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# 1973—A GLOBAL PARADIGM SHIFT

*The outcomes of wars are evaluated based on how close any of the warring parties come to reaching their objectives. In the case of Egypt in the October War, it is undeniable that the country fulfilled its objectives*

*By Nabil Fahmy*

**H**alf a century has passed since the 1973 October War, yet which side emerged victorious from this pivotal conflict remains an open question that is still debated endlessly both globally and in the Middle East. Military strategists often couch the answer in terms of territories gained or lost, or as a function of military and human cost. Political scientists and practitioners of diplomacy focus more on whether the optimum goals of conclusive victory of one side over the other were achieved, or whether all outstanding problems between the parties were settled.

Both criteria are inappropriate. Victory or defeat is not determined by hard tangible assets, nor can success or failure be assessed in absolute terms given the fog of war and the complexities of negotiations on reaching a settlement to the conflict. Assessing the outcome of war hinges on the question of whether the respective parties ended up in better or worse circumstances in its aftermath, and whose predetermined objectives were achieved. It is important in this respect to underscore that the use of force is a tool to achieve a core political objective.

Addressing the “who won” question requires revisiting the politico-military environment before October 1973, Egypt’s objectives for going into the war, as well as the negotiating process after the guns went silent. To this end, this essay focuses mainly on Egypt, which together with Syria initiated the war, while also reflecting on Israel, as well as the other parties to the conflict: the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians.

## **The Prelude to War**

Late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat firmly believed that his country needed to vigorously embrace modernity and socioeconomic development. He also



understood that the interminable Arab-Israeli conflict was imposing a heavy toll on Egypt

△ Reconnaissance unit of the Egyptian Armed Forces conducting operations during the October War.  
*Mohamed Lotfy/Ahram*

It is worth noting that his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser had accepted the unilaterally developed peace “plan” offered by U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers in 1969. It called for a “fair solution” to the Palestinian refugee problem without offering a political solution for the Palestinians while ignoring Syria altogether. It aimed at securing first and foremost an Egyptian-Israeli agreement and offered to establish an agreement between Jordan and Israel. That plan was quickly derailed because of Israeli reticence and ironically internal divisions within the Nixon administration, resulting from objections raised by U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, who had little respect for the State Department then, and no real interest or experience in Middle Eastern affairs.

Sadat assumed office following Nasser’s sudden death in September 1970. Disappointed and uncomfortable with his relations with the Soviet Union and concerned about domestic political opposition, Sadat publicly floated several peace initiatives to Israel including opening the Suez Canal to international shipping if Israeli forces were to withdraw fifty kilometers eastward from the canal zone. He also sent his national security adviser Hafez Ismail to meet Kissinger twice in 1973 in the hopes that the latter would serve as an interlocutor in negotiations between Egypt and Israel. Sadat’s overtures, however, were

received with disinterest by both the Israelis and the Americans, neither of whom took Sadat seriously at the time. Both the Israelis and the Americans miscalculated that Sadat did not possess any agency, and they shared a sense of hubris flowing from Israel's perceived military dominance that obviated any need to negotiate.

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With his efforts falling on deaf ears, and his personal domestic credibility increasingly eroding, Sadat had the foresight to conclude that Egypt needed to militarily demonstrate a seriousness of purpose in order to change the political paradigm. That would surely spur negotiations. At the same time, he also wisely understood that given Israeli's military superiority, it would be unrealistic to attempt a complete liberation of the occupied Sinai by military means. His objective was to initiate a limited targeted military operation with calculated objectives against a stronger adversary for the purpose of creating a more conducive negotiating paradigm. He took the courageous step toward this objective even though Israel could militarily depend on the United States, while Soviet support for Egypt—which ultimately came through—was questionable given that its military experts had been asked to leave just a year earlier.

The United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel had no appetite to negotiate peace in the Middle East before the 1973 War. Washington and Moscow were focused on superpower détente, while Israel basked in a sense of invincibility, its forces secure behind the supposedly impenetrable Bar-Lev defense fortifications on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. None of the other parties wanted war, or even seriously considered that Egypt possessed a war option.

Sadat, on the other hand, wanted to negotiate peace, and initiating military operations with the specific objective of initiating negotiations was a means to an end. Syria decided to join a military coalition with Egypt, although it remains unclear whether it felt it could liberate the Golan Heights militarily or, like Sadat, was intent on engaging militarily to create a window for negotiations. It is my firm conviction that Egypt emerged as the biggest winner from the 1973 War because Sadat's immediate goal was achieved, irrespective of the final disposition of forces at the time of the ceasefire or the conclusion of diplomatic negotiations.

### **The Aftermath of War**

I was about to finish high school during the 1967 Six-Day War and my university studies just after the 1973 War. I vividly remember how the 1967 defeat was a severe blow to Egypt that shattered its self-confidence. On the other hand, the

1973 War was a profoundly traumatic event for Israel, and shocked the United States and the Soviet Union into realizing that Egypt's military initiative was a game changer in the Middle East. The war also left the United States reeling from the effects of the Arab oil embargo, while the Soviet Union had become embittered as it watched its influence diminish in the region.

Perhaps more importantly, the war restored a sense of confidence and pride among the Egyptian people. This is difficult to quantify, but it was an invaluable pivot point and an indispensable precondition for dealing with the intricacies and complexities of balancing relations with the Soviet Union, the United States, and the Arab World, as well as negotiating with Israel.

The 1973 War was invaluable in creating a geopolitical paradigm which fostered negotiations between the Arabs, particularly with respect to Egypt and Israel. Without the war, negotiations would have been questionable considering the highly stagnant pre-1973 geopolitical environment. Given Sadat's specific war aims, the immediate consequences of the 1973 War were very much aligned with Egypt's objectives, more so than with any of the other parties to the conflict.

The decreased role of the Soviet Union in light of Sadat asking their military experts to leave in 1972 benefitted America in its Cold War competition. This advantage, however, was not the result of U.S. initiative. Rather it was Egypt that took the initiative despite its situation of military disadvantage after the 1967 defeat.

The Israelis ultimately gained from the war as well, albeit after having to swallow some bitter medicine and undergo serious and painful reflection. Having been forced to abandon their sense of invincibility, Israel's reassessment of its place, which was prompted by the war, opened the door for negotiations that would conclude with several peace agreements with Arab states. It is important to note here that these agreements did not come about because of any premeditated willingness by Israel but as a direct consequence of the 1973 conflict.

The Soviet Union only gained incrementally and indirectly from the war by way of its weapons not being defeated in the theater of operations (as had happened in 1967), but it did witness a diminishing role in the Middle East. This was a significant American goal which then-President Richard Nixon openly mentioned to Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy at the White House on October 31, 1973, just a few days after the war ended, when he affirmed that the United States now recognized Egypt as a central player in the region and would act accordingly.

The strategic landscape of the Middle East was thus profoundly changed as a result of the war. The ultimate agent of that change was Sadat's determination to

develop a limited war option to force an Israeli—and American—reassessment, prompting both to consider negotiations seriously. The United States and the Soviet Union did not want Egypt and Syria to initiate the 1973 War, nor for that matter were they always supportive of different Arab negotiating positions or tactics. Sadat's strategy thus underscores the importance of regional parties reserving the ability to take independent national decisions, irrespective of relations with friend or foe.

Major global players also need to better understand and be cognizant of regional dynamics. Superpower competition has wider global scope and context, but it is not the exclusive determinant in world affairs. Regional dynamics will have consequences on the interests of global powers, a reality starkly revealed by the fact that the United States raised its nuclear alert level during the October War to deter Soviet engagement.

### **Pivoting From War to Peace**

The Geneva Peace Conference on the Middle East took place in Switzerland from December 21-23, 1973, under the aegis of the United Nations and the sponsorship of the United States and Soviet Union. Egypt welcomed the co-sponsorship but insisted that it be under UN auspices because this reaffirmed the legal basis for conflict resolution. Interestingly, Jordan participated even though it had not joined the war effort, while Syria absented itself. This raised questions regarding Syria's motivation, but more importantly, it was a grave mistake for the Syrians because it was the first indication that the Arab front was not politically united.

The United States brokered two Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreements in 1974 and 1975, as well as a disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel in 1974, all signed in the context of the reconvened Geneva Conference. Because the United States and Soviet Union were focused on having their respective allies militarily disengage, Jordan did not get a disengagement agreement as it was not a party to the war. With the luxury of hindsight, this appears to have been a substantial mistake. Bringing Jordan into the post-war diplomacy would have entailed a focus on the territory of the West Bank of the River Jordan occupied by Israel as a result of the 1967 War, which could have been the kernel of a Palestinian State if further progress in the peace negotiations had been achieved.

Sadat and the Egyptian foreign policy establishment wanted a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, including a Palestinian state where Palestinians could express their national identity. Both were adamant that all occupied Egyptian territory without exception would be returned to Egypt. I remember years later former Israeli President Ezer Weizman recounting to a group, which included myself, that the Israelis found Sadat's and Egypt's negotiating styles perplexing. They were surprised that the initial and concluding positions on fundamentals

like territory were identical and unwavering, while the Israelis would always exaggerate requests or inflate problems to create room for negotiations and justifications for compromises made. The difference is simple and profound:

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*I believe that the October War created a negotiating paradigm, induced a sense of national confidence on the Arab side that enhanced its negotiating position, generated a higher level of respect toward Arab demands, and forced a sliver of Israeli realism.*

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put simply, Egypt had sovereign international borders and respected international law while Israel's borders were not legally defined and over the years had shown very little respect for international law.

I believe that the October War created a negotiating paradigm, induced a sense of national confidence on the Arab side that enhanced its negotiating position, generated a higher level of respect

toward Arab demands, and forced a sliver of Israeli realism. It also established a higher sense of international priority to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian cause, which became prominent on the international agenda, leading to then-PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat addressing the UN General Assembly in New York on November 13, 1974.

### **A Still Elusive Comprehensive Peace**

In later years, peace agreements between Israel and Egypt—and Jordan—would be successfully concluded, and decades later, the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians would be signed. However, a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement has still not been realized in the region. Occupation of Arab territories continues while Palestinians remain deprived of their national rights and live under inhumane circumstances. Violence continues more than seven decades after the conflict was initiated.

From the outset, the Arabs have complained bitterly about Kissinger's pro-Israeli bias. Equally important, if not more so, it was evident that he never attempted or wanted to achieve Arab-Israeli peace. His declared objective was to establish "order" to allow him to manage relations with the Soviet Union. This is explicitly confirmed in numerous books by and about Kissinger, including most recently Martin Indyk's comprehensive book on Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy *Master of the Game*. Consequently, it is unquestionable that Kissinger did not invest in peacemaking and intentionally limited the prospects for peace that could have been realized as the result of the paradigm shift brought about by the October War. This served Israel's interests but was mostly a Kissingerian U.S. objective. Over-dependence on the United States, and increasingly on Kissinger himself given his leading role as a result of the turmoil of the closing Nixon years, was a major mistake made by the Arabs despite the validity of their objectives.

Another egregious mistake made years later was to move the peace process out of the aegis of the United Nations to that of the superpowers, and subsequently to the sole supervision of the United States. This undermined the centrality of the sole internationally recognized framework of Arab-Israeli peacemaking embodied in the principle of “land for peace”—a phrase used as a euphemism for Security Council Resolution 242. Ultimately, with the breakdown of the Soviet Union and changing circumstances including American administrations less committed to a two-state solution, a distorted Israeli concept of “Peace for Security” and now “Arab-Israeli peace before Israeli-Palestinian Peace” is unabashedly promoted by the Israeli government.

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Any negotiator versed in the Arab-Israeli conflict will have a depth of experience in how detailed, legalistic, recalcitrant, and expansionist Israel can be when it comes to the return of territories even when there is no Israeli ideological basis for their occupation, such as the situation with the Sinai Peninsula. That being said, Israel appreciates the strategic security value of signed agreements. Security trumps everything.

Israel complained for years about a cold peace with Egypt. There were also infrequent but not insignificant issues relating to the Egyptian-Israeli border. Not once, however, has Israel threatened to abrogate the peace agreement concluded with Egypt, and the reason is quite simple. The Egyptian-Israeli peace agreements—with end-of-conflict provisions—essentially removed any potential for an Arab-Israeli war in the future. Should such a conflict have erupted, it would have been devastating for the Arabs without the Egyptian Armed Forces.

Consequently, after completely ignoring the Camp David Accords signed at the White House between Egypt and Israel in September 1978—which established a framework to address the Palestinian issue with then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin openly saying he was not committed to anything beyond the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty—Israel ultimately withdrew from Egyptian territory completely after legalistic jostling about actual placing of border postings. It was a case of pragmatic realpolitik that established security for Israel in exchange for land for Egypt, and that remains the underlying rationale to this day.

### **Opposition to Sadat’s Post-War Diplomacy**

There have been vehement voices of opposition in Egypt and the Arab World to Sadat’s strategy of agreeing to peace with Israel; some have even unjustifiably



questioned his sincerity in pursuing comprehensive peace. Sadat was a courageous and astute politician and strategist who focused on the bigger picture—the war would not have happened without him—whereas the Israeli approach was dominated by a security-focused obsession with micro-level details.

Sadat and his Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy held each other in high respect and were quite close. Both wanted a change in direction for Egypt's foreign policy as well as a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. How best to deal with Israel and Egypt's relations with global powers was nonetheless a contentious subject between Sadat and Fahmy. Sadat was a courageous leader focused on the big picture. Fahmy was a strategically seasoned diplomat and highly acclaimed negotiator. Ultimately, however, the latter resigned in objection to Sadat's 1977 Jerusalem visit because of his strong conviction that this would feed into Israeli negotiating tactics of divide and conquer and only lead to a bilateral peace agreement between the two countries. Bilateral peace would leave Israel free to completely ignore all other issues thereafter, making comprehensive peace unachievable. Israel stayed true to its practices and did little to accommodate Sadat's magnanimous gestures.

Interestingly, however, Sadat's Jerusalem trip took the Americans by surprise. Stuart Eisenstadt, President Jimmy Carter's liaison with the American Jewish community, recounts in his book that Carter first thought this to be folly that would disrupt his efforts to reconvene the Geneva Peace Conference aimed at bringing all the conflicting regional parties together. He only backed off opposing the Jerusalem trip when its political momentum rapidly grew and became unstoppable.

### **ROI for Middle Eastern Peace**

Regionalizing peacemaking, despite its cumbersome nature and inherent complexities, is the only real solution to achieving comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. That is what the George Bush administration tried to achieve when it convened the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991, under a regional umbrella, and with focus toward bilateral negotiations and multilateral peace-building. Russia was a nominal partner in this effort and the United Nations was regrettably not the hosting body. However, letters issued by then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker to the parties clearly and correctly established the internationally recognized parameters for peace in the Middle East.

The process did not proceed smoothly, but it brought the parties back together again under one umbrella to provide international support for a major effort to reach a resolution to the decades-old conflict, as well as to counter naysayers like then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir by substantially increasing the regional return on the investment in peace.

Numerous efforts and permutations developed thereafter, including—but not exclusively—the Palestinian-Israeli Oslo process. Negotiations with limited participants are normally easier to manage and even more efficient tactically, especially with Israel’s penchant for detail. It is also clear, however, that the more we compartmentalized tracks and isolated them, the more difficult it was to resolve the core Palestinian-Israeli issues at the heart of the conflict, particularly when there exists a strategic imbalance of power.

Looking back at the outcome of the 1973 October War, one cannot deny that it was historic in its numerous consequences. It was all the more so because the geopolitical environment of the time was not conducive to bold decision-making. Most of all, the war opened the door for negotiations between regional parties big and small.

The credit for the decision to go to war goes first and foremost to Anwar Sadat, who was unwavering in his pursuit of peace in the region. One can legitimately question his negotiating tactics thereafter, and fault will be found. No one, especially politicians, are perfect. I strongly believe that while the results of the negotiations are not what we had hoped for in terms of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, the 1973 War was most beneficial, especially for Egypt, but equally so for those sincerely pursuing conflict resolution rather than continued occupation or the status quo.

However, I am dumbfounded by those who belittle the significance of the October War as a monumental game-changer, or question that Egypt was the greatest beneficiary, even if all its goals were not fully realized. These historic opportunities for peace would not have existed without the 1973 War. Hopefully, the prospects of peace can be revived without the region having to suffer another conflict. 