

History: 50 Years of the 1973 Yom Kippur War

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Who is guilty of the war?

In October 2023 it will be fifty years since the Yom Kippur war occurred. This war is known as the Fourth Arab-Israeli War or by Arabs as the October War.

It was the last great direct clash between Arab nations and Israel.[i] The results of the war, as well, influenced the process of radicalization of the PLO.

This conflict is usually known as the Yom Kippur War and less known as the Ramadan War. It was according to chronological order, the fourth major military conflict between the Arab nations and Zionist Israel since the establishment of Israel in May 1948. The 1973 Yom Kippur War was between Israel (with US weapons and material assistance) and the combined forces of Syria and Egypt (armed by Soviet weapons). The war started without a formal declaration and Syria and Egypt have been fighting to recover their territories lost to Israel in the previous 1967 Israeli-Arab War.

The Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat indicated to the UNO envoy in 1971 Gunnar Jarring that he would like to sign a peace treaty with Israel in exchange for the return of the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula lost in the 1967 Six-Day War.

However, only when this proposal was ignored by both the Israeli Government and Washington, Egypt and Syria decided to start military actions for the sake to break the post-1967 political stalemate with Israel and try to re-occupied their territories lost in 1967.

The war operations

The war started on October 6th, 1973 on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) – the most important and holiest day of prayer and fasting during the whole Jewish year. The issue of the conflict was the failure to solve territorial problems that arose after the 1967 Israeli-Arab War including most importantly the return of the Sinai Peninsula[ii] to Egypt and the Golan Heights to Syria.

M. Anwar al-Sadat, a President of Egypt (1970–1981),^[iii] offered a peace initiative in the form of his proposal to sign an agreement with Israel according to which, Israel would return to Egypt all occupied territories in the war in 1967. However, Israel, backed by the US, refused to withdraw to the pre-1967 armistice lines. Al-Sadat being frustrated and anxious to retain his credibility in both Egypt and the Arab world, decided to solve the problematic issue through military conflict with limited and defined political objectives.



An Israeli M60 Patton tank destroyed in the Sinai (Licensed under the Public Domain)

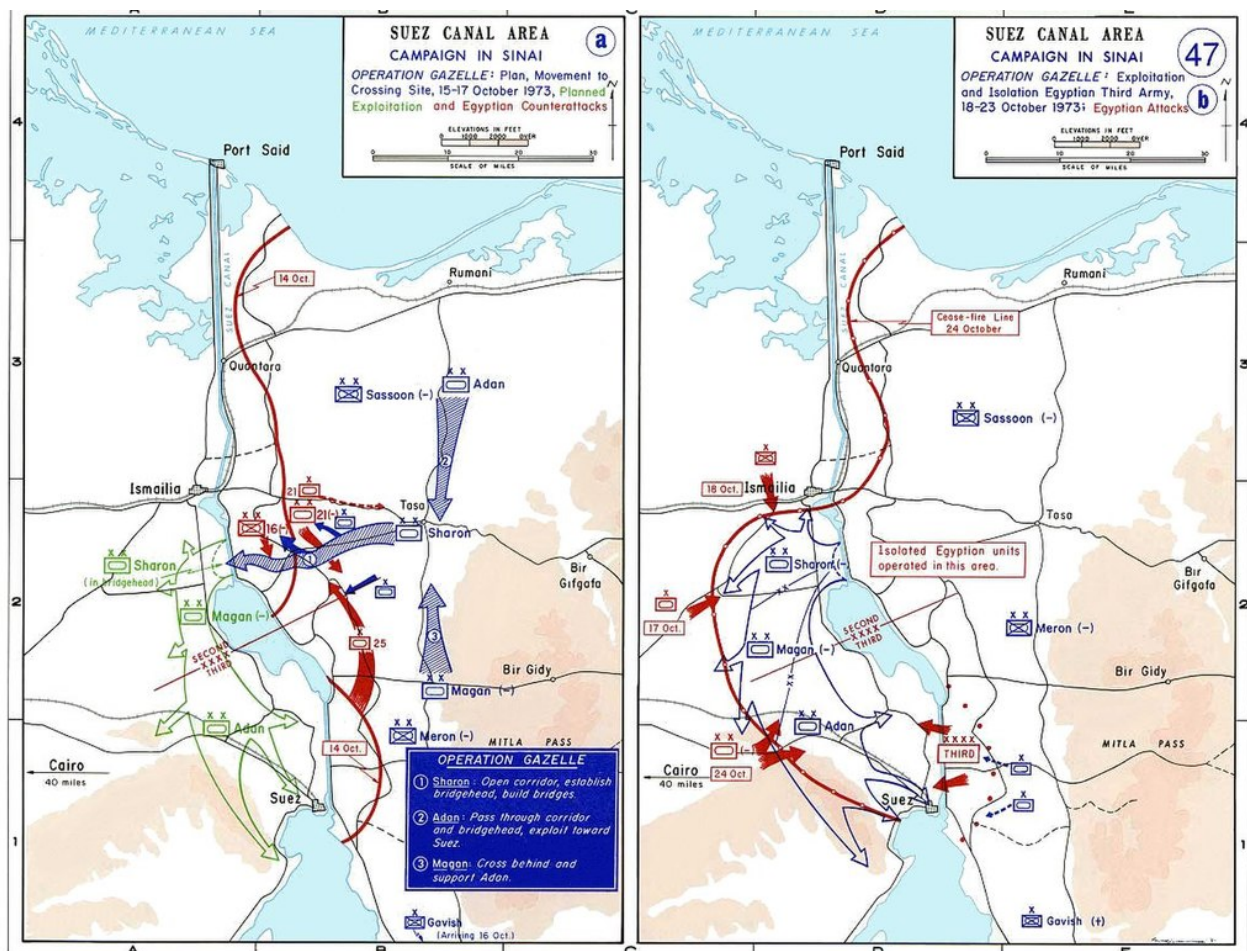
However, it was another cause of the Yom Kippur War – the overconfidence of the General Staff of the Israeli army. In other words, the top military commanders of the Israeli Army convinced the Israeli Government that Israel was safe and protected from potential Arab attack and, therefore, no pressing reason to exist for trading (occupied) territories for a guarantee of peace. In fact, such confidence became the military and the political chief doctrine of the Israeli Government which resulted in the fact that Israel was badly prepared for the war with Egypt and Syria who attacked Israel. Israeli military commanders even misinterpreted the process and task of the concentration of the Egyptian army alongside the Suez Canal^[iv] as an only ordinary military exercise.^[v]

On October 6th, 1973 (Yom Kippur) two Arab states launched a surprise attack on Israel from two fronts. Both Arab armies won some initial military success as the Egyptian army fast crossed the Suez Canal and overrun the Israeli Bar-Lev defensive line while at the same time, the Syrian army advanced into the Golan Heights and very nearly reached the 1967 border with Israel. Israel was caught unaware and the initial situation was looking very desperate for the Zionists. The Israeli army was, for instance, on the northern front outnumbered 12 vs. 1, and as a result, on this front Israeli forces during the first five days of the war were counterattacking in vain and at a high cost but especially in aircraft when Israel lost 150 military planes. This turn of events on the battlefield prompted American political intervention followed by sharply increased military supply to Israel.

Nevertheless, the military situation on the northern front started to be changed on October

10th when Israeli forces began to make an important counter-offensive against the Syrian army resulting in its pushing back. Moreover, the Israeli troops continued their actions and even entered the territory of Syria with tanks advancing to within 40 km close to the Syrian capital Damascus. As the situation dramatically became changed in the Israeli-US favor, the Soviet Union airlifted war material to Syria and Egypt but in order to counter this Soviet action, the US airlifted war material to Israel on October 12th and 13th. On the southern front, supplied by Americans since 1948, the Israeli army organized an offensive and re-crossed the Suez Canal on October 8th further west, entering the territory of post-1967 Egypt, advancing Cairo[vi], and surrounding the Egyptian Third Army.[vii]

Alarmed by dramatic Israeli successes on both fronts, oil-rich Saudi Arabia put strong pressure on its focal customer, the USA, to persuade Israel to stop its further military advances and accept the peace mediation by the UNO. In the meantime, the unsatisfied part of the Egyptian Third Army brought an appeal from President al-Sadat to the USSR. Moscow responded quickly with an open threat to send troops to Egypt against the Israeli invasion. As the international situation already became critical, for the sake to halt a serious international crisis, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger arrived in Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire which was arranged on October 24th, based on UNO Resolution 338 which was adopted on October 22nd. This resolution established an immediate cease-fire on both fronts and re-instated UNO Resolution 242 which had the final aim to establish a just and durable peace in the Middle East. It was followed by the creation of a free zone along the Suez Canal and sending of the UNO peace-keeping forces to the Golan Heights.



When, however, Israel violated the cease-fire according to the UNO Resolution 338, Kremlin once again threatened to send the Soviet troops to Egypt, but the White House did successive diplomatic pressure on the Zionist authorities in Israel.

Consequently, Israel became forced to agree to a second cease-fire on October 25th, 1973. Interestingly, both Israel and Egypt claimed victory. From a very political-diplomatic viewpoint, Israel lost the 1973 Yom Kippur War for the reason, at least, that the UNO peacekeepers have been deployed on the territory of the occupied part of Syria in 1967.

However, technically it can be said that Israel won the war, even though the first several days of it had shown that the Israeli forces with the US weapons and war materials were not invincible. This initial victory of Egypt and Syria in 1973 restored Arab pride after their shameful defeat during the 1967 Six-Days War. It has to be noticed that Israel was able to revive its military initiative on both fronts only by overwhelming collective mobilization of the civilians and at the expense of heavy casualties in both manpower and technique.[viii]

The very formal peace treaty between the two Arab states of Syria and Egypt and Israel was concluded in 1974.

According to the peace agreement, the UNO peacekeepers got a mandate to control the buffer zone between Syria and Israel.

Nevertheless, the Arab allies failed to regain the territories they lost in 1967. During the 1973 war, Israel mobilized up to around 300.000 soldiers compared to the combined Arab forces of 539.000. At the end of the war, there were 8.500 killed Arab soldiers and 6.000 killed and wounded Israeli forces.

The economic loss to Syria, Israel, and Egypt was the equivalent of a year's gross national product (GNP). Politically, the war of 1973 clearly showed the Arab dependence on the USSR and the Zionist dependence on the USA. But probably, the most terrible consequence for the Zionists of the 1973 Yom Kippur War was that the international image of Israeli military invincibility was shattered, and, consequently, Israel became even more dependent on Washington's military, diplomatic, financial, and economic aid after the war.

Some consequences of the last major Israeli-Arab war in 1973 hit the US, as well as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which doubled its petrol export prices during the war as a sign of pan-Arab solidarity against the Zionist imperialism from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Such petroleum policy created a harsh gasoline shortage in the US and took a contribution to US and Western stagflation – a combination of financial inflation and economic recession in 1974 and 1975.[ix]

The Middle East after the 1973 Yom Kippur War

After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger adopted a diplomatic strategy of limited bilateral agreements for the sake to secure partial Israeli withdrawals from both the Sinai Peninsula (Egypt) and the Golan Heights (Syria). But his prime aim was to avoid the negotiations on more difficult problems like the destiny of the West Bank (Jordan) and Gaza (Egypt). In addition, a such diplomatic strategy put the USA as the only mediator between the Israeli Zionists and the Arabs as well as the most significant external

actor in the Middle East conflict.



The political consequences of 1973 Israeli-Arab (fourth major) war opened a new phase of negotiations. It gradually became obvious that Egyptian President al-Sadat had little desire to continue the confrontation with Israel (in fact, with the USA). Al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem on November 19th, 1977, followed by the Egyptian-Israeli 1978 Camp David Accords confirmed the Egyptian desire to find a compromise with Israel. However, M. Begin's Likud Government in Israel started now to take a much harder line concerning the West Bank question which all Zionists claimed to be an integral part of biblical Israel. Consequently, the Israeli Government has been constantly increasing the number of Jewish settlements in the West Bank started by its predecessors from the Labor party.

The focus of the Arab-Israeli conflict shifted, however, when, in 1978, Israel invaded South Lebanon for the sake to pacify the Palestinian PLO guerrilla formations and succeeded to advance as far as Lebanon's capital Beirut in the summer of 1982. Therefore, the Zionists opened a new front of confrontations with the Arab world. Meanwhile, Israel fulfilled part of its commitment to the 1978 Camp David Accords by withdrawing from Sinai in 1981.

The 1978 Camp David Accords

In September 1978, US President Jimmy Carter invited al-Sadat and M. Begin to the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland. There were two peace resolutions between Egypt and Israel in September 1978, negotiated during a 13-day conference at Camp David. The Israeli side was represented by Menachem Begin, PM of Israel from 1977 to 1983, and Egypt

was represented by its President M. Anwar al-Sadat while the host was the US President Jimmy Carter.

The Egyptian President after the 1973 Yom Kippur War restored Egyptian self-confidence and emerged with his popularity enough strong to enter peace negotiations with Israel. It has to be noticed that his desire for peace was derived from his pragmatism as he realized quite well that Egypt cannot regain the Sinai Peninsula by any force and a new war, and was too poor to afford the current extremely high military expenditure. In fact, what he finally realized is the truth that Egypt cannot fight against not Israel but the USA. His sudden visit to Jerusalem to address the Knesset (the Parliament of Israel) in 1977 inaugurated a series of US-sponsored talks which finally culminated in the peace agreement signed in Camp David in 1978. But the crucial issue was that al-Sadat continued with a pro-American policy which he adopted even before the 1973 Yom Kippur War when in an effort to improve relations with the USA, he expelled from Egypt around 20.000 Soviet advisers turning the country from socialism to capitalism by gradually introducing market-oriented economy and encouraging foreign investors.

The first resolution/accord brought significant consequences for the region. More precisely, the first resolution provided a framework for the conclusion of a bilateral peace treaty between the leader of the Arab world – Egypt, and Zionist Israel. In other words, Egypt had to recognize Israel as an independent (Zionist) state and refrain from military attacks on the state territory of Israel. In turn, Israel agreed to a gradual return of the occupied Egyptian Sinai Peninsula (in 1967). The first accord served as a prelude to a final peace treaty that was signed in 1979 by Egypt and Israel.

The second resolution of Camp David provided a general framework for the relations in the region of the Middle East, and, most important, it specified ways in which reductions in Israeli military presence in the occupied areas of the West Bank (from Jordan) and the Gaza Strip (from Egypt) would finally lead to a general and successive peace agreement. In essence, the second accord dealt with the Palestinian Question proposing the granting autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a five-year interim period, after which the final status of the territories is going to be negotiated. However, the second (Palestinian) resolution or accord became strongly opposed by the Arab states followed by the PLO as well and, therefore, it became of little importance.

Only the Egyptian-Israeli accord was implemented and this (the first) resolution founded the basis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed in 1979. The autonomy concept for Palestinians was rejected because it did not give guarantees for the complete Israeli withdrawal from the lands occupied in 1967 or the creation of an independent national Palestinian state. For the Camp David Accords, M. Begin and M. A. al-Sadat received the Nobel Peace Prize.[x] Nevertheless, Israel sabotaged further negotiations by continuing to confiscate Palestinian land and build new Jewish settlements in a direct violation of the commitments M. Begin made to J. Carter at Camp David.



After 1978, for Israel and the USA, the Camp David Accords became a powerful symbol of recognition that the Zionists have been expecting other Arab states to do the same as al-Sadat did. One of the focal consequences of the 1978 Camp David Accords is that Egypt became “pacified” by Washington and Israeli Zionists and started gradually to become one more of their satellites in the Middle East (following Saudi Arabia) leaving the Palestinians on the Zionist mercy. Such policy attracted sharp hostility from the other Arab states and the PLO, who withdrew diplomatic relations and financial support. Finally, for his treachery, M. A. al-Sadat was shot in Cairo by four assassins while reviewing a military parade on October 6th, 1981 – on the same day when he started the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The Arab states have been for decades looking at Egypt as their leader who was expected to provide the focal opposition to the creation and existence of the state of Zionist Israel. From the time when al-Sadat signed and put into effect a peace treaty with Israel on March 25th, 1979, Egypt was for many years both the target of Arab economic reprisals and the recipient of significant aid from the USA. Later, Jordan and the PLO also signed agreements with Israel, and Syria and Lebanon consider the prospects. Obviously, after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt of M. A. al-Sadat opened the door of treachery followed later up today gradually by other Arab nations. The Zionists became the only winners in the Middle East.

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Endnotes:

[i] About first two Israeli-Arab wars, see in [Benny Morris, *Israeli's Border Wars 1949–1956*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997].

[ii] The northeastern Sinai Peninsula is a desert area that abuts Israel and Gulf of Aqaba.

[iii] Egypt became a republic in 1952 when because of dire economic and social conditions, the army officers staged a coup d'état on July 23rd, 1952 under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Gamel Abdel Nasser. That day is now celebrated in Egypt as National Day. On June 18th, 1953, this junta declared Egypt a republic. This became a turning point for modern Egyptians, who after that felt more independent, spearheading a resurgence of Arab nationalism across the region of the Middle East. A new Constitution was adopted in 1971 for the Arab Republic of Egypt that guarantees the individual rights of the citizens. The first two Presidents after G. A. Nasser were former General A. al-Sadat who was assassinated during the military parade in Cairo and former General Hosni Mubarak up to the Arab Spring. There is a National Assembly with limited number of political parties.

[iv] The Suez Canal is linking the Mediterranean Sea on the north with the Gulf of Suez and Red Sea on the southeast. It divides the Arabian Desert on the east from the Libyan Desert on the west (the Great Sand Sea). Today, with the assistance of UN and US aid, there is a master plan to reconstruct the Suez Canal area within the inner/outer regions that is under way of its realization.

[v] See more in [Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, *Land of Darkness, Shadow of Death: A Military History of the Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947–1973*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976].

[vi] The Egyptian capital Cairo is Africa's and the Middle East's most populous urban settlement. It is blending the cultures of both ancient and modern, East and West, Islam and Christianity. Its origins can be traced to nearby El Fustai, founded by Arabs in 641.

[vii] See more in [Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947–1974*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1978].

[viii] Further reading: Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle-East*, New York: Schocken Books, 2017.

[ix] Further reading [Insight Team of the London "Sunday Times", *The Yom Kippur War*, New York: iBooks, 2002].

[x] Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, *The Camp David Accords: A Testimony by Sadat's Foreign Minister*, London–New York: Routledge, 2013.

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