

Israel's Foreign Policy and its Intelligence Failure in 1973

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ABSTRACT

Israel, since its declaration of independence, has taken a realist perspective in its foreign policy. Yet, despite the offensive realist nature of its foreign policy, it suffered a near defeat in the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Research shows despite signals of an impending Arab threat at the time, Israel chose inaction because of a combination of external and internal factors. The internal factors were precipitated primarily as a result of the Israel's landslide victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, whereas the external factors mainly focused on themes of secrecy and deception. Uri-Bar Joseph, however, presents new evidence that negates the importance of secrecy and deception as a reason for Israel's intelligence failure. He provides evidence that Israel's inaction in 1973 resulted because of key intelligence specialists' psychological shortcomings; Bar-Joseph uses Kruglanski's Theory of Lay Epistemics to support this observation. This theory examines the judgement process and links it with the need for closure, and Bar-Joseph cites this theory in explanation of the judgment decisions of key intelligence officers.

Israel's foreign policy, since its declaration of independence in 1948, has primarily centered on maintaining its security. The Yom Kippur War that occurred on 6 October 1973, one of several Arab-Israeli conflicts that have occurred, began with the surprise attack by Egypt on Israel. This war begs the question of why Israel failed to act despite indications of an Arab threat. The Yom Kippur War precipitated because of the legacy of the devastating blow that the Arabs endured during the pre-emptive strike by Israel in 1967, known as the Six-Day War. Since Israel's foreign policy has centered on realist tenets it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of realist theory. This assessment of the Yom Kippur War will address the realist nature of Israel's foreign policy and the factors that may have caused the anomaly of Israel's inaction to the Arab threat 1973, more specifically the importance of psychological profiles of intelligence analysts who provide crucial information to foreign policy-makers.

In order to understand Israel's foreign policy it is necessary to discuss realism theory as it relates to foreign policy and international relations. William C. Wohlforth states that there are three core assumptions to explain how the world works, as viewed from the realist perspective. These include; groupism which states that to survive people need group solidarity; egoism which states self-interest is what drives political behaviour; and power-centrism which states that power is the most important feature of politics (Smith 2008, 34). As well, the concept of anarchy in realism is a "major shaping force for states preferences and actions" and thus helps to explain how and why states act, in the manner they do, in the international system (Greico 1988, 494). Anarchy for realists is the decentralized nature of the international scene, whereby there is no government to rule over states. Anarchy is, as Kenneth Waltz illustrates, not a system of chaos and disorder, but rather an ordering system of the international framework (Waltz 1979, 88-93). This exemplifies that states have no dictated authority to tell them how they should act in certain situations, as domestic politics would. John Mearshimer explains that although "international relations is not a constant state of war, ... it is a relentless security competition, with the possibility of war always in the background" (Mearshimer 1995, 9). These

tenets are consistent with Wohlforth's explanation of realism and foreign policy regarding the, often misconceived, notions of anarchy in realist theory (Smith 2008, 37).

Israel's foreign policy has revolved around the security of its borders, or national security, since its inception in 1948. This foreign policy direction is a direct result of "neighbouring Arab states [who have] attempted to destroy [the Israeli state]," as they both have legitimate claims to the land (Smith, 286-287). As such, Israel's foreign policy has involved the "three S's – statism, survival, and self-help," which "account for the primacy of national security in Israel's foreign policy." Israel has applied each of the three S's in its foreign policy by; viewing the state as the primary actor; maintaining survival amongst nations who wish to exterminate it; and self-help which involved taking steps to ensure its survival (Smith, 159).

Up until the Yom Kippur War, Israel was labelled as an offensive realist (Smith 2008, 44). The pre-emptive strike by Israel in 1967 exemplifies the offensive realist nature of its foreign policy because it sought to gain "large tracts of territory of strategic importance" (Smith 2008, 289). Since Israeli foreign policy has centered on the constant threat of extermination, why then did policy-makers make such a policy blunder in 1973? The Yom Kippur War occurred, as presented by Gareth Stansfield, because "combination of endogenous and exogenous factors" (Smith, 291). The internal factors mainly resulted because of the huge victory Israel enjoyed after its pre-emptive strike in the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. This war left Israel "exceedingly confident" of her military capabilities, so much so that after the war the military did not reflect upon where her military weaknesses may have been (Smith, 289). Israel's policy-makers viewed the Arabs as relatively disorganized and thus incapable of waging an attack against them. Another internal factor, again related to the outcome of the Six-Day War, were the threats the Arabs regularly made threats on Israel that never materialized (Smith, 289).

The external factors, as Stansfield presents, involved both the United States and Egypt. The United States had significant influence over Israel because she was in its sphere of influence during the Cold War. The United States, during this period, "adopted a policy of [avoiding pressuring] Israel into negotiations with Arab states and instead encouraged her to remain intransigent" (Smith, 291). The other external factor involving Israel's failure to react was the Egyptian "war-planners" capability to conceal their plans for war. Stansfield indicates the Egyptians success in "concealing their intentions through deception and secrecy" (Smith, 291).

Secrecy and deception are a theme throughout much of the research of the Israelis failure to react before the Yom Kippur War occurred. As Chaim Herzog points out:

[t]he deception plan, which was employed by the Egyptians to lull the Israelis into a sense of false security, was based first and foremost on encouraging the 'concept' which the Israelis had openly adopted [regarding the Arabs disunity]. And so from the outset a deception plan was worked out in great detail and developed parallel to the real plan when it moved into operation.

He further mentions that Sadat's deception plan was not only to deceive the Israelis but also the Americans. He affirms this by citing the talk between Abba Eban, Israel's foreign minister, and

Dr. Kissinger on 4 October 1973, in which, “the question of an early war was disposed of in five minutes, [because] both agree[d] that each one’s intelligence on the subject was of a reassuring character” (Herzog 1975, 38).

Lowe et al. in *The United Nations Security Council and War* state, “prevention was impossible, given the surprise nature of the attack” of the Yom Kippur War (Lowe 2008, 309). Upon further research, however, there were multiple warning signals to indicate to Israel that a threat was pending. Ephraim Kahana cites a “partial” list of Israeli intelligence failures that the author divided into two categories: strategic and covert. The strategic failures are subdivided further into two additional categories: underestimation of the opponent’s capabilities and overestimation of imminent threats. The Yom Kippur War is cited as the “most prominent example” of an underestimation of an opponent’s capabilities (Kahana 2005, 266). Uri Bar-Joseph has viewed Egypt’s deception and secrecy, which were listed as an external factor in the case study by Stansfield, as irrelevant to Israel’s debacle. Based on new research Bar-Joseph has concluded, “neither concealment nor deception ... had much relevance for Israel’s 1973 intelligence failure.” The article continues to state that “although a number of works [have] refer[ed] to an Egyptian deception plan – at the center of which stood the attempt to disguise preparations for a war as a routine exercise-its overall quality was poor” (Bar-Joseph 2003, 76). Based on this fact, as presented by Bar-Joseph, the Israeli intelligence failure has been cited as a primary reason for inaction in the 1973 war.

The intelligence failure occurred, according to the research of Bar-Joseph, because of psychological shortcomings of key intelligence specialists. Both Bar-Joseph and A.W. Kruglanski, however, have argued that the “psychology of human judgement” is “highly relevant” to the events leading up the Yom Kippur War. In their analysis they use “Kruglanski’s Theory of Lay Epistemics- to illuminate the process that led to the misuse of the available information and culminated in its inappropriate assessment by highly trained and otherwise superbly competent intelligence specialists,” namely the Director of Military Intelligence, Major-General Eli Zeira and AMAN’s prime estimator for Egyptian affairs, Lieutenant-Colonel Yona Bandman (Bar-Joseph 2003, 77). This type of psychological analysis further explains the failure of the Israeli intelligence (Bar-Joseph 2003), despite its superiority in the Middle East (Herzog, 40).

Lay-Epistemic Theory states “all human judgements are formed through a process wherein inference rules to which the individual subscribes (not unlike those derived from “operational codes”) are applied to situationally present evidence to yield conclusions” (Bar-Joseph 2003, 78). The judgemental process is “governed” by parameters. There are a number of parameters mentioned; the central one is “subjective relevance.” “This is defined in terms of degrees of belief in an ‘if/then’ inference rule connecting the evidence and the judgement in the decision-maker’s mind, such that if the evidence were observed the judgement would be warranted.” The others listed are “experienced difficulty of the task,” “processing motivation” and finally “bias” either motivational or cognitive (Bar-Joseph 2003, 79). The major motivational factor is the need for cognitive closure, which plays a pivotal part in the judgment formation processes and from this comes the “specific need for closure” (Bar-Joseph 2003, 80).

Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski point out two points related to specific need for closure. They are; firstly, “a non-specific need for closure turns into a specific need once a given judgement is in hand,” and secondly “in social contexts the needs for nonspecific and specific closures may interact with the interdependence structure of a given social situation. If high-powered figures in that situation form a given judgement (e.g. because of their need for closure) that they then became motivated to defend (because of a high need for a specific closure that ensued), their dependent subordinates and followers might also develop a need for specific closure to agree with their high-powered superiors” (Bar 2003, 80). This is the point Bar-Joseph emphasizes within the article. Two of the high profile analysts, because of their specific need for closure, became blind sighted to the signals of a potential Arab threat. Thus, Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski opened the “black box” to link “specific dysfunctional behaviour by specific officers to a specific result” (Bar-Joseph 2003, 76).

Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski’s findings are consistent with Robert Jervis’s in his discussion of the “unfortunate consequences of misconceptions which evolve due to pre-existing belief systems” (Heichal 1999, 198). Heichal cites Jervis as stating that:

If the decision-maker thinks, an event yields self-evident and unambiguous inferences when in fact these inferences are drawn on pre-existing views and he will grow too confident of his views and will prematurely exclude alternatives because he will conclude that the event provides independent support for his beliefs. People frequently fail to realize that evidence that is consistent with their hypothesis may also be consistent with other views (Heichal 1999, 198).

Jervis’s views are consistent with Lay-Epistemic Theory and closure. The overwhelming Israeli victory of the 1967 conflict provided too much confidence in the military. The perceptions of a superior Israeli military and a dysfunctional, unorganized foe played heavily on both, Major-General Eli Zeira and Lieutenant-Colonel Yona Bandman, in forming their judgments.

The Yom Kippur War humbled Israel, which caused it to revert to its former offensive realist foreign policy, which it embraced before 1973. Extensive research has been conducted into the Israeli response in 1973. Since the Yom Kippur War, Israel has had an “increase[ed] number of overestimations regarding enemy capabilities,” so as to not repeat the events of 1973 (Kahana 2005, 266).

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