

The 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars: Causes of Triumphs and Failures

Written by David Sousa

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DAVID SOUSA, MAY 26 2014

Introduction

The 1967 and 1973 wars in the Middle East radically changed the face of the region: huge swaths of land changed hands and political landscapes transformed. The 1967 War (henceforth: the June War) left Israel controlling large territories, including strategically important areas such as the Sinai desert and the Golan Heights, but also the politically sensitive areas of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. Psychologically, the war created a sense of superiority and invulnerability in the Israeli leadership, military echelon and public minds.

For the Arab world the war was a massive defeat, causing shock and disbelief among both the public and political elite. The political discourse in Arab countries changed from expressing solidarity with the Palestinians to emphasizing liberation of territories lost to Israel in the war, and in Egypt, the ideas of pan-Arabism began to fade.

Conversely, the 1973 War, (henceforth: the October War) while not directly resulting in the change of borders, was celebrated as a great victory and served to restore Arab dignity. In Israel, the public was outraged and shocked by the seeming incompetence of the country's political and military leadership, which did not survive the war.

Why were the outcomes of these wars so vastly different? And how did they affect the Arab regional order? In this essay I argue that the different outcomes were largely due to a combination of preparedness, initiative, superpower involvement and diplomatic maneuverability, military capabilities, and intelligence failures. I further argue that the June War and the rise of Anwar Sadat to power caused disunity in the Arab world, greatly diminished the appeal of pan-Arabism and increased Islamist ideas in the region, while the October War paved the way for a peace agreement with Israel.

In this essay I will analyse the outcome of each war, its impact on the Arab world, and then examine the causes for the different outcomes.

The outcome of the June War

Following a series of Egyptian moves, which Jerusalem interpreted as bellicose, the political and military leadership in Israel abandoned the notion that war was not on the horizon and prepared for war.[1] The combination of Egyptian rhetoric coupled with the expulsion of the UN observer force on the border between Egypt and Israel and the mass mobilization of Egyptian troops into the Sinai made Israel change its perception. When on May 23rd, 1967, Nasser declared the Straits of Tiran blocked to any ship sailing to or from Israel, Jerusalem decided that war was unavoidable, and two weeks later the plan to use the air-force in a pre-emptive strike was settled upon.[2]

The pre-emptive strike, in which Israeli fighter jets bombed Egyptian planes still on the ground, proved decisive in the war as Israel destroyed the bulk of the Egyptian air force and enjoyed air superiority in the ensuing battles. Within six days, the Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian, and Iraqi forces were decidedly defeated.

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Collectively, the Arab nations' fatalities numbered somewhere between 11.050 and 16.050, with Egypt suffering the bulk. In comparison, Israel lost an estimated 800 combatants, making the casualty rate stand at 25:1 in Israel's favour.[3]

The main outcome of the war, however, was the Israeli seizure of previously Arab-controlled territories. From Egypt, Israel seized the Sinai desert, from Syria the Golan Heights, and in Jordan, King Hussein probably suffered most devastating loss by losing the West Bank and East Jerusalem. These conquests added 42.000 square miles to Israeli controlled territory and with it came significant strategic depth.[4]

In Israel, following the sweeping victory, euphoria reigned. At a gathering in Lod, Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister, told the audience: "From the podium in the UN, I proclaimed the glorious triumph of the IDF and the redemption of Jerusalem".[5]

On the back of the sentiments of total victory, a new concept was born in the minds of Israel's political and military leadership. *Ha Konzeptzia*, simply meaning 'the concept', was a combination of assumptions, on which Israel built its strategic predictions on vis-à-vis its neighbours following the June War. The essence of the concept was that the Arabs had neither intention nor capability to launch a war against Israel in the short and medium term. It rested on three main assumptions: 1) The devastating Arab defeat in 1967 and Israel's continued control of occupied territories, which ensured strategic depth, gave Israel significant military advantages and the Arab states realized this. 2) Syria on its own would not risk a war with Israel. 3) Egypt would not consider war as long as it was inferior in the air, in terms of both planes and anti-aircraft defences.[6]

In short, the Israelis felt safe and confident war would not erupt any time soon.

The impact of the 1967 War on the Arab regional order

While the Israelis were basking in the glory of their victory, Arabs throughout the region were in a state of shock and sorrow. [7]

On the morning after the war's end, Arab novelist and Nobel Prize laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, expressed common-held sentiments: "Never before or after in my life had I ever experienced such a shattering of consciousness as I felt at that moment." [8]

From the grief and humiliation of the June War arose Palestinian guerrilla fighters, the *fedayeen*. Carrying out scores of cross-border attacks on Israeli targets, the Palestinian *fedayeen* "reaped a harvest of hero-worship from a wide spectrum of Arab public opinion." [9] As the Arab states lied battered and bruised after the defeat, the Palestinian militants were the ones restoring Arab honour. Given the immense popularity of the *fedayeen*, Arab leaders had little choice but to support in order to appease domestic pressure. While before the war, the very same leaders had been busy restricting the *fedayeen*, after the war they competed over who could provide the most support.[10]

However, in the aftermath of the June War a paradox arose. While the Arab governments were now supportive of the Palestinian guerrillas – offering funds or bases – the two sides had, in fact, split.[11] The discourse on the struggle against Israel from the governmental side had changed from emphasizing the liberation of Palestine and destroying the Jewish state, to liberating the territories lost in the war. The governments and the guerrillas now overtly pursued different goals. A week prior to the outbreak of the June War, in a speech to the Egyptian National Assembly, Nasser asserted:

"The issue now at hand is not the Gulf of Aqaba, the Straits of Tiran, or the withdrawal of the UNEF, but the rights of the Palestine people.... It is the aggression, which took place in Palestine in 1948... It is the expulsion of the Arabs from Palestine, the usurpation of their rights, and the plunder of their property....[12]"

In a similar speech, three days prior, Nasser said that '[t]he battle will be a general one and our basic objective will be to destroy Israel'. [13] Yet subsequent to the war, Nasser dedicated his speeches to focus on the need to liberate

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Egyptian and other Arab lands occupied in the June War. These sentiments would be echoed when Anwar Sadat took over in 1970, following Nasser's sudden death.[14][15]

Egypt was not alone in its pursuit of recapturing lost lands. For Jordan, too, the primary objective became the reclamation of its territories. In the Arab world, they enjoyed the support of Cairo-friendly governments such as the ones in Iraq and Sudan. Common for this group of states was that they accepted a political solution to the problem, involving recognising Israel and concluding a peace agreement.[16]

Another group, comprising of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya (until 1969, when newly instated Muammar Qaddafi realigned with Egypt) was mainly interested in continued oil export revenues and thus in maintaining ties with the unpopular West. Simultaneously, they had to prevent isolation from the rest of the Arab world, and opted for a compromise entailing financial support for Jordan and Egypt, while concurrently voicing opposition to any political solution to the problem. The financial aid would ensure good relations with main Arab protagonists, while the opposition to a political solution served to deflect criticism from radicals on the Palestine issue.[17] A third group of Arab states – Syria, Algeria, and Iraq (following the Ba'ath coup of July 1968) vehemently and publicly opposed any non-military solution to the Palestine issue.[18]

Arab disunity, which the 1967 War had prompted, or perhaps illuminated, would be further exacerbated. As Anwar Sadat took power in Egypt following Nasser's death in 1970, the new leader began steering Egypt in a markedly different direction. Pan-Arabism, although weakened by the Arab 1967 defeat, yet 'remained a force among the Arab masses', was put under further pressure by Sadat. [19]

Domestically as well as with his Arab counterparts, Sadat, in a series of 'Egypt-first' moves, largely ousted pan-Arabism as a central part of government policy and Egyptian public life.[20] In relations with Egyptian Arab allies, such as Syria, Sadat planned to abandon them on the battlefield, declaring that 'Syria deceived us in 1967. Why should I not deceive them now?'[21]

In the domestic sphere, Sadat consolidated his power by removing the Nasserists of the inner circle and imprisoning them on conspiracy charges. He released leading members of the previously oppressed Muslim Brotherhood, and empowered Islamist groups in universities while cracking down on Nasserist and leftist groups. Since no significant rival ideology existed at the time, Sadat needed to fill the void that Nasser and his pan-Arabism had left behind, and sought to replace it with an Egyptian pan-Islamist agenda. Gradually, it took hold of Egyptian society and with the help of Saudi-Arabia began to spread throughout the region.[22]

In short, the June War resulted in an enlarged and emboldened Israel, feeling invincible. The Arab world was left humiliated, defeated, and disunited. The war itself had created a split between the Palestinian cause and the primary objectives of the Arab governments, while the rise of Sadat caused pan-Arabism to gradually diminish in importance in Egypt and the Middle East.

The outcome of the October War

Embittered by the crushing defeat of 1967 and longing for the return of their lands, Egypt and Syria contemplated war anew. Unable to reach a political solution with Israel and incapable of pushing Washington to force an Israeli withdrawal, Sadat – alongside the Syrian Hafez al-Assad-led government- opted to go to war to liberate lost lands. On the late afternoon of Oct 6th, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a simultaneous surprise attack on Israel. Not just any day in the calendar, it was the day Yom Kippur, the most solemn day in Judaism, and the one day in Israel a year, in which the entire nation shuts down. The Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal and cruised through the scarcely manned Bar-Lev line, while the Syrians tried to capture the Golan Heights. The Arab armies inflicted heavy losses on the Israelis before the tide of war shifted and Israel pushed the Arab armies back. In total, Israel lost 2,800 men, while the Arabs lost an estimated 15,000.[23][24]

Relative to Israel's small population of only 3 million, this was an unbearable number of casualties.[25] The war didn't result in significant changes in territorial control, and the Israeli army could have marched on the Arab capitals in its

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final phases. Still, the war was perceived as a great defeat in the minds of the Israeli public.

The Israeli people was in a state of shock, similar to that of the Arab world post-1967, and comparisons between the October War and the Holocaust were common in the ensuing period.[26] From public demands of scrutiny emerged the Agranat Commission. Shortly after, first military, then political leadership was replaced.[27]

The Impact of the 1973 War on the Arab regional order

In Egypt, the war, which was celebrated as a 'divine victory' erased the shameful memory of the 1967 defeat and reinstated the nation's 'pride, self-respect, and honour'.[28] [29] The end of the war, however, created rifts between Syria and Egypt, and to some extent also between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. When on October 22, Sadat had accepted a cease-fire, he had done so unilaterally and despite strong Syrian opposition.[30] The Saudis, too, felt betrayed. They had donated 400 million dollars to the war effort and expected 'a lengthy and substantial war in return'. Furthermore, they perceived the war as just one battle in an on-going military encounter.[31]

When Sadat accepted Kissinger's plan in 1975 – in which the Israelis would withdraw from the Suez Canal in return for Egyptian renunciation of use of force – it became apparent that Egypt had abandoned ideals of Arab consensus and were pursuing their own self-interests, with little regard for Arab unity or the Palestinian cause.[32] Two years later, without consulting any Arab counterparts, Sadat went to Jerusalem and announced that Egypt was ready for peace with Israel.[33] His move had 'stunned Arabs into doleful disbelief', and when Sadat signed the peace agreement in 1979, Arab condemnation of Egypt's action was 'universal.' Egypt was expelled from the Arab League and moved from the centre of the Arab world to its outer-most periphery.[34] Whether appalled by the peace-deal or just the unilateral actions of Egypt, the Arab world was united in dismissing it, and Egypt now stood alone.

In short, the October War restored Arab and in particular Egyptian honour, and paved the way for Sadat's peace-agreement with Israel. If significant before the war, Arab disunity was now total, except for the collective condemnation of Egypt's actions. In Israel, the war had left the people in a state of shock and anger. It ultimately brought about the sacking of Israel's military and political leadership, and the introduction of its first right-wing government.

What caused different outcomes?

A host of reasons caused the different outcomes of the two wars. I suggest that the main causes were a combination of intelligence failures, battlefield strategy and the lack of information, superpower involvement, and to some degree, a change in strategic partnerships.

On the issue of the June War, the main question to answer is why Israel defeated the Arab armies with such relative ease. I believe that the main answers are time, preparation, and diplomatic maneuverability. As described earlier, Nasser had gradually convinced the Israelis that Egypt was gunning for war. This left Israeli ample time to come up with a plan and more importantly; it meant that Israel could take the initiative. Nasser was pressured by the Soviets to refrain from firing the first shot, while the Israelis felt they had received a green light from the Americans, or at least not a red.[35] As Dinstein notes, whether or not Egypt actually intended to launch a war, Israel had enough reason to go to war without being labelled the aggressor, which the muted reactions of the international community after the war clearly demonstrated.[36] Israel thus had plenty of space to maneuver, as there were no objections from the Americans, there was sufficient Egyptian belligerency to claim self-defence, and the Soviets continued holding Cairo back from firing first. Israel could choose the time and the place for war.

On the battlefield level, military strategists point to the fact that Israel had better trained pilots and better aircraft.[37] These advantages obviously help a great deal, but in this case I believe that Israel's ability to stick to the pillars of its security doctrine – preemption, offensive wars, fighting on enemy territory- was key.[38] Acknowledging the competent Israeli military, however, is only half of the story. The blunders of the Egyptian army comprise the other half: on the day of the Israeli attack, the Egyptians had –unbeknownst to Jerusalem – turned off their radars. When the Jordanians noticed the Israeli aircraft en route to Egypt, a warning was sent to the Egyptians. But the warning

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was never understood in Cairo. The previous day, the Egyptians had changed their codes without informing the Jordanians, and when Jordan sent the message 'inab' (Arabic: grape) – meaning attack is incoming – the Egyptians could not decipher it.[39]

On the battlefield, the Israelis were successful because they stuck to their security doctrine, invented and brilliantly executed a solid plan, however, the unfathomable incompetence of the Egyptians certainly played a part in their own defeat. Politically, superpower patrons were tipping the scale in Israel's favour, as the Soviets pressured Cairo to hold the fire while the Americans did not object to Israeli preemption. On the issue of the October War, why were the Arabs, most notably Egypt, more successful this time around?

In this case, the combination of skillful Egyptian deception tactics, Israeli intelligence failures, lack of military information, and changes in Israel's strategic relationships determined the outcome. The Egyptian activities aimed at deceiving Israel's intelligence apparatus were many and multifaceted. In the longer term, the Egyptians used the tool of mass mobilizations to force the Israelis to either mobilize or to let a potent threat in the Sinai remain unchecked. The first couple of times, the Israelis chose to mobilize their reserves. In April 1973, six months before the war, Israel mobilized its reserves in the face of mass Egyptian troop deployment in the Sinai. Nothing happened and the Israeli soldiers were sent home in August. The operation had cost Israel a 'fortune' and was widely criticized, thus making future mobilizations politically difficult.[40] Having secured unchecked mobilization, the Egyptians made several efforts to fool the Israelis in the days leading up to the war. Sadat left a Non-Aligned conference in Algeria, supposedly returning to Egypt because of acute illness. Cairo even initiated a search for a suitable house for Sadat in Europe where he could receive medical treatment in order to add credibility to the story. Other stories conveyed the message that Egypt was having troubles with malfunctioning Soviet weapons, so as to imply unpreparedness for war. Finally, it was declared the 20.000 Egyptian troops in the Sinai were to be demobilized and granted permission to perform a Hajj.[41]

On the Israeli side, blind faith in the previously described 'concept', coupled with complete trust in an Egyptian double agent, who was actively deceiving Israel, accounted for a large part of the Israeli unpreparedness.[42] Not even the warnings of Jordan's King Hussein could convince Israel to rethink its position.[43] The sudden Soviet evacuation of its ambassadors in Cairo and Damascus should have been the final wake-up call for Israeli.[44]

It should be noted that all Israeli defensive plans were dependent upon an expected 48-hour warning from the intelligence services, which would be sufficient to prepare weapons, forces and military installments for war.[45] This meant the intelligence failures were even more crucial in Israel's initial troubles during the war.

Adding insult to injury, the Israelis were unaware of the capabilities of the Egyptian missile defences. The War of Attrition, 1968-1970, had made it clear that the Israeli air force could still easily penetrate Egyptian airspace and maneuver with impunity. When the war ended because of superpower intervention, the Soviets had just supplied Egypt with SA-3 anti-aircraft defences. The Israeli Mirage fighters, who had easily overcome the SA-2's did not get to test their strength against the new Soviet invention.[46] When war erupted in 1973, Israeli fighter jets were unable to penetrate the Egyptian missile umbrella, making Egyptian forces largely invulnerable. Under pressure from Moscow and Damascus, the Egyptians eventually penetrated too deep into the Sinai and only at this point were the Israelis able to fight back effectively.

Strategically, Israel had lost its alliance with France, its hitherto biggest military supplier, following the June War.[47] This meant Israel relied totally on US military support. Contrary to 1967, this time the Americans were adamantly against a preemptive strike. Recently declassified documents suggest that Israel knew war was coming on the morning of the Egyptian attack, and that Jerusalem had asked Washington for permission to attack.[48] Henry Kissinger informed the Israelis that they 'wouldn't get as much as a nail' if they preempted.[49] It then seems that Israel opted to absorb the first blow in an effort to ensure steady flows of American weapons and ammunition during the war.

In short, Egypt won as a result of immense Egyptian deception-efforts, awesome Israeli intelligence failures, increased Egyptian defensive capabilities, and Israel's reliance on the Americans, who would not permit preemption.

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Contention

The causes, events, and outcomes of the two infamous Israeli-Arab wars are all, to some extent subject to scholarly disagreements, much like questions regarding the impact of the wars on the Arab world in the time-span between 1967-1979. Within this framework I cannot engage with all of them, but some should be acknowledged.

In this essay, I suggested that Israel was the loser of the October War. Others, such as Chaim Herzog labelled the war 'Israel's most impressive military victory in Israeli history'.^[50] While Israel did turn the war around militarily, politically, it was a great defeat and the ousting of all military and political leaders in the aftermath indicates that Israel was perceived as the loser.

On another issue, I argued that Sadat's ways were significantly different from those of Nasser. Ibrahim Karawan disagrees, noting that 'both Sadat and Nasser before him acted on the basis of the primacy of Egypt's national interest...'^[51]

While this might be true, Nasser's decision to enter into a union with Syria and to support revolutionary forces in Yemen with Egyptian troops, compared with Sadat's open and vocal Egypt-first policy and his unilateral peace with Israel, supports the idea that Sadat's policies were radically different from Nasser's.^[52]

Conclusion

Both wars had a huge impact on the Middle East as a whole and in particular on the Arab regional order. The June War changed the Middle Eastern map and made Israel drunk with military success. In the Arab world, it was perceived as a great humiliation, one that caused Arab disunity in the approach to Israel. Exacerbated by Sadat's rise to power, the defeat resulted in a markedly diminished appeal of pan-Arabism and the blossoming of Islamism. It furthermore caused a split between the Palestinian cause and the primary objectives of the Arab governments involved in the war.

The October War restored Egypt's dignity and paved the way for a peace agreement with Israel, which caused the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab world. The different outcomes of the two wars were a result of several main causes. Israel won the June war because it enjoyed greater diplomatic maneuverability, superior strategy, planning and intelligence, and because of tremendous Egyptian incompetence. Egypt won the October War because of skillful deception, initiative, increased defensive capabilities, and because of unbounded Israeli intelligence failures.

From these findings, it seems the victorious party in each war had time to prepare, was taking the initiative (i.e. firing first) and enjoyed a better or at least not poorer position vis-à-vis its superpower patron, than the other party.

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Written by: David Sousa
Written at: King's College London
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