

Advanced Institute, Spring 2020
THE YOM KIPPUR WAR:
A CASE STUDY IN STRATEGY, POWER, & CHARACTER
Instructor: Vance Serchuk
Washington, DC

The Yom Kippur War was the last in a series of conventional wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors that convulsed the second half of the 20th century. It is also one of the great—and largely understudied—hinge points of history. In the Middle East, what began as a surprise attack against the Jewish State on Judaism’s holiest day paradoxically marked the start of an improbable journey toward a new regional peace. For the wider Cold War, the Arab-Israeli upheaval brought the superpowers closer to nuclear cataclysm than any point after the Cuban Missile Crisis; it also set the conditions for the United States to outflank the Soviet Union and emerge as the preeminent power in the Levant, while consigning Moscow to the fringes of the region where it would remain for decades. And for the world economy, October 1973 would unleash equally epic change—as the Arab oil embargo smashed and then remade Western industry.

This Weekend Seminar, taught by foreign policy expert Vance Serchuk, will study the dramatic events surrounding the Yom Kippur War of October 1973. Students will consider the war as a case study in the exercise of military, diplomatic, and economic power, analyzing the collision of rival US, Soviet, Israeli, and Arab strategies. The seminar will also explore the larger-than-life personalities at the center of the conflict—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Leonid Brezhnev, Anwar Sadat, and Golda Meir—examining how the character and decisions of these individual leaders shaped the course of the war and its aftermath.

Friday, March 13, 2020

4 pm to 6 pm

The Path to the War

Readings:

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, November 22, 1967
- Craig Daigle, excerpt from Chs. 1-2 and 5-7, *Limits of Détente* (2012)
- Henry Kissinger, Ch. 6, *Years of Upheaval* (1982)

Discussion Questions:

1. What was UN Security Council Resolution 242, and what was its significance?
2. What was President Richard Nixon’s initial approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict upon taking office in January 1969? What was the proposed approach of Secretary of State William Rogers and how did it differ from that of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and where did Nixon come down between them?
3. How did the Nixon Administration relate its approach to the Middle East, on the one hand, and to its Cold War strategy, on the other?

4. What was the Soviet Union's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the wake of the 1967 Six Day War? What was Israel's strategy under Prime Minister Golda Meir? What was the approach of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt?
5. How did the succession of Anwar Sadat following the death of Nasser alter Egyptian strategy? How was Sadat's approach to Israel and the superpowers different from that of Nasser?
6. How did the 1972 Moscow summit affect Sadat's calculus? Why did Sadat evict Soviet forces from Egypt in 1972?
7. What was Sadat's calculus in deciding to go to war in October 1973? What did he seek to achieve? To what extent was Sadat's decision to launch the war linked to superpower dynamics? When do you think he made the decision to go to war?
8. What was Syria's objective in deciding to go to war in October 1973? To what extent were Egyptian and Syrian war aims in alignment?
9. What caused the outbreak of the October 1973 war? Was the war preventable?

Saturday, March 14, 2020

8:30 am to 9 am

Group Breakfast

9 am to Noon

The Outbreak of the War

Readings:

- Bruce Riedel, excerpt from "Enigma: The Anatomy of Israel's Intelligence Failure Almost 45 Years Ago," Brookings Institution, September 25, 2017
- Uri Bar Joseph, Ch. 19, *The Watchman Fell Asleep* (2005)
- Henry Kissinger, "Why We Were Surprised," *Years of Upheaval* (1982)
- OPTIONAL: Abraham Rabinovich, Chs. 1-5, 8-9, and 14, *The Yom Kippur War* (2004)

Discussion Questions:

1. The Yom Kippur War is often described as the greatest intelligence failure in Israeli history, comparable to Pearl Harbor or 9/11 for the US. Is this fair?
2. What warnings did Israel and the United States receive that Egypt and Syria were preparing to go to war? Why were they discounted? What were the reasons that led both Israeli and American officials to fail to anticipate the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War?
3. Why didn't Israel launch a preemptive strike?
4. What was the initial US response following the outbreak of the war? What were the underlying strategic assumptions on Washington's part? What, if any, vital interests did the Nixon Administration see at stake in the war?
5. What military changes enabled Egyptian and Syrian forces to achieve unanticipated battlefield gains against the Israelis? Why were the Israelis unprepared for them?
6. What was the US domestic political context as the war broke out? To what extent did this impact US strategy or decision-making?

Noon to 1:30 pm

Lunch and Discussion

1:30 pm to 4 pm

The Waging of the War

Readings:

- Henry Kissinger, “Shaping a Strategy,” “October 9-10: The Tide Turns Ominously,” “October 12-13: Our Airlift Begins,” “October 13-14: The Failed Cease-Fire,” and “October 15-16: The Tide Turns Again,” *Years of Upheaval* (1982)
- Abraham Rabinovich, Ch. 14, *The Yom Kippur War* (2004)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did US strategy change as expectations of a rapid Israeli victory were proven mistaken? What were the key considerations for Nixon and Kissinger as the war intensified?
2. Why did the Nixon Administration undertake an airlift to Israel, and how did it evolve in structure and substance? What strategic considerations was Washington balancing? What were the arguments for caution, what were the arguments for a more robust approach, and where did President Nixon ultimately come down?
3. What impact did the airlift have? What was its strategic significance, if any?

6 pm to 8 pm

Dinner & Discussion
The Cease-Fire and the Nuclear Alert

Readings:

- Henry Kissinger, “October 18-19: An Invitation to Moscow,” “Journey to Moscow,” “Agreement on a Cease-Fire,” and “A Tense Visit to Israel,” *Years of Upheaval* (1982)
- Golda Meir, Mordechai Gazit, Henry Kissinger, and Peter Rodman, “Memorandum of Conversation,” October 22, 1973
- UN Security Council Resolution 338, October 22, 1973
- Henry Kissinger, excerpt from “October 23-27, 1973: The US Alert and the End of the Crisis,” *Crisis* (2003)
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV, “Document 269: Memorandum for the Record,” pages 737-742
- Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV, “Document 274: Message from President Nixon to Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev,” pages 747-749

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the Soviets invite Kissinger to Moscow for negotiations? What was his rationale in accepting? What was Kissinger's strategy going into the negotiation? How did President Nixon complicate this plan?
2. What was UN Security Council Resolution 338, and what did it achieve? How does it compare to the objectives of the key parties at the start of the conflict?
3. What led to the Soviet threat to intervene directly in the conflict following Kissinger's return to Washington following the declaration of the cease-fire? How did the US react to the Soviet threat, and why?
4. What were the US domestic political circumstances as the nuclear alert unfolded?
5. Who had emerged as the winners and losers of the Yom Kippur War as of late October 1973? How do you judge the performance of the key decision-makers in Washington, Moscow, Jerusalem, Cairo, and Damascus during the crisis?

Sunday, March 15, 2020

9 am to Noon

Diplomacy after the War

Readings:

- William Quandt, Ch. 7, *Decade of Decisions* (1977)

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the US approach to Arab-Israeli diplomacy following the cessation of fighting? How did this effort differ from the US effort under Secretary Rogers in 1969-1970? What changed?
2. What was the rationale for the Geneva Conference? What role did Kissinger envision for the Soviets in Arab-Israeli diplomacy?
3. What was the strategy behind Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy"? What did it achieve, and why?

Noon to 2 pm

Closing Lunch and Discussion

Readings:

- Stephen Kotkin, Ch. 1, *Armageddon Averted* (2001)
- Ray Takeyh and Steve Simon, Ch. 7, *The Pragmatic Superpower* (2016)
- Abraham Rabinovich, Ch. 38, *The Yom Kippur War* (2004)

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the impact of the October 1973 war on global energy markets? How did this alter Western economies?
2. What was its impact on the Soviet Union and the Cold War?

3. What was the historical significance of the Yom Kippur War? What, if any, are the lessons to be learned from it?

Suggested Background Reading

(Available electronically and in hard copy upon request)

- 1) Craig Daigle, Conclusion, *The Limits of Détente* (2012)
- 2) Victor Israelyan, Chs. 1-2 and 5-7, *Inside the Kremlin During the Yom Kippur War* (1995)
- 3) Yigal Kipnis, Introduction, Chs. 1-2, *1973: The Road to War* (2013)
- 4) Henry Kissinger, "October 23-27, 1973: The US Alert and the End of the Crisis," *Crisis* (2003)
- 5) Henry Kissinger, Ch. 15, *The White House Years* (1979)
- 6) Edward McClelland, "The Month that Killed the Middle Class," *Salon*, March 7, 2015
- 7) Abraham Rabinovich, Chs. 6-7, 12, 23-24, 27-28, and 32-33, *The Yom Kippur War* (2004)
- 8) Kenneth Stein, Ch. 4-6, *Heroic Diplomacy* (1999)
- 9) Daniel Yergin, Chs. 29-30, *The Prize* (1990)

Timeline of the Yom Kippur War

- BEFORE** Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War of 1967 left the Jewish nation in control of territory three times its previous size. Egypt lost the 23,500-square-mile Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, Jordan lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Syria lost the strategic Golan Heights.
- Oct. 6, 1973 –** Hoping to win back territory lost to Israel, Egyptian and Syrian forces launch a coordinated attack against Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.
- Egyptian troops cross the Suez Canal and secure a beachhead in the eastern portion of the Sinai Desert, breaching Israel's Bar-Lev line. Syrian troops defeat Israeli forces on Mt. Hermon in northern Israel.
- Oct. 7, 1973 –** Syria captures most of the southern portion of the Golan Heights.
- Oct. 8, 1973 –** Israel launches its first counterattack against Egypt, which is unsuccessful. The Soviet Union supplies additional arms to Syria and Egypt.
- Oct. 9, 1973 –** Against orders, reserve Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon launches a counterattack against Egyptian forces in the canal area. Sharon's actions lead to moves for his dismissal.
- Oct. 9, 1973 –** US Jewish leader Max Fisher urges President Richard Nixon in a meeting at the White House to "please send the Israelis what they need." That night, Nixon tells Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir that "all your aircraft and tank losses will be replaced."
- Oct. 10, 1973 –** Washington authorizes an airlift of military supplies to Israel after the Soviet Union sends additional arms to Egypt. Israel successfully attacks Egyptian troops that had moved out of range of their protective surface-to-air-missile umbrella. Israel recaptures most of the territory in the southern Golan.
- Oct. 11, 1973 –** Israel attacks Syria from its positions on the Golan Heights. The Soviet Union's ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, tells US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that Soviet airborne forces are on the alert to defend Damascus. Kissinger warns Dobrynin that if the Soviet forces sent troops to the Middle East, the United States would as well.
- Oct. 12-13, 1973 –** The US sends additional arms shipments to Israel.
- Oct. 14, 1973 –** In one of the largest tank-to-tank battles ever fought, Israel is estimated to have lost 10 tanks, the Egyptians anywhere from 250 to 300. Iraq and Jordan send troops to the Golan, in response to appeals for assistance from Syria.

- Oct. 16, 1973** – The first Israeli troops cross the Suez Canal. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat asks the Soviet Union to convene the United Nations and seek a cease-fire.
- Oct. 17, 1973** – Ten Arab member-nations of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries announce they will cut oil production until Israel withdraws from Arab territory captured during the 1967 Six Day War and the rights of the Palestinian people are “restored.” The embargo was not completely lifted until March 1974.
- Oct. 20, 1973** – Israeli forces reach within 10 miles of Damascus.
- Oct. 21, 1973** – Israeli forces, led by reserve Maj. Gen. Avraham Adan, encircle the Egyptian Third Army. Forces led by Sharon take up positions less than 40 miles from Cairo.
- Oct. 22, 1973** – Israel overtakes all Syrian positions on Mt. Hermon. The UN adopts Security Council Resolution 338, which calls for an immediate cease-fire and the implementation of Security Resolution 242, which calls for an exchange of land for peace and negotiations between the “parties concerned” aimed at establishing a “just and durable peace.”
- Oct. 23, 1973** – Fighting continues despite the cease-fire. The UN Security Council passes resolution 339, which restates the group’s call for an immediate cease-fire and the dispatch of UN observers to the area.
- Oct. 24, 1973** – A second cease-fire is put into effect but fighting continues between Egypt and Israel. As a result, the Soviet Union threatens the US that it will send troops to support the Egyptians. The US puts its nuclear forces on a higher alert. The Soviet Union withdraws its threat the following day.
- Oct. 28, 1973** – Israeli and Egyptian military leaders meet to implement the cease-fire at Kilometer 101 marker in the Sinai. It is the first meeting between the military representatives of the two countries in 25 years.
- The Yom Kippur War resulted in the death of 2,500 to 2,700 Israelis and an estimated ten to 16,000 Arab soldiers—and wounded over twice that number.
- Mar. 26, 1979** – The Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty is signed, following two interim agreements of separation of forces and withdrawal of Israeli forces. The treaty was the result of secret preliminary talks between senior Israeli and Egyptian representatives, Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the conclusion of the Camp David Accords of September 18, 1978.