

WHAT IF THE OCTOBER WAR HAD HAPPENED DIFFERENTLY?

*Four “what ifs” that could have
changed the course of history*

By William B. Quandt

Most analysts who have written about the 1973 October War agree that it was a major international event that had long-lasting consequences for the Middle East region, for global power relations, and for the world economy. The basic narrative of what happened and why is largely agreed upon, although some puzzles remain. The American archives, and more recently the Israeli ones as well, provide access to documents that shed considerable light on internal deliberations at the highest policy levels, and many memoirs and journalistic accounts are also available to fill in some of the gaps, especially concerning policymaking in the Soviet Union, Syria, and Egypt.

Despite this historical consensus around the broad lines of the war, some questions, of course, linger. For example, when and why did Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat decide that some limited military action, rather than diplomacy, would be needed to break the post-1967 War impasse? Furthermore, when and how did Saudi Arabia reach an understanding with Egypt that it would use its oil to pressure the United States to adopt a more even-handed policy if war breaks out? On the American side, there are questions about President Richard Nixon and his role in the diplomatic efforts before, during, and after the war. He was mired in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and this left policymaking on the American side largely in the hands of his newly appointed Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. If Nixon had been more engaged, might American policy have been different? We know from the infamous tape recordings that Nixon often spoke quite bluntly about “squeezing” the Israelis and working with the Soviets to impose a settlement in the Middle East. Kissinger would sometimes imply that he agreed, but his actions suggest that he was much less willing than Nixon to go down either of those roads.



Some of the answers to these and other questions may be made clear with the passage of time and the release of additional documents. However, I do not really think we should expect many new, surprising revelations. Instead, I suggest that the most interesting angle of historiography concerning the October 1973 War will come from the treacherous terrain of exploring the “what ifs” surrounding this crisis. This is, of course, a risky business because alternative scenarios cannot be empirically verified. Yet, the question remains: what might have happened if different decisions had been made at certain junctures? I raise four of these “what ifs” in this short essay, knowing full well that I cannot prove that any one of them would have necessarily changed the course of history. Still, I think it is a worthwhile exercise.

△ U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger meets President of Egypt Anwar Sadat, Cairo, November 1973. *Magnum Photos*

First What If: The War Was Preventable

First, there is the question of whether the war was inevitable. Those who say yes point to the mindsets and power balances in the region at the time. Israel had easily prevailed in the 1967 War against three Arab armies. The United States, the preeminent world power, was providing substantial military, economic, and diplomatic support to Israel, and few believed that the Arab parties, even with Soviet support, had a viable military option to force a change in the status quo. The prime minister of Israel, Golda Meir, expressed the view during 1973, in exchanges with Americans, that if Egyptian President Sadat decided to go

to war, that would be a problem for him, not for Israel. Israel would defeat Egypt's forces even more readily than they had done in 1967. For good measure, she added that he had no chance of recovering all of Sinai even if he agreed to negotiate. In short, diplomacy might be possible if Egypt came to its senses and accepted that it would have to make significant territorial concessions, as well as recognize Israel's right to exist.

Sadat was certainly aware of this adamant Israeli stance, and he had made it clear that it could not be the basis for negotiations. He had made a number of gestures in 1971 and 1972, including speaking openly of "peace" with Israel and sending home Soviet military advisers, which had brought him little in return, and he was beginning to talk about the inevitability of another round of military conflict. The dominant view in Israel and the United States was that he was bluffing. But the United States had taken notice of a noteworthy decision he made in mid-1972 when he announced the departure of some 15,000 Soviet military personnel from Egypt. This was precisely the kind of gesture that could be expected to attract the attention of Nixon and his primary foreign-policy adviser, Kissinger. And it did. Soon after this announcement, the United States agreed to establish a backchannel means of communicating directly between the White House and Sadat (the State Department was not included). Through this channel, by the latter part of the year, after Nixon had been reelected in 1972, it was agreed that high-level diplomatic contacts would take place between Washington and Cairo involving Kissinger and his Egyptian counterpart Hafiz Ismail.

Kissinger's memoirs make it clear that he had modest expectations for anything of substance to emerge from this initiative. He had never met Sadat and had a very low opinion of Egypt's military potential. Still, he knew that Nixon wanted to move forward on the Middle East dossier, and this was his chance to wrest Middle East policy from the State Department, where Nixon had initially wanted it to stay. In the first half of 1973, he had two secret meetings with Ismail. While Kissinger respected Ismail for his professionalism, he concluded from his lengthy talks that the Egyptians had unrealistic expectations of how much and how quickly they could achieve their goals—mainly the recovery of their territory in Sinai—through diplomacy. He did, however, say to Ismail that after the Israeli elections late in 1973, he would initiate some kind of diplomatic process to see what might be possible.

The extensive notes of Kissinger's two meetings with Ismail are now in the public domain, and a careful reading of them suggests that the Egyptians were willing to be quite flexible on a number of key issues, except for the return of all their territory in exchange for peace. But they did agree to move ahead with negotiations with Israel, even if other Arab parties were not included at the outset. Egypt also made it clear that the Palestinian issue should be dealt

with primarily by Jordan and whichever Palestinians would agree to join Jordan in negotiating. Exchanges took place on distinguishing between sovereignty, which the Egyptians insisted must be recognized as a basic principle, and security arrangements, which might limit military deployments in certain areas.

At the end of his second meeting with Kissinger in May 1973, Ismail expressed concern that the United States did not see the need for urgent movement on the diplomatic front in order to prevent another war. He urged Kissinger to visit Cairo to meet with Sadat directly to see if there was a way to move things forward. Kissinger declined, saying that he would need time to set the stage for his planned Middle East initiative later in the year. In short, he brushed aside Ismail's plea to accelerate Kissinger's gradualist approach.

We know that Kissinger did finally meet with Sadat, but only after the October war. He later admitted in his memoir that he had greatly underestimated the man and his strategic vision. One wonders what might have happened if he had

accepted Ismail's proposal to meet with Sadat. Most accounts say that Sadat had not made up his mind about going to war until after the U.S.-Soviet summit in the summer of 1973. So, one of my unanswerable "what ifs" is whether or not a Kissinger-Sadat meeting on the heels of his meeting with Ismail might have prevented the Egyptian decision (and the Syrian one) to go to war.

One way of reacting to this query is to say that Sadat *needed* to go to war in order to subsequently make peace. Sadat's own memoir makes it seem as if that was the case, and people close to Sadat have agreed. But when one thinks of what a risky venture the war was, and how close Sadat came to being humiliated by military defeat in the last days of the war, one has to wonder if a serious diplomatic overture launched in mid-1973 might not have been quite tempting to him. A move like this would certainly have been supported by the Soviet Union and could have been a success for the policy of *détente*.

Second What If: A Different Kissinger and Nixon

My second line of inquiry involves the relative positions of Nixon and Kissinger as the crisis of October 1973 evolved. Nixon was already deeply preoccupied with the Watergate crisis when the war broke out. In fact, he was in Florida reviewing the secret tape recordings of his own conversations, presumably to ensure that any incriminating material could be taken care of. To say the least, dealing with a crisis in the Middle East was not on his priority list, although he,

Most accounts say that Sadat had not made up his mind about going to war until after the U.S.-Soviet summit in the summer of 1973. So, one "what if" is whether or not a Kissinger-Sadat meeting might have prevented the Egyptian decision (and the Syrian one) to go to war.

more than Kissinger, had been talking about the need to take some diplomatic initiative in the Middle East, including with the Soviet Union. Nixon, more than Kissinger, saw “détente”—one of his signature policies—as a way for the two major powers to coordinate their diplomatic initiatives to reduce the risk of regional conflicts that could threaten global stability. Kissinger had a more ambivalent view of dealing with the Soviets, but he had a good working relationship with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and had a special phone line that went directly to his office (as he did with the Israeli ambassador).

It is important to recall that Kissinger only became Secretary of State (while retaining his position as National Security Adviser) one month before the outbreak of the October War. So, he was relatively new to his role as the undisputed key foreign policy figure in the Nixon administration. And yet the

The Middle East was not an area that Kissinger had much experience dealing with. The war put him, his relationship with Nixon, and his ability to master a whole series of new issues to the test.

Middle East was not an area that he had much experience dealing with. The war put him, his relationship with Nixon, and his ability to master a whole series of new issues to the test.

My recollection at the time, as one of Kissinger’s aides in the Middle East office of the National Security Council, is that his initial reaction to the outbreak of the war was surprise, anger, and a belief that the Israelis would quickly reach the outskirts of Cairo. But almost immediately he

and Nixon received a message from Sadat that made it clear that his goal in starting the war was limited to breaking the diplomatic impasse, not defeating Israel. Sadat went so far as to say that when the war was over, he wanted to work with the United States to solve the Arab–Israeli conflict once and for all. Kissinger, at Nixon’s urging, began to develop a relatively cautious approach to the war. He talked to the Soviets about the need for an early ceasefire and for restraint by both superpowers. When the Israeli leadership seemed to be in a state of panic on the third day of the war because of early military setbacks, he urged patience and did not overreact to their requests for direct American intervention with arms resupply.

Over the next few days, he came close to reaching an agreement with the Soviets on the idea of a ceasefire-in-place that would be the centerpiece of a UN resolution. On October 10, just as the USSR began an airlift of arms to Syria and Egypt, the Soviets notified Kissinger that they believed that Sadat, as well as Syrian President Hafiz Al-Assad, was ready to consider a ceasefire. For the next three days, Kissinger worked to find a formula for a ceasefire. Had it gone into effect, it would have meant that Syria would have lost all of its initial territorial gains that they fought hard for—even more Syrian territory was under Israeli occupation—but the opposite was the case on the Egyptian

front, where Egyptian forces were dug in on the east bank of the Suez Canal and were fairly well protected from aerial bombardment by robust air defenses.

Third What if: An Earlier Ceasefire

For reasons that are not clear, the Soviets said that any UN resolution should not be sponsored by the United States and Soviet Union. In fact, they thought it would be best if the two superpowers abstained. It is unclear how Nixon and Kissinger dealt with the ceasefire initiative at that point. Kissinger eventually turned to the British to sponsor a ceasefire resolution, and meanwhile secured Israel's agreement to accept it. The full story of how that happened has not been told, but it seems as if the top leadership in Israel felt that the gains on the Syrian front would offset the modest losses in Sinai, and that a ceasefire would allow Israel to rebuild its military forces to deal with whatever would come next. The British claimed Sadat was opposed to a ceasefire and therefore they refused, to Kissinger's dismay, to introduce such a resolution in the UN.

My unanswerable question about this episode is, why did the United States and Soviet Union not jointly introduce a ceasefire resolution on October 12-13? They did just that ten days later. Would Sadat or Al-Assad really have refused to comply if such a resolution was passed by the UN Security Council? If a ceasefire had gone into effect at this point, the United States would not have begun its large-scale aerial resupply effort to Israel, the Arab oil producers would most likely not have announced their oil embargo and production cuts, and there would have been little likelihood of anything like the Soviet threat of military intervention and the subsequent U.S. stage-three military alert that occurred in the October 24-25 period. Détente might have looked like a more successful policy than it did in the aftermath of the most serious U.S.-Soviet confrontation since the Cuban missile crisis. So, I am still puzzled by why both the United States and Soviet Union were hesitant to agree to sponsor a ceasefire-in-place in the October 12-13 period. Perhaps if Nixon had been more in charge, he could have communicated directly with Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev to clinch the deal. Had that happened, the October 1973

If a ceasefire had gone into effect at this point, the United States would not have begun its large-scale aerial resupply effort to Israel, the Arab oil producers would most likely not have announced their oil embargo and production cuts, and there would have been little likelihood of anything like the U.S. stage-three military alert that occurred in the October 24-25 period.

crisis would have come to a different end, with much less risk for global stability and the health of the world economy. A post-war diplomatic initiative, largely led by the United States, would have still been likely and would have probably begun with disengagement agreements on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts.

Fourth What if: A Ceasefire to which Israel Committed

My fourth question involves Kissinger's trip to Moscow and the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement with the Soviets, which became UNSC Resolution 338 on October 22, followed within twelve hours by a full cessation of hostilities. Kissinger then flew to Israel, where he was soundly criticized by Meir for not giving Israel a bit more time to improve its military situation on the Sinai front. Kissinger, who had wanted to use Israeli military pressure to convince the Soviets to get the Syrians and Egyptians to stop the fighting, was now in the awkward position of telling Israel to stop just short of their goal of encircling the Second and Third Egyptian armies. He admits that he may have left the Israelis with the impression that they did not have to abide strictly by the twelve-hour deadline for the ceasefire.

By the time Kissinger was back in Washington, Sadat, with a sense of desperation, was calling for the United States and the Soviet Union to send forces to the region to enforce the UN Resolution that they had just sponsored, and that Israel was violating by continuing to advance after the twelve-hour deadline. This led to several exchanges of urgent messages between Moscow and Washington, ending with the Soviet threat on October 24 to send its own military forces if the United States would not agree to some sort of joint initiative. Kissinger's reaction, and Nixon's absence from the decision making, raised questions at the time that are still somewhat unanswered. The fact that Nixon was not present at the meeting when the stage-three military alert was decided upon is now largely attributed to the pressure he was under because of his domestic political problems. He was also known to be drinking more than he could easily manage and was probably unable to participate in the meeting for that reason.

Under those circumstances, I conclude that the alert was a deliberate overreaction from the American side in response to the exaggerated threat of unilateral military intervention from the Soviets. In short, we had two weak political leaders, at a crucial moment in history, trying to look more threatening than they had any intention of being. But we also now know from recently declassified Israeli sources that Kissinger was playing a complex game of telling the Israelis to keep up the military pressure on Egypt, even though that would risk undermining the ceasefire that had been negotiated with the Soviets. Fortunately, by October 25, Kissinger and Dobrynin managed to defuse the risk of confrontation, and the ceasefire finally went into effect. But it was a nerve wracking few hours, when reckless moves by each superpower nearly jeopardized the formula they had just worked out to end the crisis.

Although the accepted version of the October 1973 War is correct in seeing it as a major turning point that eventually opened the way to peace negotiations that were at least, in part, successful, I still believe that we should reflect on the questions raised here. Could the war have been prevented altogether? Would

things have worked out differently on the American side if Nixon had not been in dire domestic political circumstances and Kissinger not relatively new to the issues of the Middle East? Once the war began, was an opportunity missed—had the ceasefire initiative succeeded—for a serious diplomatic initiative for peace, without all the added human and economic costs of war, disruption of the world economy, and undermining of détente that resulted from the last phase of the crisis? Could and should the superpowers, who pushed through UN Resolution 338, have spent more time and energy on trying to ensure that it was implemented properly? While no one can be sure of how best to answer these questions that I have been pondering now for fifty years, my personal view is that the answer is a cautious yes in each case. 