appreciation, saying that the teamwork and effectiveness in this crisis was the best of any he had experienced. Despite the fact that the CIA had been criticized for getting it wrong in the months prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the work of the Agency during the crisis was seen as excellent, largely because of the work of the Middle East Task Force.