

# The Israeli “Nuclear Alert” of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis

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## Executive Summary

On the afternoon of October 6, 1973, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the armies of Egypt and Syria launched major assaults against Israeli positions along the Suez Canal and in the Golan Heights. Within a day, Arab armies had seized the east bank of the Canal and substantial territory in the Heights, and had repelled Israeli air and ground counterattacks. The mood in the Israeli high command was dark, and in some places almost apocalyptic. Moshe Dayan, defense minister and national hero, went so far as to suggest that the very existence of Israel – “the third Temple” – could be in jeopardy.

It has long been rumored that in this desperate context Israel alerted or somehow manipulated its nuclear forces – perhaps in order to “blackmail” the United States into providing greater support, as one American journalist alleges, or to deter further Arab assault. If true, this would constitute one of the very few serious nuclear “threats” of the nuclear era. This in and of itself makes it a topic of enduring interest. But in light of the continued and perhaps growing salience of nuclear weapons – and thus also their political “uses”– in the hands of U.S. adversaries as well as allies and partners, this study is of more than antiquarian interest because, in concert with other examples drawn from crises and conflicts, it helps elucidate how nuclear weapons can affect and influence the course of politics and war.

Yet there has never been a serious, in-depth study of this incident that has had access not only to key participants (both American and Israeli) and open sources, but also to the tremendous store of U.S. Government documents pertaining to the Yom Kippur War. This study is the first of this kind on this incident and represents the results of almost a year of extensive research in U.S. Government archives and in the open literature, numerous interviews with participants and experts, and the convocation of a workshop to discuss the issue.

After this exhaustive review, our conclusion is that Israel likely did take some steps associated with the readying of its nuclear weapons and/or nuclear weapons delivery forces in the very early stages of the Yom Kippur War, but that these steps were defensive or precautionary in nature and were not designed to send a signal to the United States, the Arabs, or anyone else. We assess that it is also very likely that the United States did observe this activity and that the report of the activity was disseminated to key decision-makers – but that the report did not have any significant impact on U.S. decision-making. Rather, U.S. (and likely all nations’) decision-makers were aware of the possibility of Israeli nuclear use as an implicit reality, but they judged that it was only plausible *in extremis*, and American leaders did not believe the situation, even in the dark hours of October 7, had reached those depths.

We also assess that there was pressure within the Israeli defense establishment to consider preparation for nuclear use, however, particularly by Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. We judge that it is likely that Dayan suggested that the Israeli supreme war cabinet (led by Prime Minister Golda Meir) consider the more substantial readying of Israel’s nuclear forces for a possible “demonstration” usage on or about October 7 – but that Meir and the other participants in the meeting rebuffed Dayan’s proposal, and that no action was taken in accordance with it. That said, we believe it is possible that Dayan might have taken some minor actions with respect to Israel’s nuclear forces on his own initiative, but we do not have the evidence to make a firm assessment on this point.

While caution is always in order when generalizing from a single case study, this case does illuminate several points of relevance to the role of nuclear weapons in international politics and conflict.

- *The perceptual significance of nuclear operations:* Contrary to a substantial body of literature that asserts that the manipulation of nuclear weapons and their associated forces in a crisis or conflict by one side is almost certain to be highly destabilizing, this case suggests that such manipulation will not *necessarily* be seen by other parties as escalatory. In this case, Israel appears to have taken preliminary precautionary steps to protect or prepare its nuclear weapons and/or related forces without causing the United States or, to our knowledge, the Soviet

Union or the Arabs to view this as a major or even particularly significant step. This provides evidence for the intuitive proposition that manipulating one's nuclear forces need not be seen as destabilizing or escalatory, especially if such actions seem to be natural reactions to a changed strategic environment. In the U.S. context, this should suggest charting a middle course between oblivious or overactive manipulation of nuclear forces in a crisis on the one hand and a too-great reluctance to do anything at all on the other. In other words, decision-makers should avoid actions that they have reasonable basis for thinking others would regard as escalatory. At the same time, they should not overestimate the probability that other nations will interpret U.S. steps that are designed to increase the survivability or basic functioning of U.S. nuclear forces as destabilizing or escalatory. In short: the context and *type* of activity matter.

- *Bureaucratic and organizational factors in nuclear signaling:* It appears plausible that Israel's steps to modify the alert status of its nuclear forces were taken on the initiative of officials (most likely Dayan) who were below the highest authoritative level of Israeli state decision-making. This lends strength to a well-established point: action that might appear to be the product of deliberate, coordinated state action can in some cases be more accurately interpreted as the result of actions by segments of a government rather than of the whole state itself. Nuclear "signals" might, then, be the product of certain organizations or coalitions within governments and might not reflect (or might reflect imperfectly) the policy of the state as a whole. This is especially the case with signals that employ capabilities that can be manipulated without the consent or knowledge of the highest political echelons, notably including nuclear delivery forces. Care must therefore be taken when attempting to draw inferences about state intent from such signals (or possible signals).
- *How necessary or significant are signals?* Nuclear theorists and historians tend to focus on concrete (or purportedly concrete) instances of nuclear signaling. But this case suggests that the way in which nuclear weapons influence conflict —and international politics more broadly —is not likely to be substantially af-

fectured by attempts at signaling through manipulation of forces so long as the participants are reasonably cognizant of each other's capabilities and genuine red lines and avoid transgressing the latter.. Nuclear weapons cast a long shadow, and thus, their influence is likely to be continuously factored into strategic decisions rather than neglected in such a way that signals are necessary to remind decision-makers of their salience. In today's context, for instance, Israel might manipulate its nuclear forces in a way observable to the United States in order to try to induce U.S. action against Iran, but it is not clear why such manipulation (absent credible steps towards real employment) would tell the United States anything dramatically new about Israel's calculus and therefore why it should materially affect Washington's own calculus of how to act. Of course the point should not be carried too far. Decision-makers can be ignorant, get carried away, lose focus in the fog of war, or simply make poor decisions, in which case signals can play an important role in reinforcing the importance of others states' nuclear forces in strategic calculations. That said, nuclear weapons' long shadow is unlikely to be forgotten.



## The Study

Rumors of an Israeli nuclear alert in the early days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War have circulated for decades, even making their way into popular culture. The alleged alert has also informed more serious discussions about the use of nuclear weapon during international crises, and one celebrated journalist has gone so far as to assert that the Israelis used the alert to blackmail the United States to intervene aggressively in the war on Israel's side. But did the alert really happen?<sup>1</sup>

In early 2012, CNA received a project award from the Naval Postgraduate School's Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering WMD (PASCC) to investigate the truth of the reports concerning the alleged alert. PASCC is funded by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA).<sup>2</sup> The study was to follow a similar CNA

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1. This paper focuses on the Israeli alert alleged to have taken place in the early days of the war. It does not focus on a separate incident that is reported to have taken place on or about October 17, 1973, connected to the Egyptian deployment in the Sinai of Scud missiles, which Israel (and the United States) feared might be armed with nuclear warheads. According to knowledgeable and credible sources, in response IDF Chief of Staff General Elazar ordered the deployment of an Israeli missile battery in an uncamouflaged fashion in such a way that Soviet satellites would be likely to detect the deployment and assume that such missiles were nuclear-capable. Yuval Ne'eman, in Michael O. Wheeler and Kemper V. Gay, eds., *Nuclear Weapons and the 1973 Middle East War*, Center for National Security Negotiations Occasional Paper, August 1996, 15.
  2. CNA is a non-governmental federally-funded research and development center and therefore does not speak on behalf of the U.S. Government. The assessments and views laid out in this paper therefore should not be construed as reflecting assessments or views of the U.S. Government.

study for DTRA on the nuclear elements of the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969.<sup>3</sup> Our questions were to include the following:

- Did Israel alert or otherwise change the status of its nuclear forces in the early stages of the Yom Kippur War, when Israel was facing serious – and to some Israelis dramatic – setbacks on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts?
- If Israel did change the status of its nuclear forces, how did it do so and what were its objectives? Who made the decision to do so and why?
- Which countries, and who within those countries, observed any change of status to Israel’s nuclear forces?

To answer these questions, we exploited newly available and otherwise untapped sources on the war, which we have weighed and synthesized in the first in-depth study of its kind. We conclude our study by reflecting on the policy implications of our findings to guide future decision-making during crises involving nuclear-armed states. The continuing danger —and perhaps likelihood —of proliferation of nuclear weapons and conflict or crisis between nuclear-armed states ensure the study’s enduring relevance.

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3. Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2010).

## The Background to the War

The Yom Kippur War was perhaps the most intense crisis in the history of Israel after the War of Independence. In June 1967, the Israeli Defense Forces handily defeated the armies of the combined Arab powers on three separate fronts and conquered large and strategically significant territories in the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights that provided substantial additional buffers for “green-line” Israel. So dramatic and lopsided was this victory, and so effective did the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) seem to be in relation to their Arab opponents in the Six Day War and the following War of Attrition, that most people in Israel and in Western capitals believed that Israel was so superior to the Arabs that the latter would not seriously contemplate war against Israel again for some time.

In large part based on this perceived preponderance of military power, the Israeli political leadership viewed political engagement with the Arabs over the occupied territories and other issues as unnecessary.<sup>4</sup> Israel’s assessment of the military balance indicated that Egypt and Syria could not challenge Israel. Moreover, despite Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat’s interest in changing the status quo, many Israeli leaders were deeply skeptical of Arab interest in serious political negotiations, an assessment fortified by the Arab side’s adversarial and confrontational public posture, exemplified for instance in the “three no’s” to peace with, recognition of, or negotiations with Israel issued by the Arab League following the 1967 War.

As Yigal Kipnis, a leading expert on Israeli decision-making of the era, describes the situation:

Decision makers in Israel [thought] that their military superiority and deterrence, along with the political support of the United States, would prevent a political process, which

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4. Yigal Kipnis presentation at CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

they did not want. The Israeli Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense [believed] that political considerations would prevent Sadat from starting a war and that he would wait for a political process to begin a month later, after the Israeli elections. [They also based this view] on the assertion by the heads of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) that, if an attack did take place, the standing army [that is, the army without the reinforcements that would be provided by the calling up of reservists] could bring it to a halt and that the IDF, without any great effort, could transfer the fighting to the other side of the Suez Canal or deep into Syrian territory.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, some have observed that a certain hubris or braggadocio had developed among influential parts of the Israeli leadership during the period of “national euphoria” following the Six Day War.<sup>6</sup>

Yet by 1973 several developments had undermined the grounds for this strategic assessment. Most importantly, Anwar Sadat had replaced Gamel Abdul Nasser as premier of Egypt. Sadat regarded Nasser’s policy of aggressive pan-Arab nationalism, inveterate hostility to Israel’s existence, and cooperation with the Soviet Union as having failed. Seeing Nasser’s catastrophic defeat in 1967 and his inability to reclaim Egypt’s lost territory through the War of Attrition, Sadat by 1973 was resolved to chart a new course to restore Egypt’s lost territories and improve Cairo’s political and strategic situation.

Sadat therefore came to the conclusion that Egypt needed fundamentally to alter its strategic position and the regional political status quo, but that it could do so only if it first recovered the national prestige lost in the ignominy of 1967. That way, Sadat’s moves would appear to proceed from strength rather than weakness,

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5. Yigal Kipnis, “1973: The Road to War,” unpublished manuscript. Kipnis’ forthcoming book is based on extensive research into the Israeli official archives, including newly declassified documents.

6. See, for instance, Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and its Sources* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2005), 43. As Bar-Joseph described, “The post-1967 period was also characterized by an atmosphere of boastfulness and the belief in brute force as the sole means to solve Israel’s security problems...It also influenced the way Israeli generals mistakenly calculated the necessary balance of forces at the frontline during the opening stage once [the war] started in October 1973.”

and Israel and the United States would be compelled to engage politically with him. As Sadat himself reported in his memoirs, “It was impossible...for the United States...to make a move if we ourselves didn’t take military action to break the deadlock. The drift of what Kissinger said...was that the United States regrettably could do nothing to help so long as we were the defeated party and Israel maintained her superiority.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Egypt would have to show some kind of military achievement over Israel, demonstrating Egypt’s strength.<sup>8</sup> Sadat concluded that a limited war designed to bloody

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7. *Anwar al-Sadat, In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977) at 238. See also 244, 255. For Sadat’s shift of course from Nasser’s policies, see 210-3. For Sadat’s reasons for moving away from the Soviets, see 230-1. Sadat laid his approach out openly to *Newsweek* journalist Arnaud de Borchgrave before the beginning of the war: “The time has come for a shock...America has left us no other way out. The resumption of the hostilities is the only way out.” Arnaud de Borchgrave, “Next, a ‘Shock’ by Sadat?” *Newsweek*, April 23, 1973. Sadat expected the conflict to resemble the Tet Offensive in Vietnam – a military defeat but a political victory. Email from Arnaud de Borchgrave, February 2008 (relating an off-the-record interview of March 26, 1973), on file with the author. See also Mohammed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (London: Collins, 1978), chapter 15; Abdel Ghani Gamasy, *The October War: Memoirs of Field Marshal Gamasy of Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1993), 144 and 174-8; and Yair Evron, “Nuclear Options in Conventional Wars,” *7 Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 1 (1984), 158-9, basing his assessment on classified Egyptian military documents captured by Israeli forces and printed in the Israeli Defense Forces’ journal. According to Evron, these documents revealed that Egyptian objectives were “a change in the political status quo, and the shattering of the Israeli strategic doctrine...limited and primarily political” (158-9). See also Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1982), who records that “Sadat fought a war not to acquire territory but to restore Egypt’s self-respect and thereby increase its diplomatic flexibility” (460). For elaborations of Sadat’s strategy, see the book by his advisor, Mohammed Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York, Quadrangle: 1975), 206 and 257-61.
8. De Borchgrave, “Next, a ‘Shock’ by Sadat?” email from de Borchgrave (February 2008); and de Borchgrave’s comments at CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

Israel and augment Egypt's credibility made sense.<sup>9</sup> The war would therefore be a tailored one designed to shake up the strategic situation, not a war of conquest.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Sadat's advisor Mohammed Heikal somewhat grandiosely described the war as "perhaps the first true example of a limited war – a war deliberately limited in its objectives and in its duration."<sup>11</sup>

Egypt's security archives from the period are inaccessible, so we do not know how Israel's stockpile of nuclear weapons shaped Sadat's strategic calculations. Sadat, like his predecessor Nasser, had publicly acknowledged the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons prior to the war, and, though Sadat had asserted that Egypt's biological weapons were an effective deterrent against them, it seems reasonable to assess that Israel's nuclear capability played a role in limiting his war aims.<sup>12</sup> Sadat himself gave reason to think this, reportedly telling Israeli Defense Minister Ezer Weizman in 1977 that he had never intended to penetrate deeper into the Sinai because "he knew what Israel had,"

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9. For the Arab calculus for limiting war, see Shlomo Aronson, *Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 178-9; Shlomo Aronson, *The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: Opacity, Theory, and Reality, 1960-1991* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 144-145 (citing in particular discussions with William Quandt). See also Yair Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 72-5. As Sadat himself put it: "I knew my capabilities. I did not intend to fight the United States of America." Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 261. According to Aronson, President Nixon explicitly warned Arab ambassadors several days after October 6 that "the Arabs should under no circumstances violate the pre-1967 lines." Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, 232-4.

10. This view of the war as deliberately limited is widely accepted. For a review of the literature, see Shlomo Aronson, "The Nuclear Dimension of the Arab-Israeli Conflict," 7 *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 1 (1984), 116-7.

11. Mohammed Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, 257. See also Mohammed Heikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 180-2.

12. Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* (May 2007).

presumably referring to Israel's nuclear weapons capability.<sup>13</sup> That said, in planning for the war, Sadat likely did not pay significant attention to the role of Israel's nuclear weapons, likely believing that the Israelis would not use their nuclear weapons unless an invader threatened the state's existence; since he only sought to recapture territory Israel had taken from Egypt in the 1967 war, Sadat probably judged that Israel's nuclear weapons would not play a major active role in the war. The more immediate worry for Sadat was Israel's potent conventional military capabilities and the prospect of American resupply and even intervention.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, during the course of 1973, Sadat brought Syria's leader Hafez al-Assad into the endeavor. Syria's interests were partially aligned with Egypt's, though more straightforward. It hoped to win prestige and recover the Golan Heights lost to Israel in 1967, also

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13. Amir Oren, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013 and Avner Cohen conversation with Ezer Weizman.

14. For an analysis of how the Israeli nuclear capability might have shaped Arab calculations and how these related to the salience of other factors such as Israeli conventional capabilities and the possibility of superpower intervention, see Aronson, *Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East*, 178-179. Aronson argues: "[Arab] preplanning might have been influenced, among other things, by the fear that the pre-1967 lines were guarded by a nuclear threat and the other side might panic and be driven to materialize his nuclear capacity, especially if Israeli civilian settlements, cities, and communications were to suffer. The Israelis had taught the Arabs over twenty-five years that even small-scale Arab attacks on centers of Jewish population were bound to bring a violent reaction. Instead of triggering such a reaction, Syria and Egypt preferred to battle with Israel on the margin of the occupied territories, conventionally, drawing much blood from the Israeli army." For a different view, arguing that the Israeli nuclear capability did *not* have a significant impact on Arab planning, see Evron, *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*, 72-73. Evron argues that the nuclear issue was not introduced into Sadat's calculations because Sadat did not expect under any circumstances that Egypt could achieve anything beyond a limited objective, namely taking the Suez Canal and seizing a land strip no further than the passes (Mitla and Gidi) some 30-40 kilometers east of the canal.

through a combined military-political campaign. Its goals and methods were also limited.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to these political developments pointed towards war, the military balance was changing in a way making Arab ambitions more realistic, particularly with respect to the kind of war that the Arabs were planning to fight. Burned by Israel's dominance in 1967, both the Egyptians and Syrians procured advanced Soviet weaponry, especially air defense and anti-tank capabilities aimed at undermining the Israeli air and tank superiority that had proved so central to Israel's victory in 1967. Indeed, by the early 1970s Egypt and Syria boasted the world's densest networks of SA-2, SA-3, and, most importantly, cutting-edge SA-6 Soviet surface-to-air missile batteries, a capability the Arabs had not enjoyed in the 1967 war. They also integrated modern Soviet bloc anti-tank weapons, including the SAM-7 shoulder-fired missile, the RPG-7 rocket launcher, and the AT-3 Sagger wire-guided missile.<sup>16</sup> The significance of the integration of these capabilities escaped the notice of or were discounted by Israeli intelligence while offering the Arabs the promise of degrading Israel's crucial edge in air and armored warfare.<sup>17</sup>

In line with their limited objectives, the Arab armies prepared tailored campaigns aimed at maximizing their own strengths and exploiting Israeli weaknesses, and exhaustively practiced for the assaults, especially in Egypt. In the south, the Egyptian Army would assault, seize, and hold the Bar-Lev Line that Israel had built on the east bank of the Suez Canal through a carefully planned and

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15. Evron, "Nuclear Options in Conventional Wars," 163-4, and Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 24-7. Indeed, Evron points out that Syria's objectives were so limited that Assad on October 6, the day the Arabs began the war, asked the Soviet Union to ask for a ceasefire just two days later. Henry Kissinger recorded that Syria "fought for more conventional and literal objectives: It simply wanted to regain occupied territory and at a minimum to inflict casualties on Israel." Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 460.

16. Simon Dunstan, *The Yom Kippur War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), 27.

17. Amir Oren, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.



coordinated attack using makeshift bridges, commandos, and infantry and armored units. On the Israeli side, the Bar-Lev Line of fortifications, located at the western edge of the Sinai Peninsula and thus distant from Israel proper, was manned by a modest cadre of reservists.<sup>18</sup> In the north, the Syrian Army planned to launch a surprise assault involving three infantry and two armored divisions preceded by a short but intense artillery assault. The concentrated mass of Syrian forces would break through the Israeli lines on the Golan Heights before Israel could mobilize its reserve forces, and then seize the Golan and reach the Jordan River. Syrian forces were ordered not to advance farther than these objectives without further authorization from the Syrian high command.<sup>19</sup>

Sadat had telegraphed and indeed explicitly sought to communicate shortly before the war started in October that his war aims were limited.<sup>20</sup> But neither the Arabs' specific plans for war on October 6, nor, crucially, the constraints on their war aims were clearly and confidently known to the Israeli leadership before war broke out.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War*, 27-29 and 59.

19. *Ibid.*, 121-123.

20. Heikal reports that Sadat, through an intermediary, sent a message to Washington on October 5, "and hence Golda Meir, that Egypt had limited objectives and was not seeking to retake the whole of the Sinai desert by force..." Sadat's message also stated that Egypt was prepared to negotiate in earnest on a range of key issues if Israel withdrew from its occupied territories." Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, 182. See also Gamasy, *October War*, 134-5. Gamasy actually specified that "only conventional weapons would be used" (134). William Quandt reported that Washington received a backchannel message from Sadat, although possibly after the outbreak of war, that explained that he did not intend to take over Israel but rather sought to break the intolerable political impasse in the region.

21. Israel did eventually obtain advance, firm knowledge that war would break out shortly before the start of hostilities, most prominently from the Israeli agent in the Egyptian leadership, Sadat's son-in-law, Ashraf Marwan. For a discussion of the impact and reliability of Marwan's reporting, see Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Angel* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv: Kinneret Publishing House, 2010. See also Bar-Joseph, *Watchman Fell Asleep*, 47-51 and 185-186. Bar-Joseph believes that Marwan was a bona fide agent. For a different interpretation of Marwan's role, see Yigal Kipnis, "1973: The Road to War," appendix.

This was to have important implications for the early stages of the war. First, it inflicted a dramatic psychological blow on the Israeli leadership when their confident expectations about Arab behavior were so sharply upended, resulting in an environment of intense psychological pressure on all elements of the Israeli security leadership. Second, it meant that Israel did not have time to call up its reserves and had not postured its forces for immediate and even tactically preemptive action before October 6.

Israel's reluctance to mobilize its reserves and preempt the Arab attack was primarily the result of two main factors, in addition to the assessment that the Arabs were not going to attack: first, the Israeli leadership's concern about the domestic economic and political impact of mobilization, and second, Israel's pledge to the United States, and specifically to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, not to preempt an Arab attack (as Israel had done in 1967).<sup>22</sup> With Israel's forces unmobilized, the Arab attacks on the 6<sup>th</sup> would be substantially more dangerous, since Israel's defense plans relied heavily on the integration of reserve units and particularly on preemption.<sup>23</sup> For instance, the effectiveness of Israeli Air Force (IAF) plans to suppress Egyptian and Syrian surface-to-air missile batteries relied critically on the ability to preempt (as well as on good

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22. Kipnis believes that the failure of Israeli intelligence did not have a significant impact on the decision making of Dayan and Meir, since the political leadership in Israel wanted to avoid war by any possible quiet diplomatic means rather than to strike preemptively. This decision-making calculus was motivated by a number of factors: the Israeli political leadership's view that Sadat's goals were political and therefore, that there was "low probability" that he would attack; their aversion to calling up the reserves and arousing an escalation of tensions just before elections in Israel; their desire to encourage calm to avoid giving Kissinger the opportunity to initiate political moves in the region they wanted to avoid; their commitment to the United States to wait longer than two hours once they had been attacked to avoid appearing as the aggressors; their confidence in the results of the war, if it did break out; their aversion to spurring a war in October; and their preference for diplomatic steps to prevent war. Kipnis, presentation at CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013, and discussions between Kipnis and Avner Cohen, March-April 2013.

23. Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War*, 37-40 and 128-130.

weather).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, so reliant was Israel on gaining sufficient warning of an impending Arab assault that IDF Chief of Staff David Elazar and his deputy stated that an outbreak of war without such warning would be a “catastrophe” since Israel’s war plans – including interdiction of enemy air defenses, for instance – relied upon at least 48 hours advance notice of war.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Israel apparently had *no* prepared plans for a defensive war – but possessed six to nine plans for an offensive one.<sup>26</sup> Yet in the crunch of early October 1973, the political level was unwilling to authorize preemptive attacks.

In summary, then, on the eve of war in October 1973, the Israeli security leadership did not expect a serious war with the Arab states and had not undertaken the specific preparations that the Israelis themselves thought necessary to meet an Arab assault effectively.

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24. Bar-Joseph, *Watchman Fell Asleep*, 219, citing IAF Commander Benny Peled’s statement that “if we are not allowed to choose the day in which we [attack], then there is grave doubt [whether we will succeed] and the plans would not suffer this disruption.” It is not clear whether Peled had a reasonable basis for thinking that he would receive such authorization; in fact, there is evidence to suggest the political leadership had made it clear to Peled and the IDF leadership that they would *not* receive such authorization. In the event, IDF Chief of Staff Elazar tried but failed to convince the political leadership to authorize preemption on the morning of October 6. See Shmuel Gordon, *Thirty Hours in October* [in Hebrew] Tel Aviv: Maariv Publishing House, 2008. Amir Oren, at the CNA Workshop on March 11, 2013, reported that IAF plans rested on three criteria for success: intelligence warning, good weather, and permission for preemption.

25. Quoted in Bar-Joseph, *Watchman Fell Asleep*, 57.

26. Oded Erez and Amir Oren, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

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## War Breaks Out

At 2 p.m. local time on October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched major assaults on Israeli positions along the Bar-Lev Line on the east bank of the Suez Canal and along the ceasefire line in the Golan Heights.<sup>27</sup> October 6 was Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, when even many secular Jews in Israel were attending synagogue.<sup>28</sup> In a classic case of strategic and intelligence surprise, Israel (along with the United States) was caught off guard.<sup>29</sup>

Capitalizing on the Israelis' surprise, unpreparedness, and underestimation of Arab capabilities and competence, the Arab armies met with remarkable success during the first few days of the

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27. For military histories of the war, see Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War*, and Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975).

28. It was also during the Muslim period of Ramadan, when it was thought less likely that the Arabs would attack.

29. As the CIA's own postmortem stated: "There was an intelligence failure in the weeks preceding the outbreak of the war in the Middle East on 6 October." Director of Central Intelligence, "The Performance of the Intelligence Community Before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report," December 1973. As intelligence historian Matthew T. Penney puts it, "[t]o intelligence historians, the October 1973 War is almost synonymous with 'intelligence failure.'" Matthew T. Penney, "Intelligence and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War," in *President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War*, paper prepared for conference held at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, January 30, 2013, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/historical-collection-publications/arab-israeli-war/nixon-arab-israeli-war.pdf>, 7. For the classic work on the surprise, see Bar-Joseph, *Watchman Fell Asleep*. See also Michael I. Handel, *Perception, Deception and Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War* (1976) (no. 19 of Jerusalem Papers on Peace Problems). This was due in large part to a deliberate Egyptian attempt to encourage Israeli estimates of the Arabs' lack of preparation for or willingness to go to war, saturation of the Israeli intelligence system, and the Israelis' high confidence in their military superiority over the Arab states.

war.<sup>30</sup> In the south, Egyptian artillery bombarded Israeli positions along the Bar-Lev Line while hundreds of attack aircraft struck at Israeli positions in the Sinai.<sup>31</sup> Almost immediately, large Egyptian formations began crossing the Suez Canal across its expanse, and, within 24 hours, most of the Israeli strongpoints along the Canal had been captured or abandoned. By the next day, October 7, the Egyptians had deployed around 850 tanks and a great number of other artillery and armored vehicles across the Canal, as well as five infantry divisions numbering approximately 90,000 men armed with formidable anti-air and anti-tank assets; and further reinforcements were on the way.<sup>32</sup>

Though the collapse of the Bar-Lev line was traumatic enough, by the war's second day the Israeli leadership saw the situation in the Golan Heights as even more dire, given the northern front's much greater proximity to Israeli population centers and to pre-1967 Israel generally. Indeed, by midday on the 7<sup>th</sup>, Syrian forces had captured more than half of the Golan Heights and were threateningly situated just a few kilometers above the Israeli population centers of the Galilee, while the outnumbered and isolated IDF units on the Heights were barely holding on to their positions with a thin screen

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30. For a description of Israeli overconfidence, see Martin Van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict* (1993), 100-1. For a discussion of the role of Egyptian strategic deception, see Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep*, ch. 3.

31. Israel had built 35 highly fortified positions, called "Maozim" in Hebrew, along the 195 kilometers of the Suez Canal, each of which was manned by 30-40 soldiers and backed by armor and artillery to their rear. On October 6, 1973, however, only 31 posts were occupied, with only 16 fully manned, while the other 15 were manned partially, and largely for observation purposes. Indeed, on the 6<sup>th</sup> only 600 IDF reservists (one battalion) manned the entire 195 kilometers of the Suez Canal line. Israel also deployed two regular armor brigades in Sinai, the first one along the second line of defense, roughly 10 kilometers from the Canal, and the second brigade in rear bases deep inside the Sinai, with its headquarters located at Bir Tmeda, nearly 200 kilometers from the Canal. Data from Herzl Shafir, "The 1973 War: A Different Perspective," revised in November 2010. Shafir is a retired IDF major general who served as a staff officer in the Yom Kippur War.

32. Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War*, 64-65 and 72.

of men and armor desperately awaiting the arrival of mobilized reinforcements, low on ammunition, and sustaining heavy casualties.<sup>33</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup>, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan journeyed to the northern front and was severely unnerved by the situation, going so far as to suggest that military developments portended the impending “collapse of the Third Temple,” a reference to the state of Israel. The situation in the North and Dayan’s state of mind were to bear significantly on the way the nuclear element affected Israeli decision-making.<sup>34</sup>

The Israelis, heavily outnumbered and outgunned in both theaters, then mobilized their entire reserve force, including four armored divisions, and dispatched them to both fronts to counterattack against the Arab armies. In the south, however, an Israeli armored counterattack on the 8<sup>th</sup> was turned back with stunningly heavy tank losses. In the north, isolated and outnumbered, Israeli armored outposts continued to hang on by a thin thread. Moreover, Israeli Air Force Commander Lt. Gen. Benny Peled reported to the Israeli high command that the continued attrition of the IAF’s aircraft, a primary source of Israeli military advantage, would result in the exhaustion of Israeli effective air power within a week.<sup>35</sup>

Cumulatively, the shock and the fog of war brought on by the Arab invasion, in addition to Israel’s difficulty in mobilizing its arriving reserves into an organized counterattack, touched off a wave of anxiety, and even to some extent panic, among the Israeli leadership. On both fronts, the Israelis were deeply unnerved by the Arab success at blunting Israeli air and armored attacks, the twin pillars of Israeli military strategy.<sup>36</sup>

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33. For a dramatic detailed account of the battle over the Golan Height see Aviram Barkai, *On the Edge: The Story of the 188 Brigade* [Al Blima, in Hebrew], (Tel Aviv: Ma’ariv, 2009).

34. Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep*, 228-232. For a somewhat different account on Dayan that day see Arie Braun, *Moshe Dayan and the Yom Kippur War*, Tel Aviv; Edanim Press, 1992, 93-97.

35. Avner Cohen, “The Last Nuclear Moment,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2003.

36. Some Israeli leaders, like Dayan, were severely unnerved. Others were more level-headed but nonetheless worried that an unfavorable result in

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the Golan and along the Suez, while it would not jeopardize the existence of the state of Israel, would damage Israel's prestige and possibly drag it into a long and costly war of attrition it could not afford. Amir Oren, for instance, pointed to the fears of another war of attrition. CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.



## The Alleged Alert: the Sources for the Account

It was in this context of intense strategic and psychological crisis, in an atmosphere of near-panic, that it is alleged that the Israeli war cabinet, or at least some elements within it, ordered Israel's nuclear weapons placed on some sort of alert. It is further alleged by some that such manipulation was intended to send a signal, either to the United States or to the Arabs and Soviets.

Several factors are posited as having motivated the Israelis to alert or manipulate their nuclear forces for political or military effect. The most straightforward was an Israeli desire to signal to the attacking Arabs (and/or their Soviet patrons and backers) that further incursions into Israeli territory would risk serious Israeli escalation, including a nuclear response. More commonly, however, reports of an Israeli alert or signal argue that it was designed to convince U.S. decision-makers of the gravity of the Israeli military situation so that the United States would resupply Israel with military equipment – especially ammunition, aircraft, and tanks – that Israel believed it desperately needed but that Washington had, through October 8-9, resisted granting.<sup>37</sup>

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37. Accounts differ about the rationale behind Washington's unwillingness to initiate a resupply effort immediately. William Quandt emphasizes Kissinger's desire to obtain a ceasefire in the early days of the war, as well as his interest in letting Israel "bleed a bit but not too much" in order to facilitate diplomatic and political movement both on Arab-Israeli peace initiatives and with respect to U.S. standing in the Arab world. Interview with William Quandt, August 2012, and Quandt, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013. James Schlesinger recalled that the main factor was the American desire to avoid Arab criticism for intervening too obviously on the side of the Israelis. Interview with James Schlesinger, February 2013. Washington policymakers also appear to have had a more sanguine view of Israel's military predicament than Israeli leaders did.

The principal accounts regarding what transpired are laid out in the remainder of this section.<sup>38</sup>

In its April 12, 1976, issue, *Time* magazine reported that Israel had alerted its nuclear forces during the Yom Kippur War and that this alert had been communicated to the United States. *Time* reported:

For years there has been widespread speculation about Israel's nuclear potential—speculation that has now been confirmed. At a briefing for a group of American space experts in Washington recently, an official of the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that Israel had between ten and 20 nuclear weapons “available for use.” In fact, TIME has learned, Israel possesses a nuclear arsenal of 13 atomic bombs, assembled, stored and ready to be dropped on enemy forces from specially equipped Kfir and Phantom fighters or Jericho missiles. These weapons have a 20-kiloton yield, roughly as powerful as those that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki...

Israel's 13 bombs, *Time* also reported, were hastily assembled at a secret underground tunnel during a 78-hour period at the start of the 1973 October War. At that time, the Egyptians had repulsed the first Israeli counterattacks along the Suez Canal, causing heavy casualties, and Israeli forces on the Golan Heights were retreating in the face of a massive Syrian tank assault. At 10 p.m. on October 8, the Israeli commander on the northern front, Major General Yitzhak Hoffi, told his superior: “I am not sure that we can hold out much longer.” After midnight, according to *Time*, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan solemnly warned Prime Minister Golda Meir: “This is the end of the Third Temple.” *Time* related that Meir thereupon gave Dayan permission to activate Israel's doomsday weapons. As each bomb was assembled, it was rushed off to waiting air force units. Before any triggers were set, however, the battle on both fronts turned in Israel's

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38. For an account of the alleged alert and the associated literature, see Avner Cohen, “Nuclear Arms in Crisis Under Secrecy: Israel and the Lessons of the 1967 and 1973 Wars,” in Peter R. Lavoy et al., eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Nuclear Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 117-24.

favor. The 13 bombs were sent to desert arsenals, where they remained after the war.

According to *Time's* sources, the Israelis were convinced that the Russians had learned of their newly acquired nuclear potential, possibly through a Soviet Cosmos spy satellite over the Middle East.

*Time's* sources further believed that the United States learned about the Israeli bombs as a result of a reconnaissance sweep of the Middle East by a spy plane. Some high officials in Washington insisted to *Time* that the United States had no knowledge of the bombs, and denied that they were a factor in the alert. According to *Time*, the plane was spotted by Israeli air defenses and two Phantom jets scrambled to intercept it. "I have it on my radar," the Israeli pilot radioed. "It is an [SR-71] American Blackbird." Back to him came a direct order from a high-ranking Israeli Air Force commander: "Down it." The SR-71, flying effortlessly at 85,000 feet, easily outclimbed and outdistanced the Israelis and returned to its base with significant readings.<sup>39</sup>

Also in 1976, Charles Wakebridge noted in *Military Review* that the Syrians had halted their seemingly unobstructed advance in the Golan on October 7; despite there being daylight left, and observed that this decision to terminate the advance was "one of the most inexplicable and intriguing [decisions of the war]."<sup>40</sup> Martin van Creveld inferred from this puzzling decision by the Syrians to halt their advance that "there may have been a veiled Israeli hint concerning nuclear weapons dropped in Damascus' ears" if Syria did not halt its invasion.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent and widely noticed claim that Israel alerted its nuclear forces, however, was made by journalist Seymour Hersh in his 1991 book *The Samson Option*. Hersh offers a detailed account of Israel's alleged attempt to coerce the United States into

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39. "Violent Week: The Politics of Death," *Time*, April 12, 1976.

40. Charles Wakebridge, "The Syrian Side of the Hill," *Military Review*, February 1976, 23-24.

41. Van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict*, 102. Van Creveld was careful to note that he was speculating about such a warning.

initiating an arms resupply.<sup>42</sup> According to Hersh's account, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan's extremely pessimistic mindset in the first two days of the war about the imminent demise of the "Third Temple" led to a dramatic war cabinet meeting on Monday, October 8, in Golda Meir's office in Tel Aviv. According to Hersh, the Israeli leadership at this meeting:

resolved to implement three critical decisions: it would rally its collapsing forces for a major counterattack; it would arm and target its nuclear arsenal in the event of total collapse and subsequent need for the Samson Option [meaning Israeli use of nuclear weapons]; and, finally it would inform Washington of its unprecedented nuclear action—and unprecedented peril—and demand that the United States begin an emergency airlift of replacement arms and ammunition needed to sustain an extended all-out war effort.

The kitchen cabinet agreed that the nuclear missile launchers at Hirbat Zachariah, as many as were ready, would be made operational, along with eight specially marked F-4s that were on twenty-four-hour alert at Tel Nof, the air force base near Rehovot. The initial target list included the Egyptian and Syrian military headquarters near Cairo and Damascus.<sup>43</sup>

Then, a few lines later, Hersh cites an Israeli official who "was in the prime minister's office that night" claiming that:

the basic decision to arm the weapons of last resort was reached easily...[but] there were far more complicated discussions of how many warheads to arm and where they were to be targeted. There was a separate, preliminary briefing by technical experts from Dimona, led by Shalheveth Freier, who described the weapons and targets that were available for immediate assembly.<sup>44</sup>

According to Hersh, the reasoning behind the nuclear arming was a twofold signaling. First, the alert was meant to tell the Egyptians and

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42. Seymour Hersh, *The Samson Option* (New York: Random House, 1991).

43. Hersh, *Samson Option*, 225.

44. *Ibid.*, 225-226.

the Syrians [via Soviet intelligence, since the Arabs did not possess the intelligence capabilities to detect such changes to Israel's nuclear forces] "to limit the offensive and not attempt to advance beyond the pre-1967 borders." Hersh added that the information was transmitted to General Mohammed el-Gamasy, the Egyptian armed forces chief of staff. Second, the alert was intended to force the United States to begin an immediate and massive resupply of the Israeli military.<sup>45</sup> This constituted what Hersh calls Israel's "nuclear blackmail."

Hersh also claims that the word of the Israeli nuclear arming came from the Soviets. According to his Israeli intelligence source, Israel SIGINT Unit 8200, the Israeli communications intelligence agency, picked up both the Soviet warning to Cairo about the Israeli nuclear arming and, on the morning of October 9, the Soviet warning to Washington.<sup>46</sup>

Hersh adds that, some days later, the U.S. intelligence community got its own look, via the KH-11 intelligence satellite, at the Israeli missile launchers at the site he referred to as Hirbat Zachariah. According to Hersh, "the launchers were left in the open, perhaps deliberately, making it much easier for American photo interpreters to spot them. (The Soviets also had satellite coverage in the Middle East, and presumably saw the same missile field.)"<sup>47</sup>

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45. Ibid., 227.

46. Ibid., 229.

47. Hersh, *Samson Option*, 231. Another American journalist, Richard Sale, in a 2002 *UPI* news story entitled "Yom Kippur: Israel's 1973 Nuclear Alert," reiterated some of Hersh's factual claims while adding a few others, and, like Hersh, attributed those claims to unidentified "knowledgeable" U.S. government sources. Richard Sale, "Yom Kippur: Israel's 1973 Nuclear Alert," *UPI.com*, September 16, 2002, available at [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2002/09/16/Yom-Kippur-Israel's-1973-nuclear-alert/UPI-64941032228992/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2002/09/16/Yom-Kippur-Israel's-1973-nuclear-alert/UPI-64941032228992/).

Sale rehashed Hersh's basic claim that Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan secured PM Golda Meir's authorization to arm 13 nuclear weapons [no exact date was given], and that this "arming" involved the Jericho missiles [at a site that he, like Hersh, referred to as "Hirbat Zakariah"]

In a review of Hersh's book in the *Washington Post Book World*, William Quandt, an academic who served as the lead Middle East official on the U.S. National Security Council during the 1973 War, gave a different, less dramatic account of Israeli nuclear weapons-related activity. Quandt's account, which he has reiterated in its same basic form for over 20 years, is unique, as it was penned by an individual who had direct access to events. According to Quandt:

There has long been a sense among American policymakers that providing Israel with conventional weapons was justified, in part, by the concern that Israel would otherwise feel compelled to rely exclusively on a nuclear defense. This widespread view is rarely mentioned in policy deliberations, but I am convinced that it has had an impact on decisions...

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and eight F-4 fighters [at Tel Nof Air Force Base]. Furthermore, according to Sale, the state of alert lasted three full days but he did not specify which days. In this context Sale added a few more factual details that do not appear in Hersh's account.

He wrote:

At that time, the Jerichos were deployed inside caves, inside Israeli military air bases that had "huge blast doors," a former senior CIA official recalled...The missile launchers were set up on the back of railway cars and could be rolled out, fired, then rolled back and the blast doors closed, this official said.

Somehow, an agent in place in Israel alerted the United States of the arming of the Jerichos and on October 12, an SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft based at Beale Air Force Base in California took off, refueled off of Rota, Spain, and then flew over Syria, Jordan and Israel. The plane, able to survey 100,000 square miles of land an hour, spotted the radiation from the missiles, according to a former Pentagon official and others familiar with the incident. According to this Pentagon source, Israel ordered their F-4s to down the plane, but the Blackbird soared to 85,000 feet, beyond the range of the Israeli fighters.

Sale cited American sources in saying that the predominant view today is that Israel's first nuclear alert was a "bluff," what he also calls a "saber rattling," but he qualified it as "an extremely dangerous one." As Sale notes, "Saber-rattling or not, that same day, the United States began a huge airlift to Israel including ammunition, tanks and aircraft."

[During] the October 1973 war...a respected American ambassador...heard Kissinger refer to “intimations that if they [Israel] didn’t get military equipment, and quickly, they might go nuclear.”

I was close enough to those events as a member of the National Security Council staff that I doubt that an explicit threat was made by [Israeli Ambassador Simcha] Dinitz [as alleged by Hersh]. We did know around this time, however, that Israel had placed its Jericho missiles on alert. I did not know what kind of warheads they had, but it did not make much sense to me that they would be equipped with conventional ordnance. I assume others agreed. It was also conceivable that a nuclear threat might be made if Egyptian troops broke through at the passes [that is, deeper in the Sinai and thus closer to Israel proper]. None of this had to be spelled out in so many words by the Israelis.

It is true that for one day, October 9, there was a sense of panic among some Israeli leaders. By the end of the day, the tide was turning in Israel’s favor, and Nixon had agreed to make up military losses. No one wanted to have Israel defeated, nor put in a position where it might consider using whatever nuclear capability it had. Without being told in so many words, we knew that a desperate Israel might activate its nuclear option. This situation, by itself, created a kind of blackmail potential. “Help us, or else...” But no one had to say it, and I do not think anyone did. The major decision to mount a full-scale airlift was, in any case, not made until October 13, and then primarily because the Soviets had already begun direct resupply flights and a ceasefire effort had failed.<sup>48</sup>

A number of Israeli sources also provide some evidence that the Israelis attempted to change the status of their nuclear forces during this early period of the war. According to a number of individuals, for instance, there has long been a rumor in informed Israeli circles that Defense Minister Dayan, possibly on his own authority, sought to influence Washington to give greater aid to Israel during the period of intense crisis in the early part of the war. According to these sources, Dayan communicated his intent or orders to manipulate Israel’s nuclear forces, over a communications line the Israelis knew

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48. William B. Quandt, “How Far Will Israel Go?” *Washington Post Book World*, November 1991.

to be compromised to American intelligence (in other words, he wanted American intelligence and, through it, American policymakers, to hear him).<sup>49</sup>

Other sources repeat variations of the account that Israel alerted, prepared, or manipulated its nuclear forces, or considered doing so, but these accounts do not offer independent or sourced testimony.<sup>50</sup>

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49. Author discussions with former Israeli intelligence official and defense expert, August 2012, and Edward Luttwak, February 2013. According to Luttwak, who conceded that he did not have solid sourcing for the account, Dayan spoke of activating Israel's nuclear forces over a notionally secure line that the Israelis had validated the Americans had access to by a ruse involving the U.S. air attaché. Yair Evron offered a similar report in *Israel's Nuclear Dilemma*, 72.

50. See, for instance, Walter Boyne, *The Two O'Clock War: The 1973 Yom Kippur Conflict and the Airlift That Saved Israel* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002). Boyne reported that Dayan recommended the actual use of Israel's nuclear weapons. In the author's discussion with Boyne in February 2013, however, Boyne said he could not locate or recall his original sourcing for the account of Israel's nuclear alert. Similarly, in Howard Blum's *Eve of Destruction: The Untold Story of the Yom Kippur War* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 227-229, and Simon Dunstan's *Yom Kippur War*, 73 and 175-176, no sourcing is provided.



## What Actually Happened? Judging the Evidence

So what actually happened with respect to Israel's nuclear forces on or about October 8-9, 1973? Was there a manipulation of these forces by the Israeli leadership or segments of the Israeli leadership designed to signal to either the Arabs/Soviets or the United States?

To investigate this question, CNA exhaustively scrutinized and cataloged the available primary and secondary literature, gained access to both open and closed archives of various U.S. government entities (including the Nixon Library, the repository of the White House and National Security Council (NSC) documents of the period), interviewed both key participants in and experts on the events, and convened a closed workshop of participants and experts in order to carefully review and discuss the events in an attempt to ascertain precisely what happened.

To answer these questions, we first had to establish the basis upon which to make historical assessments of this type. Based on established principles of historical analysis, we assigned particular importance to contemporaneous first-hand accounts of individuals directly involved in the events and to government documents from the period.<sup>51</sup> (Because so few people were privy to the events, we were

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51. In general terms, a rigorous historical assessment should be based on the following elements: (1) multiple perspectives; (2) a critical reading of sources; (3) an awareness of individual or institutional bias; and (4) a consideration of alternative or competing explanations or hypotheses. For more on the historical method, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1998). On the historical method in international affairs, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Michael J. Horgan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Odd Arne Westad, "The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century," in

limited to a small number of accounts.) Second- or third-hand reports, especially if unsourced, were given correlatively less weight.

In terms of individual testimony, we gave greater weight to individuals whose testimony was consistent, tailored, and linked to their area of responsibility, and appeared free of bias or tendentiousness. We also placed greater value on reports by individuals who had or have a reputation for reliability and accuracy in testimony. With respect to documents and written sources, we gave the highest credence to those documents produced or sourced to individuals or institutions with a solid basis for knowing about the issues we were investigating.

In addition to the quality of sourcing, we preferred explanations that are most economical in light of the established evidence available. We therefore discounted explanations that require the premise or addition of extraordinary, unusual, or superfluous behavior or factors.

Based on this methodology, we viewed unidentified sources in secondary accounts as indicators of activity but not as ultimate proof. For instance, we regarded the accounts of *Time* magazine, Seymour Hersh, Sale, Boyle, Blum, van Creveld, and the other reporters and historians only as indicators, since they did not offer either credible, transparent individual testimony or documentary proof of their assertions. Furthermore, some of these authors – in particular, Hersh – are widely thought to be of questionable reliability. Similarly, we judged second-hand rumors of the variety offered by Bar and Luttwak as suggestive but insufficient as anything approximating proof.

Because the actions we are investigating were carried out by governments, we placed the greatest weight on credible sources from the main governments involved. CNA conducted preliminary investigations to see what might be available on the issue of an Israeli nuclear alert in the Soviet (now Russian) state archives and among retired officials. After consulting with Mark Kramer of the Cold War History Project, we assessed that there was little promising documentation available and that any surviving Soviet-era officials

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Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

would probably not be willing to discuss this issue openly. We made a similar calculus regarding Egyptian and Syrian archives and surviving officials. These decisions were also heavily influenced by resource constraints on the project.

For the United States and Israel, we had more sources to work with. We spoke to several officials directly involved in the 1973 crisis at the highest levels of the U.S. government, and we had access to virtually all the documents—classified and unclassified—related to the alleged nuclear signal on October 8-9. Our access to Israeli government officials and documents was, on the other hand, fragmentary and indirect. The Israeli government strongly discourages discussion of issues relating to Israel’s nuclear program by current and former Israeli officials (and even journalists and experts), which makes discussion and analysis of any Israeli nuclear activity by Israelis usually circumspect and elliptical. For these reasons, we placed considerable weight on Israeli testimony and evidence when it was well sourced but our judgments must of necessity be more tentative.

The result of our review of the U.S. side was that, with one exception, we did not find any documents in the open or closed archives or receive testimony from any involved official that support the proposition that Israel deliberately manipulated its nuclear forces on October 8-9 to send a signal to the United States, the Soviets, Egypt, or Syria. Indeed, some interviewees vehemently rejected at least the stronger variants of the notion that Israel “blackmailed” or “coerced” the United States through nuclear signaling. While we did not consult every U.S. document or speak to every concerned official, we did exhaustively scrutinize the relevant archives at the Nixon Library and a number of relevant U.S. government agencies, a task in which we were ably and materially assisted by professional archivists and historians at these agencies, and spoke to a significant number of involved officials.<sup>52</sup> None of these searches revealed any

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52. These searches included but were not limited to the documents declassified in connection with the January 30, 2013, event at the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California. We would like to pay special thanks to Matthew Penney, his colleague from the Historical Collections Division (HCD), and David Robarge and the entire HCD staff for their invaluable help in our research efforts.

documentation of an Israeli alert or clear manipulation of its forces. Similarly, none of our interviewees, save one, recalled any Israeli nuclear alert or signaling effort, and these interviewees included the then-Secretary of Defense, his executive assistant, the lead CIA military affairs analyst on the Yom Kippur War task force, and the deputy commander of the Joint Strategic Targeting Planning Staff at Strategic Air Command. Moreover, we possess reliable reports that other key individuals, particularly National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Deputy National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, not only did not recall any such alert but rejected the allegation that there was one.<sup>53</sup>

Based on this research effort, we conclude that there is no solid basis for Seymour Hersh's report that Israel, through its ambassador in Washington, Simcha Dinitz, "blackmailed" the United States by threatening to escalate the war with its nuclear weapons. We assess this for several reasons. First, both the American and Israeli participants and those who would have had reason to know of such a threat vehemently deny that there was an attempt at nuclear blackmail.<sup>54</sup> Knowledgeable Israelis also reject this story.<sup>55</sup> Second,

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53. Discussions with Amir Oren, inter alia. Oren has interviewed both Kissinger and Scowcroft for his forthcoming documentary on the war, to be released in connection with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war in the fall of 2013. Alistair Horne, in his biography of Kissinger, reported that "Kissinger always hotly denied, and several times to the author, that Israel had ever mentioned this possibility ["the use, in extremis, of Israel's nuclear weapon, Jericho" *[sic]*] to the United States, and certainly not as any form of blackmail for assistance." Alistair Horne, *Kissinger: 1973, The Crucial Year* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 242.

54. Interview with Peter Rodman, former executive assistant to Kissinger (February 2008). Walter Isaacson reported in his biography of Kissinger that "[a]ccording to both Dinitz and Kissinger, Dinitz did not mention – or threaten – that Israel was prepared to resort to nuclear weapons." Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 518. Dinitz himself rejected the story in an article in 1999. Simcha Dinitz, "The Yom Kippur War: Diplomacy of War and Peace," 6 *Israel Affairs* 1, 118. According to Lebow and Stein, then-Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Colby, a participant in the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), stated to them that "[t]here was no nuclear blackmail." Richard Ned

given the tremendous gravity that such a threat would entail, one would expect to see at least some documentary evidence of deliberations following from its issuance; yet we found none. In contrast, there were extensive discussions in the sessions of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), the working principals-level national security policymaking body during the Nixon Administration, later in the month concerning perceived Soviet threats to escalate the conflict and the U.S. decision to alert its nuclear forces to warn Moscow against unilateral intervention in the conflict. Third, Hersh's account has evident inaccuracies, suggesting that it is of imperfect reliability.<sup>56</sup> Finally, there is a plausible alternative account of events that fits the available evidence more tightly – specifically, that the “blackmail” Kissinger refers to in his memoirs was Dinitz's proposal that Prime Minister Meir visit Washington in the midst of the war in order to plead for U.S. resupply, a move that Kissinger recognized would place inordinate pressure on the Nixon administration to cave in to Israel's requests. Based on these factors, we assess that Hersh's account of a formal, coordinated Israeli attempt to “blackmail” the United States using its nuclear forces is without foundation.

To say that there was no attempt at blackmail is not, however, to say that Israel did not alert, check, or modify the status of its nuclear

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Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), at 194-5.

55. Among other points, Ne'eman strongly rejected Hersh's “nuclear blackmail” story. He explicitly denied the nuclear component in Hersh's story about the war cabinet session on the morning of October 8: “This session of the War Cabinet did not make a decision to deploy ‘the nuclear arsenal.’ Neither did the session on the next morning.... An appeal to the USA for ammunition and weapons was first presented on the 9 (late afternoon Israeli time) and the airlift was begun on the 14 October. Thus I completely deny Hersh's story.” Ne'eman in *Nuclear Weapons and the Middle East War*, 5.

56. For instance, Hersh mischaracterized the positions of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger and DCI William Colby and relied on anecdotal evidence of Kissinger's remarks to Anwar Sadat and a former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt. Hersh, *Samson Option*, 229-30.

forces in some way. On the contrary, it is plausible, and in our assessment likely that the Israelis modified the status of their nuclear delivery systems, especially their Jericho ballistic missile force, in a manner consistent with the overall changes to their military posture in response to the Arab assaults. In other words, the Israelis probably readied or checked their nuclear delivery systems in response to the Arab attacks in order to prepare them for any eventuality, a sensible precautionary move during a large-scale attack.

This was certainly how it was interpreted by the one American official who wrote an account of the intelligence he claimed to have seen about Israeli activity during the October 8-9 timeframe. William Quandt asserted that the United States had detected Israeli nuclear weapons-related activity during the early days of the war. As the NSC staff lead on Middle East issues, he had reason, and the necessary access, to know of such developments; our research showed that he was on the White House distribution list for almost all important contemporaneous U.S. documents pertaining to the war. Moreover, Quandt has no clear reason to fabricate such a story. He does not appear to be promoting an agenda; nor has he sought to capitalize on the story for monetary or other gain as far as we know. Quandt also has an established reputation as an objective analyst and has given a consistent version of his story for over 20 years. James Schlesinger, who was Secretary of Defense at the time, for instance, when told by CNA analysts of Quandt's story, observed that, while he could recall no such report, he would give Quandt an "A grade" for reliability.<sup>57</sup> Finally, as discussed in greater detail below, Quandt's story is consistent with the other available documentation and participant testimonies.

Quandt's account is that he, as the lead NSC Middle East official who was the recipient of incoming intelligence information, was given an electronic or signals intelligence report on or about October 7, 8, or 9, 1973, detailing that Israel had activated or increased the readiness of its Jericho missile batteries.<sup>58</sup> (The United States did not have real-

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57. Interview with James Schlesinger, February 2013.

58. Interview with William Quandt, August 2012, and Quandt, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013. Quandt stated that he could not remember

time satellite imagery at the time and no SR-71 flights had yet been conducted.)<sup>59</sup> Quandt assumed that this was a nuclear weapons-related step because of the low accuracy of the Jerichos. Quandt related that he was not present when Kissinger saw the report (if he did), but Quandt did emphasize that the report did not have a significant impact on discussions or deliberations among U.S. policymakers. Indeed, the document was never discussed in any meetings that Quandt was aware of, and he never heard Kissinger mention it.<sup>60</sup> Quandt noted that the broader issues of Israel's nuclear weapons program were discussed on or about October 9 or 10.<sup>61</sup>

CNA's extensive and intensive exploration of the available open and closed U.S. government archives did not yield any document matching Quandt's description of an electronic intelligence report dated such that it would have been made available sometime between October 7 and 9. The absence of documentation corroborating Quandt's account does not, however, diminish the value of his testimony. The nature of the information that Quandt alleges he received would have been very tightly controlled, given the sensitivity of any intelligence the United States might attempt to collect on its partner, Israel, and especially on Israel's nuclear weapons program – a subject that the Nixon Administration had decided to treat with great secrecy. Moreover, it is well established that Kissinger attempted during this period to limit and control the dissemination of intelligence and

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the specifics regarding the report. In the August conversation, he suggested October 7 or 8; in the March Workshop, he suggested October 8 or 9.

59. See for an account of SR-71 flights during the war, <http://www.wvi.com/~sr71webmaster/griffiss.html>.

60. Interview with Quandt, August 2012; Quandt, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

61. Quandt, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013. Quandt noted that this discussion was prompted by independent reasons (most likely bureaucratic inertia), rather than because of the intelligence report about Jericho activity.

other information as tightly as possible.<sup>62</sup> Such a report would quite plausibly, then, have been disseminated only to a very small number of officials, of whom Quandt would have very likely been one.<sup>63</sup> We know, for instance, from documentary review that Quandt was one of the very few officials who received comparably closely held reporting. We should therefore not expect any but a very small number of officials to have been privy to such a report. The fact that most interviewees do not recall such reporting is therefore not dispositive as to the veracity of Quandt's account, especially when one considers that the key actors in the U.S. government during the war were receiving a torrent of intelligence reporting as well as other material and may not have read such a report or, if they did read it, may not have committed it to memory.

That said, this point should not be carried too far. It is significant that then-Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, an official who almost certainly would have been on any such distribution, does not recall receiving any such report.<sup>64</sup> Schlesinger concedes that Kissinger might have attempted to keep a report such as the one Quandt states he received from Schlesinger. He points out, however, that the then-Director of the National Security Agency, Lieutenant General Lew Allen, also reported to him and that he and Schlesinger had a good working relationship. Schlesinger judges it implausible that Allen would have withheld a report of such significance from the Secretary of Defense. The fact that Schlesinger does not recall such a report must count against the plausibility of Quandt's testimony but we

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62. Indeed, Kissinger's unwillingness to share reporting of his own diplomacy with key leaders is cited as one of the reasons for the Intelligence Community's failure to forecast the outbreak of war. See William E. Colby, Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger, "Critique of Middle East Crisis," October 27, 1973, 3. See also, Harold P. Ford, *William E. Colby as Director of Central Intelligence, 1973-1976* (Washington, D.C.: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1993), 34.

63. Discussion with HCD historians, October 2012; interview with Charles Allen, February 2013.

64. Interview with James Schlesinger, February 2013. Nor does Schlesinger's then-executive assistant, Robert Murray, recall receiving such a report. Interview with Robert Murray, February 2013. (Note: Murray is currently the Chief Executive Officer of CNA.)



judge that it is not dispositive, because of the distinct and real possibility that Schlesinger may not have read the report (either due to the amount of material he was receiving or because he did not judge it worthy of his attention). Furthermore, despite Schlesinger's reputation for possessing a formidable memory, it is possible that he read such a report but simply does not recall it.

We also judge as not dispositive the fact that we were unable to locate a report along the lines of what Quandt described in the U.S. government archives. If there was such a report, it might not have been archived and thus would not be available today in documentary form. According to expert historians of the intelligence processes of the period, at that time some reports of particular sensitivity were not recorded and stored through normal intelligence dissemination channels.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, especially in an era before sophisticated computerized data recording capabilities, documents were not always properly categorized and stored. Either of these factors could explain why we were unable to locate such a report.

Third, given the continuing sensitivity surrounding both the Israeli nuclear weapons program and the methods of intelligence collection Quandt described, we cannot discount the possibility that cognizant former officials might regard it as their obligation not to acknowledge the existence of such a report. (We take pains to emphasize that we do not question the integrity or honesty of these former officials.)

Moreover, according to Quandt, he did not regard the report that Israel had changed the status of its nuclear delivery system to mean that the Israelis intended actually to use their nuclear weapons or that they were trying to pressure the United States into action. Indeed, Quandt made clear that the report had no discernible impact on U.S. policy-making. For Quandt personally, however, the news highlighted the gravity of the situation even as it did not set off "alarm bells" in the U.S. decision-making process.<sup>66</sup> Rather, other considerations were the important determinants of U.S. decision-making. According to Quandt, American decisions regarding the

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65. Discussion with HCD historians, October 2012.

66. CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

resupply airlift were motivated by Sadat's rejection of the ceasefire offer, the scale of the Soviet resupply effort and the concomitant American desire to avoid a Soviet proxy victory, and the intense Israeli and American domestic pressure on the Nixon Administration.<sup>67</sup>

This comports with the rest of our research. Indeed, neither any involved American official (including Quandt) nor any piece of official documentation lends credence to the proposition that specific Israeli nuclear weapons activity had a material impact on U.S. decision-making regarding the resupply airlift or any other facet of the war. In our extensive review of the minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group and other memoranda recording discussions of U.S. government officials on the American policy towards the war, we found no mention of Israeli nuclear weapons activity. Furthermore, when asked, these officials have denied that Israeli nuclear weapons even arose as a topic of discussion during U.S. deliberations.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, U.S. policy decisions in the early phase of the war (principally the resupply airlift) can be more economically explained, and with greater documentary and other evidence, by other factors. For instance, the decision to initiate the resupply effort was taken on October 11 and the airlift itself began in earnest on October 13 – several days after the arrival of the report Quandt described. This would have been a great deal of time given the circumstances, which provides further evidence that it did not have a major impact. Conversely, the arguments that external pressure on

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67. Ibid.

68. Interview with James Schlesinger, February 2013. Then-DCI Colby stated: "There was no emphasis on it [Israeli nuclear weapons] in any of the discussions. Our intention was to get the airlift going. No blackmail was needed. They [Israel] were in a tough situation, the balance of forces was overwhelmingly against them. At most, the question of Israeli nuclears was in the back of our head, but it didn't influence our judgment." Lebow and Stein summarized the view from official Washington: "Officials in Washington generally did not fear an escalation to the nuclear level unless Israel found itself in a desperate situation where Arab armies threatened Israel's civilian population." (This sense appears to have derived from discussions with William Quandt, given the footnote sourcing.) Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, 194-5.

Nixon and Kissinger and Sadat's rejection of the United Nations ceasefire proposal were the major factors that drove the Administration to initiate the airlift fit more closely with the timeline. We therefore assess that there is substantial basis to conclude that, even if Israel did manipulate or alert its nuclear forces, any such activity had no material impact on U.S. decision-making concerning the war.

It is important to make a distinction here: Israeli nuclear weapons likely *did* play an important though implicit (and thus often underemphasized) role in limiting Arab objectives and strengthening American interests in preventing wholesale Israeli defeat and averting escalation.<sup>69</sup> But to the extent that this happened, it was the consequences of Israeli possession of nuclear weapons *as such* rather than due to the specific manipulation of these forces during the course of the war.

In light of the above, we incline towards an explanation of what the United States observed that incorporates the testimony of all the credible participants and documents. That is, we are drawn to an historical regression line that "fits" all the data points available, including Quandt's. Such an approach results in an assessment that the United States *did* observe some kind of Israeli nuclear weapons-related activity in the very early days of the war, probably pertaining to Israel's Jericho ballistic missile force, but that the activity reported in the intelligence message was not considered by any influential segment of the U.S. government to be sufficiently worthy of note to merit further discussion or action. As Quandt described it, it did not set off "alarm bells" in the U.S. decision-making process.<sup>70</sup> This means that any such activity was not construed as a deliberate signal by Israel and was not integrated into the U.S. decision-making process as such.

The notion that the Israelis checked or changed the status of their nuclear delivery systems without intending to send a signal to its allies or enemies fits well with the result of a similar approach to the evidence available from Israeli sources. One of the few instances in

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69. William Quandt made this point during the CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013. William Colby made a similar point to Lebow and Stein.

70. CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

which a senior Israeli official with a basis for knowing about these matters has spoken on the issue is Shimon Peres' discussion with Janice Ned Lebow and Richard Stein in connection with their book, *We All Lost the Cold War*. Though Peres was not directly involved in the war cabinet's decision-making during the Yom Kippur War, he was intimately involved in the creation and establishment of the Israeli nuclear program and has been in and out of high government office since the 1950s, including in more than one stint as Prime Minister. He was also a long-time friend or acquaintance of the war cabinet members, and one of the core political actors in Israeli history of the time. He is now President of Israel. It is therefore likely, if not certain, that he would have knowledge of such an alert or attempt at blackmail. In a footnote in Lebow and Stein's book, however, they record that Peres, in response to their raising of the issue of an alleged Israeli nuclear alert or attempt at "blackmailing" the United States, "categorically denied that Jericho missiles were made ready, much less armed. At most, he stated, there was an operational check. The cabinet never approved any alert of Jericho missiles."<sup>71</sup>

As far as we are aware, the first Israeli "in the know" to provide a public narrative regarding these alleged events was the Director-General of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission during the war, the late Shalheveth Freier. While Freier was careful not to say anything concrete as to what happened during the war with respect to nuclear weapons, on numerous occasions he publicly and privately denied Hersh's account, especially the reference to Freier's own alleged role.<sup>72</sup>

Another important Israeli to speak on these issues was Professor Yuval Ne'eman, a former Israeli Minister of Science and acting Chair of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission (both under Prime Minister Menachem Begin in the early 1980s), who served during the war as Moshe Dayan's personal liaison in communication with the United States. In those positions, Ne'eman had a substantial basis for knowing what transpired on the Israeli side (though he was actually

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71. Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*," 463, footnote 47.

72. Avner Cohen observed Freier making comments to refute Hersh's narrative at least two or three times in international fora.

still in the United States during the time of the events discussed here and only arrived in Israel after the nadir of the war had passed).

In an article titled “The USA-Israel Connection in the Yom Kippur War” that was based on a lecture that Ne’eman gave at a small meeting in Washington, D.C. in February 1996, Ne’eman provided an account of the nuclear dimension of the 1973 war. While he was elliptical in his language concerning this sensitive issue, he did address Quandt’s claim that the Israelis had appeared to alter the status of their nuclear weapons-related forces during the early part of the war. (Both attended the February 1996 meeting for which Ne’eman prepared his paper, along with Avner Cohen.)

Ne’eman wrote:

Note that it would be normal, for whoever is responsible for anything relating to strategic missiles – even if their warheads are just filled with ordinary explosives – to advance their state of preparedness, in a time of war. This might explain Mr. Quandt’s information, in this meeting, about signals which were traced by the USA intelligence....

Similarly, for whoever might be responsible for the nuclear infrastructure and the processing of further nuclear steps – whether it be development, production or the enhancement of the level of preparedness – to come to the Prime Minister at the beginning of a war and enquire whether such circumstances might indeed be expected, etc. Such a consultation should have taken place between 6 and 8 October. As I explained above, the Prime Minister’s answer could not have implied deployment. It might and should have indicated a need for some degree of preparedness for the strategic missiles, whatever their actual warheads, and some protective steps in the nuclear domain, such as shutting down the reactors throughout the war, to minimize risks from bombardments.<sup>73</sup>

Neither Peres’ nor Ne’eman’s statement constitutes a clear and direct declaration that Israel took concrete steps to modify the alert status of its nuclear weapons-related capabilities. But it is essential to bear in

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73. Ne’eman in *Nuclear Weapons and the Middle East War*, 5-6.

mind that Israel operates under a very strict code of secrecy and silence concerning essentially all aspects of its nuclear weapons program, a code that applies to officials both during and after their service.<sup>74</sup> It is therefore unreasonable to expect officials such as Peres and Ne'eman to make open and clear statements to such effect. Indeed, what they said already may be testing the bounds of the permissible within Israel.

Additional testimony from a knowledgeable Israeli was offered by Azarayahu Arnan (nicknamed "Sini"), the long-time aide to Minister Yisrael Galil, who was Golda Meir's closest political ally and one of the four members of the Israeli war cabinet during the war. In a long videotaped interview with Avner Cohen, Sini recalled that he was waiting outside the Prime Minister's office in Tel Aviv late in the morning or early in the afternoon of October 7 for his boss, Minister Galili, who was attending a war cabinet meeting (or informal consultation) inside as the situation on the Golan reached its nadir for Israel. Waiting with him outside the meeting room was Shalheveth Freier, then Director-General of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission. Even though the two had known each other for years, Sini related that Freier's body language signaled a complete reluctance to engage in any "small talk."

After the war cabinet meeting adjourned, Galili shared with Sini the unusual events that had taken place inside as the meeting finished. As Galili related to Sini, the meeting had focused on the urgent military situation in the Golan Heights, and especially discussion of sending Minister of Trade and former IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Chaim Bar Lev, to the Northern Command to help address the Command's apparent dysfunction. As the discussion appeared to reach closure and some of the senior military officers and senior civil servants started to leave the room (apparently including Chief of Staff Elazar), Defense Minister Dayan asked Prime Minister Meir if she would permit him to bring in Israeli Atomic Energy Commission Director-General Freier to "brainstorm" with her and the three ministers in the war cabinet (Minister of Defense Dayan, Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon, and Minister without portfolio Yisrael

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74. See Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Galili) about possible “demonstration options,” an apparent reference to a demonstration of Israel’s nuclear weapons capability (it is unclear whether to the United States or to the Arabs/Soviets).

Sini stressed that, according to Galili, Dayan did not ask the cabinet to approve an actual “demonstration.” Rather, Dayan asked the prime minister to authorize Freier to make the necessary perpetrations for such a demonstration in case the need for it arose, since the authorization for preparatory steps at that juncture would save precious time, shortening the execution of an order for an actual demonstration to a matter of minutes rather than hours. According to Sini, the implication from Dayan was that such an authorization would need to be issued from both the Minister of Defense *and* the Prime Minister and, moreover, that he, Dayan, had already ordered or authorized Freier to take some initial preparatory steps, but that a full authorization needed to come from the Prime Minister herself.

At that point Galili and Allon sprang to Meir to oppose vigorously Dayan’s suggestion to bring Freier into the room to discuss preparations for a nuclear “demonstration.” According to Sini, Galili and Allon told the Prime Minister: “You should tell him [Minister Dayan] to forget about it.” They argued that it was premature to consider any option of that nature in that forum and at that stage. The Prime Minister’s military aide, Brigadier General Israel Lior, also supported the two senior ministers in opposing such discussion. In response to Dayan’s recommendation, Meir decided against bringing Freier in to discuss these options.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond these reports of deliberations at the very highest level, other knowledgeable Israelis report that nuclear weapons did not play a significant role in at least the general stream of Israeli decision-making on the war, particularly military decision-making. As in the U.S. case, there seems to be a consensus among Israeli experts and participants that the matter of Israel’s nuclear forces did not receive wide or active discussion in Israeli decision-making circles during the war, with one possible exception.<sup>76</sup> Abraham Rabinowitz reports that

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75. Avner Cohen interview with Azarayahu Arnan. Available on video file with Cohen.

76. CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

at a meeting in “the Pit,” the locus of IDF decision-making, General Ze’evi argued for the use of “special means” against the Syrians on October 7 but was rebuffed by the other attending generals, including Chief of Staff Elazar.<sup>77</sup>

Beyond that account, however, a number of Israeli military officers who were involved in the management of the war have stated clearly that the nuclear issue was never discussed, or even mentioned, in any of the senior military staff meetings during the war. Major General Eli Zeira, who served as the Israeli military intelligence chief during the 1973 War, and Major General Herzl Shafir, who served during the war as human resources and training chief of the IDF and was well-connected within the armed forces, both stated that, at the level of the top IDF senior staff officers below the Chief of Staff of the IDF and the head of the Israeli Air Force, the nuclear issue was never dealt with during the war. General Zeira related that he recalled Minister of Defense Dayan telling the top commanders of the IDF more than once that the nuclear issue was not their concern and that they should not even think about it.<sup>78</sup>

Underlying these constraints was the clear understanding that Israel had very solid reasons for nuclear restraint. Nuclear escalation of the war by Israel would have meant a grand violation of what Israel had

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77. Abraham Rabinowitz, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Changed the Middle East*. New York: Schocken, 2004, 269. In his endnote sourcing on page 522, Rabinowitz sources his claim to an article by influential Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman and Gil Meltzer in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* on August 15, 2003.

78. Avner Cohen interviews with Generals Eli Zeira, Herzl Shafir, and Shlomo Gasit, January and March 2013. In these conversations all three generals, among the few surviving senior Israeli military leaders of the 1973 war, strongly denied having ever heard even a shred of discussion about Israel’s nuclear weapons at any of the meetings they attended during the war. (Each of these officers were all then major generals, one level below IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General David Elazar). General Zeira even noted that Minister Dayan did not allow his top generals to discuss nuclear matters, seeing those issues as beyond their scope. They all stressed, however, that they could not rule out that some discussions of nuclear weapons took place at the war cabinet or other high decision-making levels, but they were confident that whatever was discussed there was not translated into concrete military operational discourse.



repeatedly pledged for nearly a decade – i.e., a national commitment not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East, the commitment that lay at the heart of American and possibly other states’ tolerance of Israel’s nuclear program. Indeed, the understanding that Israel would be restrained its nuclear weapons posture was the core of the September 1969 oral agreement between President Nixon and Prime Minister Meir about Israel’s nuclear program, the agreement that led to the end of the U.S. visits at Dimona nuclear reactor in Israel and to serious American attempts to halt Israel’s budding nuclear weapons program.<sup>79</sup> More broadly, any Israeli demonstration of its nuclear capability, let alone actual use, would almost certainly have led to a widespread condemnation of Israel by the world community and a serious international outcry for Israel to dismantle its nuclear weapons program.<sup>80</sup> Finally, Israel’s nuclear arsenal at the time was almost certainly modest in size and relatively unsophisticated, leaving few options for employment.<sup>81</sup>

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79. For an account of this history based on declassified U.S. documents, see Avner Cohen and William Burr, “Israel Crosses the Threshold,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May/June 2006, 22-30.

80. See, for instance, the Defense Intelligence Agency’s paper, “Long-Range Outlook for Israeli Security,” undated, available in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV: Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2011), 732. Henry Kissinger explained, for instance, that “[s]hould Israel brandish nuclear weapons, the Soviets would counter it and it would be very dangerous for Israel.” Minutes of Bipartisan Congressional Leadership Meeting, November 27, 1973, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume XXV*, 993. Although Kissinger’s remark took place after the events investigated in the study, it applied to Israel’s strategic situation throughout the war.

81. For a discussion of likely Israeli nuclear capabilities as of 1973, see Peter Pry, *Israel’s Nuclear Arsenal* (1984), 29-30. The following year, the U.S. Intelligence Community assessed that Israel had produced and stockpiled a “small” number of nuclear weapons and had invested “heavily” in the Jericho missile system designed to carry nuclear warheads. Special National Intelligence Estimate, *Prospects for Future Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, SNIE 4-1-74, August 23, 1974, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB240/snie.pdf>. Based upon the sources, it seems likely that Israel had a small number of warheads, perhaps 10-20, with some delivery capability via both aircraft and medium- or intermediate-range missile. Israeli capabilities therefore

Short of a true moment of last resort, Israel therefore faced very strong disincentives to unveiling its doomsday weapons.

Where does this leave us? While it is impossible to say precisely what was discussed at the highest levels of the Israeli government, given the limited testimonial and documentary evidence available, we can say with some confidence that the Israelis likely checked the status of and even prepared their nuclear delivery systems as a cautionary measure soon after the beginning of the war. There is no basis to characterize this step an effort to “blackmail,” “coerce,” or even materially influence U.S. policy through the manipulation of their nuclear forces, however.<sup>82</sup> Nor is there such evidence substantiating the proposition that the alert was an attempt to deter or coerce the Arabs or Soviets.

This line of evidence dovetails with the conclusions we reached based on the evidence available from the U.S. side – that there was probably a change in the status of Israel’s nuclear delivery systems but the Americans did not interpret such activity as an attempt to coerce them.

We do not have enough information to determine who made the decision to upgrade the readiness of the nuclear weapons-related assets, but there is some evidence, though not dispositive evidence, to suggest that the upgrade may have been authorized by officials below the level of Prime Minister Meir, and particularly by Defense Minister Dayan, possibly through or with his closest civilian deputy, former IDF Chief of Staff Zvi Zur (nicknamed “Chera”), who in his position played an active role in overseeing the technical and administrative aspects of the Israeli nuclear program and its associated delivery

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were likely subject to the constraints faced by all such immature arsenals. The arsenal was small and relatively inflexible, effective mostly as “dirty” terror weapons. The Jericho missiles were also of uncertain maturity at this stage.

82. Most credible historians and analysts agree on this point. For example, Richard New Lebow and Janice Gross Stein argued that “[t]he evidence does not sustain the proposition that Washington was blackmailed,” pointing to denials by Kissinger and Dinitz as well as similar statements made by other participants. Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, 194.

system formations. As noted above, our information about the Israeli side of events is distinctly limited, but the reports we do have suggest that Dayan might have been operating on his own initiative. This is plausible, moreover, given Dayan's willingness to buck established lines of authority (as he had done in 1956 and 1967 – to success and therefore acclaim); his deep personal interest in and connections to the nuclear program, especially through his senior aide, Zur; and his profoundly unsettled mental state on and about October 7-9, a state which might have made him more likely to take significant steps on his own to avert, as he feared, the loss of the “third house of Israel.”<sup>83</sup> We therefore assess that it is quite possible that Dayan ordered the preparatory steps we conclude were taken without high-level political authorization – and may even have intended these steps as a signal to the United States. It is also possible that such steps were considered “technical” enough that they could be taken even below Dayan's level as Minister of Defense. On the other hand, it is also possible, as Yuval Ne'eman implicitly suggested that Meir herself approved such preparatory steps but that they were intended purely as precautionary steps for weapons of last resort and not for signaling purposes.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, exactly who authorized these preparatory steps at this stage remains a mystery, since we simply do not have sufficient reliable information to make an informed judgment. What we *can* say with confidence, however, is that, when Dayan did bring up the issue of further manipulation of Israel's nuclear forces on October 7, his recommendation was rebuffed by Meir and the other members of the war cabinet.<sup>85</sup>

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83. For Dayan's role in Israel's nuclear weapons program, see Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 148-150, 284, et al. For Dayan's mental state, see Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep*, 228-232, and Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, “Personal Functioning Under Stress: The Role of Accountability and Social Support in Israeli Leaders in the Yom Kippur War,” 52 *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 1 (February 2008), especially 13-16. As Bar-Joseph and McDermott observed, “Dayan's behavior on October 7 indicated he was under an extreme level of stress and revealed signs of panic” (14).

84. Ne'eman in *Nuclear Weapons and the 1973 Middle East War*, 5.

85. See Sini's testimony as well as Cohen's “Last Nuclear Moment” for descriptions of this meeting.

With respect to the impact of Israel's nuclear weapons-related moves on the Arab states, our judgments must remain tentative. Given the limited access to Arab sources, we simply cannot assess with confidence what the Arab states observed of Israeli activity. But, given Arab capabilities at the time, it is unlikely that they could have detected modifications in the alert status of Israeli nuclear weapons – and they almost certainly could not have detected relatively modest modifications. Presumably the Israelis knew of the limitations of Arab reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities, such that an Israeli attempt to deter the Syrians from further incursion into Israel by signaling its intent to use nuclear weapons would have had to have been much more blatant – and thus readily observable to all parties, including the United States – than what the historical record indicates happened. Moreover, there is no need to posit an Israeli nuclear threat to explain Arab actions. Rather, there are entirely plausible alternative explanations for Arab behavior, particularly Syria's failure to exploit its advantages in the Golan Heights on or about October 7. Factors offered include the high rate of casualties suffered, fuel shortages, deteriorating morale, the need to reorganize after heavy fighting, concern about vulnerability to Israeli flank attacks, and/or a Syrian manner of “playing by the book” and thus a method of operation dictating that Syrian forces wait for follow-on units to arrive before exploiting the Israeli gap.<sup>86</sup>

Our assessment with respect to the Soviet Union must be more qualified. The Soviets launched a Cosmos reconnaissance satellite or satellites to surveil the battle area, but we do not know what the capabilities of the satellite(s) were.<sup>87</sup> It is possible that the Soviets had quite good coverage of Israel's nuclear program – or at least that the Israelis thought they did – and thus that Israel, or at least certain Israelis with authority over aspects of the nuclear program or its associated delivery systems, might have thought that even modest modifications to the status of Israel's nuclear-related systems would have constituted a subtle signal to Moscow – and that Moscow could be relied upon to pass such a signal on to Damascus and/or Cairo.

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86. Dunstan, *Yom Kippur War*, 166-167.

87. See William B. Quandt, *Soviet Policy in the October 1973 War*, R-1864-ISA (Santa Monica, CA: 1976), 19, and Ne'eman in *Nuclear Weapons and the 1973 Middle East War*, 15.

Given the limited evidence we have on this question, we simply cannot say for sure. Given our judgment that Israel did not conduct a major attempt at nuclear signaling of any kind during the first few days of the war, however, we assess that it is likely that there was no such attempt with respect to the Soviets.

## What Happened? Our Assessment

Our assessment, then, is that, in the very earliest days of the Yom Kippur War, in an atmosphere of confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty, Israeli officials – possibly at a level below the Prime Minister – ordered key elements of the Israeli nuclear weapons enterprise, probably including the Jericho ballistic missiles, to take steps to increase their readiness and alert status as a defensive or precautionary step in light of the dramatic, and possibly grave, situation that Israel appeared to face. This step was not intended by the responsible authorities of the Israeli government as an attempt to “blackmail” or otherwise induce action by the United States. We further assess that at least some of these steps, particularly the order to alter the status of Israel’s nuclear delivery systems or the alteration itself (possibly including the assembly of certain weapons systems, including nuclear weapons), was detected by U.S. intelligence, and that a report detailing this development was disseminated within the U.S. government, probably to a very small number of concerned officials at senior levels. We assess that this report had no significant impact on the decision-making within the U.S. government. We also judge that it is unlikely that the Israelis intended to send a nuclear signal to other parties, namely the Arabs and/or Soviets, by changing the status of their nuclear delivery systems.

That said, we do judge that Israel’s nuclear weapons capability, its reputation for resolve, and the precariousness of the Israeli position meant that American (as well as Arab and Soviet) officials were cognizant of the threat that Israel might “go nuclear” if pressed to the wall. Because the situation never deteriorated to a level at which such use was seen as necessary or credible, the topic never arose in formal U.S. government deliberations (such as the WSAG) or, in our view, even in informal government discussions. But the possibility that a further deterioration of the situation could compel Israel to consider escalation, including to the nuclear level, was a significant but implicit factor in American deliberations (and likely also in Arab and Soviet decision-making). In this, as in so many cases involving nuclear weapons, their influence was felt more through the way they shaped

the parameters and basic boundaries of discussion and decision than through an impact on individual decisions in detail.<sup>88</sup>

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88. See, for instance, Muthiah Alagappa, *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Asia* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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## Insights from the Case Study

What insights and conclusions can be drawn from this case study? First, it is important to note that great caution must be maintained when attempting to derive propositions of general validity from specific historical instances, instances which are necessarily highly contextualized and contingent. Any individual historical case is far more likely to provide incremental reasons for confidence in or skepticism about general assessments than to provide firm grounds for broad new findings.

With that in mind, this case study provides additional illumination on several important aspects of the study of nuclear weapons and their impact on war and politics.

*The perceptual significance of nuclear operations:* It has long been a commonplace of nuclear theory that the manipulation of nuclear weapons and their associated forces can have significance beyond purely military considerations and, indeed, can be highly destabilizing if such steps are construed by others as having escalatory ramifications. For instance, the U.S. test launch of an Atlas ballistic missile during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Strategic Air Command's upping of its forces' alert level to DEFCON 2 without President Kennedy's knowledge or approval are often pointed to as instances of routine or inertia-driven actions that dangerously risked sending an escalatory message to the potential adversary.<sup>89</sup>

The Yom Kippur War case suggests that such dangers, while real, are not automatic. Here, the Israelis appear to have made changes to the operational status of their nuclear forces *without* triggering a perception of a major escalation by other involved powers. This provides evidence for the intuitive proposition that manipulating one's nuclear forces need not be seen as destabilizing or escalatory,

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89. See, for instance, Martin J. Sherwin, "The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: In Search of Historical Perspective," 44 *Prologue* 2 (Fall 2012).

especially if such actions seem, as the Israeli steps seemed to William Quandt, to be natural reactions to a changed strategic environment. This indicates that the context in which such steps are taken and the *kind* of steps one takes make a difference. Had the Israeli military position been far more dire and the Israelis more aggressive in their nuclear weapons activities, Quandt and the U.S. government might have interpreted their actions quite differently. Given that Israel's situation was bad but not extreme and that Israeli actions seemed designed to ensure the defense and basic readiness of their nuclear forces, however, they elicited little concern.

In the U.S. context, this should suggest charting a middle course between oblivious or overactive manipulation of nuclear forces in a crisis on the one hand and a too-great reluctance to do anything at all on the other. In other words, decision-makers should avoid actions that they have reasonable basis for thinking others would regard as escalatory while not overestimating the probability that other nations will interpret U.S. steps that are designed to increase the survivability or basic functioning of U.S. nuclear forces as destabilizing or escalatory. The context and *type* of activity matter.

***Bureaucratic and organizational factors in nuclear signaling:*** While we were unable to reach a definitive conclusion, it appears plausible that Israel's steps to modify the alert status of its nuclear forces were taken on the initiative of officials (most likely Defense Minister Moshe Dayan) below the highest, authoritative level of Israeli state decision-making. This lends strength to a well-established point: action that might appear to be the product of deliberate, coordinated state action can in some cases be more accurately interpreted as the result of segments of a government rather than of the whole state itself.<sup>90</sup> Nuclear "signals" might, then, be the product of certain organizations or coalitions within governments and might not reflect (or might reflect imperfectly) the policy of the state as a whole. This is especially the case with signals that employ capabilities manipulable without the consent or knowledge of the highest political echelons, notably including nuclear delivery forces. Air forces might be able to operate nuclear-capable bombers and navies nuclear-capable ships

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90. See, for instance, Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1971).

and submarines without high-level political authorization. Care must therefore be taken when attempting to draw inferences about state intent from such signals (or possible signals).

*How necessary or significant are signals?* Nuclear theorists and historians tend to focus on concrete (or purportedly concrete) instances of nuclear signaling, as at the end of the Korean War, in the Taiwan Straits Crises, and in the Cuban Missile Crisis. And these certainly are important cases. But how important are more clear signals in influencing states' behavior as compared to the simple, brute fact of the existence of a state's (or states') nuclear deterrent capability?

In the Yom Kippur War case, everyone involved thought that Israel had a nuclear weapons capability and that Israel would almost certainly use it if the Arabs pushed too far. That seems to have had at least some impact on the Arabs' decision to impose constraints on their objectives and war plans, though Israel's conventional superiority and American backing likely were far more in the front of Arab leaders' minds. It also, according to Quandt and Director of Central Intelligence Colby, was a factor in American decision-making, specifically in reinforcing the American interest in ensuring that Israel was not forced into a corner. It also likely influenced Soviet policy towards the conflict in similar ways. These assessments were, however, based on Israel's basic nuclear weapons capability, and were not particularly sensitive to how Israel manipulated its forces on a day-to-day basis. Of course, observed preparation for actual use would have sent a strong signal, but, given Israel's powerful incentives not to introduce nuclear forces into the war's equation, American decision-makers (and likely other actors) judged that this would likely only have happened *in extremis*. So, nuclear forces played an important part in shaping the basic strategic context in which the war took place and the key actors in the war were aware of Israel's capability and credited Israel's resolve. But they were all also aware that Israel had publicly pledged not to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East and, more broadly, that it was tethered by the knowledge that brandishing its nuclear weapons would likely be to impose upon itself a very serious international political price. These assessments were not particularly fragile or sensitive to Israel's particular nuclear weapons posture.

Moreover, even if Israel *had* sought to manipulate its nuclear forces for strategic effect it is unclear how effective such an attempt would have been. In circumstances short of the extreme situation in which all participants thought Israeli use was plausible, the answer is unclear. In the actual circumstances of the war, would any of the other states have thought Israeli nuclear use credible? Because it never crossed American decision-makers' minds that Israel would actually use its nuclear weapons in the circumstances that were unfolding, any manipulation of nuclear forces that did occur did not enter into the discussion.<sup>91</sup> Is there any reason to think that more nuclear activity on Israel's side would have changed this calculus? We are in the realm of speculation here, but there seems ample reason to think that no one would have thought so, given the tremendous downsides Israel would have faced in using nuclear weapons over attacks on territories it had seized from the Arabs in 1967. Thus, it is unclear whether the United States or any of the other involved states would have interpreted such an attempted signal as being of great significance.<sup>92</sup>

The broader point is simply that the way in which nuclear weapons influence conflict and international politics more broadly is not likely to be substantially affected by attempts at signaling so long as the participants are reasonably cognizant of each other's capabilities and genuine red lines and avoid transgressing the latter, as was the case in the 1973 war. Nuclear weapons cast a long shadow, and thus their influence is likely to be continuously factored into strategic decisions rather than neglected in such a way that signals are necessary to remind decision-makers of their salience of nuclear forces. In today's context, for instance, Israel might, as Paul Bracken has suggested,

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91. Quandt, CNA Workshop, March 11, 2013.

92. An analogous example of an attempt to manipulate nuclear forces for effect well below where such use was deemed credible is the Nixon Administration's attempt to induce the Soviets to pressure the North Vietnamese to be more pliant at the negotiating table by upgrading the alert status of U.S. strategic forces in 1969. The attempt had no discernible impact. See William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3:2 (January 2003), pp. 113-56.

manipulate its nuclear forces in a way observable to the United States in order to try to induce U.S. action against Iran, but it is not clear why such manipulation (absent credible steps towards real employment) would tell the United States anything dramatically new about Israel's calculus.<sup>93</sup>

Of course the point should not be carried too far. Decision-makers can be ignorant, get carried away, lose focus in the fog of war, or simply make poor decisions, in which case signals can play an important role in reinforcing the importance of others states' nuclear forces in strategic calculations. But, even in the most dangerous and tense crises and conflicts, it is unlikely that the awesome influence of nuclear weapons will be wholly ignored or forgotten.

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93. Paul Bracken, "If Iran Gets the Bomb," *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2012, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735104578121513378501702.html>.





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