

Re-evaluating the Yom Kippur ‘intelligence failure’: the cultural lens in crisis

Article

Accepted Version

Rezk, D. (2017) Re-evaluating the Yom Kippur ‘intelligence failure’: the cultural lens in crisis. *International History Review*, 39 (3). pp. 470-495. ISSN 1949-6540 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1230766> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/67304/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1230766>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

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Abstract:

Henry Kissinger famously explained the ‘intelligence failure’ of Yom Kippur in cultural terms, asserting that Western analysts were unable to understand Arab rationality in ‘starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect.’ This article fundamentally challenges this conventional understanding of the 1973 surprise attack. Drawing on recently declassified material and interviews with veteran diplomats and intelligence professionals it will show that both the British and American intelligence communities had an excellent sense of Egyptian President Sadat’s intentions in waging war against Israel. Rather the evidence suggests that misconceptions about Egyptian military capability were more important. These misconceptions derived from particular ideas about Arab culture and Soviet-Egyptian relations following the expulsion of Soviet advisors in 1972. The article thereby illuminates wider questions about how we define ‘failure’ in intelligence and the role of cultural ideas in international history.

Key words: culture, intelligence, Middle East, Yom Kippur, war

Acknowledgements: This article is based on doctoral research conducted at the University of Cambridge and supported by the AHRC from 2006-2009.

On 6 October 1973, Egypt and Syria co-ordinated a lightning surprise attack against Israel. Though short-lived, it was a war that would change the face of the modern Middle East. Launched at 2.p.m on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath of Yom Kippur, the momentum of the attack carried Egyptian armoured units several miles east of the Suez Canal. Within just three days the Egyptian military were blocked by Israeli retaliation, yet the initial achievements of the Egyptians marked a symbolic turning point in world history. In retrospect the war marked the first step towards a bilateral peace treaty between Egypt and Israel that would dramatically alter Egypt's seminal role in the international politics of the Middle East. Moreover, it was a conflict with strikingly international implications, bringing the world's superpowers to the brink of a nuclear confrontation in support of their respective allies and provoking the first global oil crisis in numerous European capitals. Arab states united in an unprecedented manner to impose an oil embargo that would visibly punish the United States for backing Israel.

The regional and international context to this crisis began in June 1967, when the Israeli Defense Force embarked upon a pre-emptive lightning strike against the Arab States. In just six days Israel absorbed three times its territory, seizing Sinai and the Suez Canal from Egypt, Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. In the aftermath of war, American diplomatic policy evolved to support these territorial acquisitions until the defeated Arab governments were prepared to declare peace with Israel. Against this increasingly adversarial relationship between the U.S. and Arab States, the British assumed the more neutral role of 'honest broker' in the Arab-Israeli dispute authoring the ambiguous UN Security Council Resolution 242 which called for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories.

From a Cold War perspective, the dramatic military defeat of Egypt forced a greater dependence on Soviet arms. It served to consolidate Soviet presence in the Middle East as the US-Israeli relationship also deepened and Israel came increasingly to be seen as an ally in the Cold War. In July 1970, this culminated in the arrival of 15,000 Soviet advisors in Egypt during the peak of the War of Attrition to defend the Egyptian heartland against Israeli deep penetration raids. In July 1972, President Nasser's successor, Anwar al Sadat tried to break the stalemate by getting rid of the Soviet advisors and indicating to the Nixon Administration both overtly and covertly, that he would be prepared to reach a separate agreement with Israel.

The Nixon administration faced a number of domestic and international considerations that stood in the way of a more active policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict that might have averted the 1973 War. Uppermost in U.S. foreign policy considerations towards the Middle East was Détente. Nixon was concerned that disagreements over the Middle East would threaten the progress made in the historic Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). Moreover U.S. Presidential elections in 1972 meant that it was impossible for any candidate, not least Nixon, to adopt a hard line against Israel. Indeed, in 1973, the American administration began to supply Israel with F-4 Phantom jets and decided that any diplomatic initiative must wait for Israel's elections in October. Domestically, the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew and the Watergate Crisis plunged the American administration into turmoil and effectively left Henry Kissinger at the helm of decision-making towards the Middle East.¹

However, the October War and the subsequent escalation of the Crisis, forced the Arab-Israeli conflict to the top of the American foreign policy agenda. The war revealed that Israeli reluctance to withdraw from occupied Arab territories could have major strategic consequences for the superpower. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union were forced into the curious position of militarily resupplying their clients during the fighting, whilst simultaneously collaborating on a UN ceasefire proposal to quell the conflict. After Israeli contraventions of the ceasefire, the Soviets responded with a sharp warning that if Israel proceeded to violate the UN agreement, they would take the 'appropriate steps unilaterally.' In response, on the 25 October, the U.S. put their nuclear forces on worldwide alert, a step not taken since the Cuban Missile Crisis over a decade before and arguably, a drastic and dangerous overreaction. Moreover, they did so without consulting with or informing the British government who were already frustrated with their American ally's handling of the crisis.²

In Israel, the Yom Kippur war is understandably associated with the word 'trauma'³ How could the most effective intelligence service in the Middle East have failed to predict such a devastating attack? Israeli historian Avi Shlaim writes that 'military history offers few parallels for strategic surprise as complete as that achieved by Egypt.'⁴ In 1974, the Agranat Commission was tasked to investigate how such a failure could occur, following which a plethora of studies concluded that despite the excellent information available to the Directorate of Military Intelligence (AMAN) prior to the war, a range of psychological, organisational and bureaucratic factors (both common to cases of surprise attack and specific to the Israeli intelligence community) inhibited high-quality strategic warning.⁵ The historiography that followed offered different schools of thought as to which factors were more important. One wave of literature, building on the findings of Agranat, stressed the role of individuals, noting for example the manipulation of information by Director of Military Intelligence General Zeria⁶ and the over-reliance on a recently disclosed single source named Ashraf Marwan (President Nasser's son-in law) who was allegedly a double agent actually working for Egypt.⁷ An alternative school, composed mainly of Egyptian sources, emphasised the ingenuity of Egypt's deception plan whilst also expressing surprise that Israel had failed to understand the significance of military preparations in the immediate moments before war.⁸ A less politically motivated literature stressed the cognitive challenges common to all surprise attacks and the difficulty of distinguishing between 'signals' and 'noise' in the buildup to war⁹. The most convincing accounts placed specific Israeli failures in the context of wider psychological obstacles to accurate predictions, highlighting the role of Israeli strategic beliefs and dogmatic reliance on a strategic 'Conception', to which crucial information at the tactical level was subordinated.¹⁰ As the doyen of intelligence failure, Richard Betts has argued, over-reliance on strategic preconceptions that Egypt did not intend to launch war degraded the perception of tactical indicators indicating the contrary.¹¹ The latest revisionist interpretation has gone so far as to suggest that that despite some failures, Israel's intelligence *successes* in this war 'have not been satisfactorily and accurately documented.'¹²

And yet despite the international nature and implications of this crisis, there has been little consideration of why other interested powers failed to anticipate the war and whether the nature of their 'intelligence failure' was similar or different. Both the UK and the US had considerable (though

somewhat divergent) policy concerns in the region. On the eve of war, Washington was complacent about the Arab-Israeli conflict, prioritising Soviet containment above all else. The Nixon administration was overwhelmingly preoccupied with Détente, the war in Vietnam and restoring relations with China.¹³ Nixon's primary strategic concerns towards the Middle East were essentially Cold War ones, fundamentally driven by fear that an Arab-Israeli conflict could bring the superpowers into open confrontation. Thus Kissinger opted for an approach of diplomatic delay, supporting Nixon's view that Israel was a Cold war ally that was to be armed. Israel was described by Nixon as 'the only state in the Mideast which is *pro* freedom and an effective opponent to Soviet expansion.'¹⁴ During the Nixon administration the White House authorized the provision of over a billion dollars in military credits to support the sale of military and technological equipment, firmly allying themselves in the Israeli camp. In contrast, British policy makers in Whitehall had become acutely aware of their dependence on Arab oil and increasingly keen to play the role of 'honest broker' in the conflict as they bid goodbye to the final vestiges of empire.¹⁵ Despite their differences, both powers recognised the potentially destabilising impact of another Middle-East crisis. Consequently, their intelligence communities, exemplifying a uniquely 'special relationship', regularly produced assessments for policy-makers on the prospects of a further Arab-Israeli war.

However, the Anglo-American 'intelligence failure' to predict the attack has received little scholarly attention.¹⁶ A leading intelligence historian concludes that the attack on Israel was 'not foreseen by any of the world's major intelligence services.'¹⁷ A recently declassified post-mortem by the CIA found that intelligence of an impending attack was 'plentiful, ominous and often accurate,' if only they had put the pieces together.¹⁸ A historian from the CIA's Centre for the Study of Intelligence explains the American intelligence failure by drawing on similar schools of thought to the Israeli case study: from re-organizational initiatives within the CIA to more cognitive factors such as the 'rational actor' fallacy.¹⁹ This investigation largely confirms the original findings of the Pike Investigation in 1975, particularly DCI Colby's admission that 'we had a bit of a mindset.'²⁰

Moreover, the Nixon administration faced something of an unusual divide between the intelligence and policy sphere that manifested in much bureaucratic infighting. Kissinger was a keen consumer of raw intelligence and had a notoriously adversarial relationship with the State Department under Secretary of State William Rogers, before inheriting his job in August 1973. Kissinger relied heavily on much backchannel communication, making him privy to sensitive and important intelligence which he did not share. DCI Colby later informed Kissinger that 'he could have done a better job as DCI had the White House not cut him off from certain privileged data.' This information included earlier warnings that Soviet Premier Brezhnev had communicated of the Arabs' serious intent, a conversation between Kissinger and the Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and private messages from Sadat.²¹ Even once the war had started, infighting between the State Department and Department of Defense prevented the Administration from countering a significant Soviet airlift to Egypt and Syria.²²

Amongst the literature has explored this issue from the Anglo-American perspective, the charismatic figure of Henry Kissinger has dominated the historiography of this Western 'intelligence failure'. Developing the cognitive school of thought to highlight the role of culture, in his memoirs, Kissinger explained that 'our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of starting an un-

winnable war to restore self-respect.²³ This is a claim that as yet has gone unchallenged and fundamentally shaped conventional wisdom on one of the most important international crises of the twentieth century. Kissinger argues that a cultural dissonance pervaded Western assessments: a classic illustration of ‘mirror-imaging’ rather than attempting to enter the psychological paradigm of one’s adversary. Moreover first-hand accounts from the Egyptian side corroborate this narrative of a ‘cultural divide’: ‘in the Egyptian view, none of the principal [Western] policy-makers...managed to read the true Arab picture – that the Arabs would not be dictated to on terms for the future...they would have to deploy every means including resort to arms to get back their lands and their rights.’²⁴

Yet despite Kissinger’s ‘culturalist’ explanation, there has been no exploration of how ideas about ‘culture’ really influenced Western assessments of this war. The past decade has seen growing scholarly interest in the role of cultural differences and antipathies in defining the West’s relations with the Arab world, stoking a heated debate inspired by Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis.²⁵ However scholars of intelligence have, for the most part, been loath to embrace the ‘cultural turn’ that has taken international history by storm.²⁶ The majority of intelligence literature has concerned itself with unashamedly positivistic objectives: to establish causation; to determine ‘successes’ or ‘failures’; and to learn lessons. Leading scholars of international history have lamented the neglect of culture in this burgeoning field and called for ‘a more probing examination of diplomatic texts’.²⁷

Thankfully a narrow realm of the intelligence literature has come around to the ‘cultural turn.’ In fact the ways in which culture can influence perceptions has a small but established genealogy in intelligence studies. In 1976 Robert Jervis and Anthony Marc Lewis explored the impact of ethnocentrism in international politics and the American intelligence community respectively.²⁸ Since then a nascent ‘cultural wave’ of scholarship has paid closer attention to the diverse ways that ‘culture’ intersects with intelligence, exploring for example; the cultural awareness required for a successful counterinsurgency, comparing the organisational cultures of the Anglo-American intelligence communities or the relationship between strategic cultures and intelligence failure.²⁹ Key monographs examining Anglo-American intelligence on Japanese and French views of Nazi Germany rightly place intelligence history within a broader framework of political and cultural perceptions.³⁰ As the doyen of international history David Reynolds persuasively argues, ‘in such a text-based area of history as diplomatic history, scholars must therefore be extremely sensitive to language.’³¹ This article thus directly responds to Reynolds’ call for a ‘cultural approach to intelligence history and a more probing evaluation of archival texts.’³²

Yet one groundbreaking thinker on ethnocentrism remains almost entirely absent from the intelligence literature. Edward Said’s polemical deconstruction of Western ‘Orientalism’ in 1979 has been plainly neglected, if not actively ignored, by scholars of intelligence and diplomacy.³³ Indeed Matt Connelly has observed that, ‘post-colonial scholars today catalogue the cultures of empire in novels and travel writing, museums and expositions, paintings and postcards – everywhere it seems, but the archives and personal papers of European and U.S. policy makers.’³⁴

Despite important scholarly advances at the intersection of culture and intelligence, the application of critical theory in this ‘missing dimension’ remains missing. Developing the ‘cultural wave’

described above, recent publications by the author have sought to bridge this gap further, exposing intelligence perceptions of the ‘Arab national character’ for example.³⁵ Drawing on Edward Said’s literary deconstruction of Western discourse, this work has advocated an interdisciplinary analysis that reveals both the spoken and the unspoken assumptions of ‘Otherness’ in recently declassified material. Applying a methodology that privileges representation over causation, the case will be made that we can use political and intelligence documents about this crisis to reveal the innermost thinking of the elite producing ‘knowledge’ for policy-makers about the Arab ‘Other’ and how ideas about Arab culture may have influenced their analysis of impending war in the lead up to October 1973. This might well be called, ‘the missing dimension’ of the missing dimension.

This article constitutes the first empirical context in which this approach is applied. It operationalises how ‘culture’ can be used as an analytical tool in better understanding and writing the international history of intelligence communities. How and why were Britain and America unable to foresee that Egypt was planning an attack on 6 October 1973? What was the discursive ‘habitus’ shared by Anglo-American analysts about the Arab world?³⁶ The recent declassification of a number of Anglo-American diplomatic and intelligence documents, together with interviews on both the British and the Egyptian side allow us to verify what aspects of the ‘true Arab picture’ British and American analysts were in fact able to read, and what role ideas of ‘Otherness’ and cultural lenses may have played.

The relationship between intentions and capabilities has long been recognised as the ultimate determinant of strategic surprise. In a much cited article on intelligence failure, Avi Shlaim put forth the following equation to explain strategic misconceptions: ‘Threat perception may be said to equal estimated capacity multiplied by the estimated intent.’ In the case of the 1973 war, he argues that had ‘intelligence chiefs not been influenced by the current views about Arab intent they might have given more weight in their evaluations to the demonstrable increase in Arab capabilities which preceded the outbreak of war.’³⁷

Shlaim presents a typically ‘Western’ intelligence failure. The inability to discern the intentions of their adversaries is by now a common, even predictable, assertion in the literature on Anglo-American strategic surprise. The West’s technical prowess has reaped more reward in ‘observing actions than divining intent,’ i.e. accessing the ‘secrets’ (or capabilities) rather than the ‘mysteries’ (or intentions) of conflict.³⁸ Sadat himself intimated that this was a cultural phenomena specific to the West. He said: ‘You Americans always use computers to solve geopolitical equations and they always mislead you.’ What you ‘forgot’, he observed pointedly, was to feed ‘psychology’ into the computer.³⁹ The implication is therefore that analysts had a good understanding of Egypt’s capabilities, but failed to anticipate war because they fundamentally misread Sadat’s intentions.

The discussion that follows will suggest that in fact, the reverse is true. Analysts had a remarkably good strategic understanding of Sadat’s intentions. Rather, underestimating Egypt’s *capability* resulted in a failure to take these intentions seriously. Returning to Shlaim’s equation, when estimated intent was multiplied by estimated capability; it was the latter rather than the former, which was misunderstood, which consequently resulted in a reduced threat perception. Moreover, cultural preconceptions played a role in this equation, but not quite in the way that Kissinger suggests.

Analysts on both sides of the Atlantic proved remarkably able in penetrating Sadat's mindset and unravelling the 'mystery' of his intentions. They accurately identified that a limited military victory would suffice to achieve Sadat's political goal of regaining Egypt's honour and reclaiming her land, they repeatedly warned that in the absence of successful diplomacy Sadat would have no choice but to embark on war and they empathised with the domestic and military pressures on him to take action. The real weakness therefore lay not in their assessments of the 'mysteries' but more unusually in their analysis of the 'secret' – Egypt's improved capability.

There was a near unanimous agreement within the Anglo-American intelligence community about Egypt's military bankruptcy. Undoubtedly their assessments mirrored Israeli complacency in this regard. Analysts could be forgiven for asking why they should be worried about Israel if Israel was not worried itself?⁴⁰ As the Director for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), Ray Cline claimed in a meeting just weeks after war broke out, 'we were brainwashed by the Israelis who brainwashed themselves.'⁴¹ British intelligence veterans have also intimated that Israeli influence was important in this regard.⁴² A General in the British Defence Intelligence Staff, shot down the predictions of a young Colonel that the Egyptians would attack, on the basis that the Israelis insisted that their defences on the Suez Canal were impregnable.⁴³ Israeli estimations undoubtedly influenced their allies, encouraging them to downgrade their fears of war.⁴⁴ As the Franco-Palestinian scholar Camille Mansour puts it, the Israelis were 'seen as the experts, the 'Orientalists' of the Middle East in the sense defined by Edward Said: they are at once knowledgeable about the terrain and imbued with Western civilization. They are the ones who can claim to understand Arab mentalities, their political processes, their 'irrationality.'⁴⁵

Such Orientalism clearly informed assessments of Egyptian capability. Anglo-American assessments reveals that two overarching factors contributed to their underestimation of Egypt. Firstly, analysts relied on a library of cultural preconceptions about the Arab World (reinforced by the Six-Day War and early assessments of Sadat's leadership) that pervaded military assessments. Secondly, the dramatic expulsion of 15,000 Soviet advisors in 1972 appeared to confirm to analysts that without their superpower patron, the Egyptians had no real military option.

Finally, the article interrogates the utility of binary discourse such as 'success' and 'failure' in ascertaining the historical role of intelligence analyses in this period. This case study shows that we must pay yet greater attention to the role of 'culture' in the field of intelligence and international history. As the following discussion will show, the intelligence 'failure' of 1973 requires considerable qualification.

Naturally there are a number of evidential limitations to bear in mind. Though there has been much material declassified in recent years, certain documents remain inaccessible. For example, many of the JIC records for 1973 remain classified and almost no signals intelligence (SIGINT) is available. Considering the limitations of the material available and the extent of US/UK intelligence sharing, the article takes a collaborative approach to Anglo-American intelligence rather than a comparative one,

highlighting divergences between assessments that will undoubtedly be subject to future revision as further material is declassified. Michael Goodman's *Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee* describes the growing exchange of assessments and increasingly close relations between the CIA and JIC that characterised the post-war era, notwithstanding differences in policy.⁴⁶ Similarly, John Dumbrell observes that together with nuclear information, the 'intimate intermeshing of US and British intelligence ... formed the essence and beating heart of the Cold War "special relationship".'⁴⁷ Moreover, America had no formal diplomatic relations with Egypt following a political rupture between the two states after the Six-Day War. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the Americans will have relied even more heavily on British diplomatic and intelligence reporting during this period.

Mystery No. 1: Limited Military action

Two years before the 1973 war, the British intelligence community made a strikingly accurate assessment of the key motivating factors that would determine the next Arab-Israeli conflict. The JIC argued that:

Sadat might calculate that the strengthening of Egypt's system of air defence with Russian backing would enable him at any rate to reopen limited military action...without making it certain Egypt would suffer unacceptable casualties and damage through Israeli retaliation. Politically he might be influenced by the hope that such action would relieve him of criticism, internally and elsewhere in the Arab World. He might also hope that it might galvanise the United States into taking action to restore the ceasefire or into bringing greater pressure to bear on Israel in relation to the achievement either of an interim arrangement or a comprehensive settlement.⁴⁸

Identifying the sufficiency of a limited initiative was an impressive feat. It is a central precept of Western military logic and Augustinian political theory of war that likely success is the primary consideration of a responsible leader leading a nation to the battlefield. Shibley Telhami has claimed that, 'one of the most fundamental assumptions by all analysts assessing the prospect of war in 1973, supported by accepted theories of war, was that Syria and Egypt did not have the ability to win *and therefore were unlikely to attack*.'⁴⁹ In a classic example of self-orientalising, Heikal suggests that such pragmatism neglected the 'obstinacy of the Egyptian and Arab character.'⁵⁰

Yet analysts had a number of precedents indicating that military superiority was no precondition to waging war. During the War of Attrition fought across the Suez Canal between 1968-1970, the JIC warned policy-makers that 'despite the Arabs' military inferiority it is by no means certain that this factor will remain sufficient to deter the Arab states from contemplating an attack against Israel, which could either precipitate an Israeli pre-emptive strike or lead to an Arab attempt to strike first.'⁵¹ Rather than 'mirror-imaging' their rationale onto their Arab subjects, analysts recognised that within this cultural milieu absolute military superiority was not going to be decisive. Instead they assessed the likelihood of conflict in the regional context and according to Arab priorities. In particular, analysts recognised the relationship between domestic legitimacy and foreign policy and correctly concluded that the primary rationale driving the Arab leaders to war would be retrieving the sense of 'honour' lost in the 1967 defeat.

In the spring of 1973, Sadat gave a dramatic interview to Arnaud De Borchgrave of *Newsweek*. Analysts observed that its ‘general tone’ was that ‘the time has come for a shock. Diplomacy will continue before, during and after war.’⁵² Such a grandiose statement could easily have been dismissed as meaningless. Yet diplomatic reporting demonstrated detailed and impressive analyses of Sadat’s answers, deducing vital conclusions about the relationship between notions of national honour and the corollary prospects for peace and war. The FCO’s attention was particularly drawn to,

the rather odd implication of his [Sadat’s] answers to the twelfth and thirteenth questions – that although direct negotiations are out of the question at a time when effective peace reigns that will not be true when battle is resumed. For some inscrutable reason this passage was only carried by al Ahram. What I think the president means is that direct negotiations with the enemy while the latter is occupying Egypt’s territory and Egypt is not even trying to recover it would be tantamount to the unconditional surrender demanded of Hitler by the Allies. If so it could be that Egyptian honour would be satisfied by a very small and controlled bout of hostilities across the Canal leading almost at once to “direct” peace feelers.⁵³

The reference to occupation and its implications is particularly important. A recent scholarly work on Arab perspectives of the October War notes that recognition that ‘in spirit the Arab offensive was a response to Israeli occupation, has been largely ignored in the dominant October War historiography.’⁵⁴ In contrast, this sensitive and detailed analysis underlines the extent to which British diplomats were evidently in tune with this key psychological dimension of Sadat’s decision-making, precisely anticipating the diplomatic strategising that would follow an attack. Rather than dismissing such open sources as mere propaganda, rhetoric or ‘irrationality’, Sadat’s answers were examined and cross-examined with cultural awareness and empathy, to infer fundamental insights into the political pressures Sadat perceived himself to face and the means by which the prevailing desire for ‘honour’ might be satisfied.

The interview also caught the attention of Harold Saunders, a south-Asia expert from the National Security Council (NSC). Saunders concluded from it that Sadat ‘may seriously be considering initiating a limited military engagement along the Suez Canal.’ He judged that Sadat, ‘seems to realise that Egypt will not achieve its goal of recovering Sinai by military means, but that an end to the ceasefire might stimulate powers to press hard for a settlement.’⁵⁵

In May 1973, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) at the State Department reiterated their fears of war more strongly. They noted that although Sadat, ‘has no illusions that Egypt can defeat Israel militarily, he seems on the verge of concluding that only limited hostilities against Israel stand any real chance of breaking the negotiating stalemate by forcing the big powers to intervene with an imposed solution.’ They clearly warned that if Sadat was to ‘shed his last doubts about whether military action is essential to achieve this American shift, the only remaining decision would relate to the timing and scope of his move.’⁵⁶

That a limited military initiative would suffice to achieve Sadat’s goal of provoking a political solution was thus amply recognised. Analysts had a number of precedents and public declarations indicating that in the Arab cultural context, absolute military superiority was no precondition to initiating an attack. Ultimately, the decision to go to war would depend on what international diplomacy could (and could not) achieve.

Mystery No 2.: International diplomacy

The quality and timeliness of international diplomacy was therefore recognised to be a fundamental factor in Sadat's calculations. Analysts identified that Sadat regarded military moves as a complement to diplomacy and accurately assessed that he would only embark on war when diplomacy appeared to have failed. Erstwhile Egyptian Presidential Adviser for National Security Hafez Ismail recounted that 'Sadat wanted the heat of the battle to be the force behind the political decisions which had to be taken.'⁵⁷

The British intelligence community demonstrated considerable foresight about the consequences of diplomatic failure. As early as 1969 the JIC warned, mincing no words, that: 'in the absence of a negotiated settlement meeting the principal Arab political aims, no Arab leader is strong enough to abjure publicly an ultimate resort to force, as a means of exacting forcibly what Israel is not prepared to yield politically.'⁵⁸ Looking back in 1974, British Ambassador to Egypt, Phillip Adams reflected that although 'military factors determined the date and time of the attack, international political developments over the previous year had reinforced Sadat's commitment to the war option.'⁵⁹ U.S. policy on the Middle East failed to evolve following President Nixon's re-election. Fresh supplies of Phantoms for Israel commenced even after the Egyptian National Security Advisor Hafez Ismail visited Washington in February 1973. Little attention was paid to the Middle East at the Nixon/Brezhnev summit in June and the U.S. vetoed a U.N. Security Council Resolution on the Middle East in July calling for Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territories.

The Americans took a more relaxed view. In March 1973, the CIA's Middle East analysts claimed that, 'despite the gloomy prognosis being assiduously disseminated from Cairo, Sadat has not exhausted his diplomatic options.'⁶⁰ The State Department's INR was 'inclined to state the case on the risk of hostilities with a political purpose with a little more urgency. If the UN debate of next year produces no convincing movement in the Israeli-Egyptian impasse, our view is that the resumption of hostilities will become a better than even lot.'⁶¹ Though differing in emphasis, there was an understanding on both sides of the Atlantic that in the absence of a feasible diplomatic alternative, Sadat would be forced to resort to a dramatic military initiative.

British analysts particularly stressed the importance of American action in influencing Sadat's motivations. In March 1973, the British defence attaché in Egypt remarked: 'If I were asked what major operation the Egyptian armed forces were capable of conducting against the Israelis with some measure of success I would have to answer none.' He nonetheless entertained the possibility that if by 'political necessity or by pressure on the leadership Egypt was forced to take military action her least damaging solution and one which might place her in a position for international negotiation would be to cross the Canal to a limited depth of about 12 kilometres.' The attaché recognised that the end goal was ultimately political and pointed towards America. He reported that 'from this position she [Egypt] would hope to provoke political intervention by the Big Powers and presumably to negotiate from a fresh set of circumstances.'⁶² It was a remarkably astute analysis, clearly identifying the strategic

priority of international negotiations in any military assault. The attaché accurately gauged not merely what was likely to happen but the more important issues of why and how, combining military strategising with cultural sensitivity in order to enter Sadat's mindset.

This heightened acuity on the British side both to Egypt's plight, and the potential implications of international diplomacy engaged policy-makers at the highest level. On 15 June 1973, British Prime Minister Edward Heath made a personal appeal to President Nixon before impending American-Soviet talks:

I do not think it is overstating it to say that, unless Israel can be persuaded to show a greater willingness to withdraw from the territories she occupied in 1967, vital Western interests will soon be at risk. In the circumstances I very much hope, Mr President, that you will give the most serious consideration to using the unique influence of the United States with the Israelis to persuade them that they must change their lines – in their ultimate interest as well as ours.⁶³

It seems clear therefore that analysts communicated the primacy of diplomatic negotiations in Sadat's strategic considerations. They recognised that whilst Sadat hoped that the threat of war could act as sufficient leverage in such negotiations, he was increasingly subject to domestic and military pressures to take military action.

Mystery No. 3. Domestic Pressures

Analysts identified Sadat's fragile domestic position as the final pressure point. It was no secret that Sadat struggled to assert his authority as a statesmanlike successor to Nasser.⁶⁴ The CIA initially believed that he was 'a compromise candidate chosen for his weakness' and that he was unlikely to 'fill the presidency for more than an interim period.'⁶⁵ In 1971, Sadat faced an internal power struggle with his Nasserist opponents, exposing a plot to overthrow the new President.

More worryingly, Sadat's much-lauded 'year of decision' had resulted in naught. On 12 October 1972, an army officer led troops into a mosque in central Cairo and called publicly for war with Israel. This open challenge to Sadat reflected deeper unrest within the military, relayed in a number of Egyptian accounts.⁶⁶ By late 1972 analysts reported, that 'more and more Egyptians are speculating openly about how long Sadat can last and who will take over from him.'⁶⁷ As British Ambassador Phillip Adams reflected,

The continued loyalty of the armed forces remains crucial for President Sadat's survival and, if he can see no other way of warding off a coup by younger officers against him he could well decide to hot things up by ordering some limited military action even though he knows that the Egyptians would suffer heavily: better for him a devastating Israeli reprisal than the loss of his position. A cynical view of President Sadat's motives perhaps, but I fear a realistic one.⁶⁸

This 'cynical view' has since been validated by several first-hand Egyptian elites affiliated with Nasser who claim that Sadat's focal motivation in going to war was indeed to retain his flailing position.⁶⁹

Military dissatisfaction with Sadat's leadership reflected broader societal concerns. The period preceding the war saw an unprecedented degree of public protest. Student demonstrations, sectarian unrest with the Christian Coptic community and innumerable lamentations by the political elite culminated in a petition presented to Sadat in 1972. Diplomats reported the contents of the petition back to Whitehall, describing 'the calamities which surround Egypt' that 'threaten not only the land but her civilisation and inheritance, her ideology and values... her enemies seek her complete destruction.'⁷⁰ This all-encompassing, prevailing sense of desperation within the Egyptian body politic led Ambassador Beaumont to describe 'a general feeling of growing impotence and of disintegration of President Sadat's regime.' Evoking an interesting if Eurocentric historical analogy, Beaumont noted that a French colleague compared it 'to the atmosphere which reigned in Paris at the demise of the fourth republic.'⁷¹

Though less concerned, American analysts also reported Egyptian assertions that the no-war, no peace situation was 'more dangerous for the future of Egypt than war itself.' They judged that such statements were most likely a 'pressure tactic' to evoke a response from the U.S., but concluded that, 'it probably accurately reflects Sadat's feeling that the present situation is both an affront to his personal self-respect and ruinous of national morals, dignity and constructive purpose.'⁷² Despite a deteriorating economic situation, American analysts expressed 'doubt' that Sadat was 'under significant domestic pressure to go to war.' They argued that 'Sadat and his advisers are aware that their military prospects are poor at best.' The danger was that 'disaster might well sweep away Sadat's regime than rescue him from his dilemma.'⁷³

Analysts recognised that Sadat faced unparalleled pressures to wage war. As a weak successor to Nasser, he was seen as particularly vulnerable to pressures from the military and unprecedented public protests. Though they assessed that a military disaster might portend the end of the regime, they accurately gauged the all-encompassing and detrimental impact of the no-war, no-peace situation on Sadat's calculations.

The 'Secret': Underestimating Egyptian capabilities

If British and American analysts were able to gauge Sadat's intentions with a relatively high degree of accuracy, the same cannot be said for their assessments of Egypt's capabilities. As Kissinger put it, 'I have never seen a military estimate by anybody, prior to the war which indicated that the Arabs had any chance whatever of defeating the Israelis or of even staving off their own defeat for anything longer than six days.'⁷⁴ It is revealing that no NIEs (National Intelligence Estimates) or SNIEs (Special National Intelligence Estimates) on the prospects of war between Egypt and Israel were requested or undertaken between May and the end of September, reflecting 'the fairly relaxed view US intelligence had of the developing crisis.'⁷⁵ Similarly in March 1973, British military attachés spoke in no uncertain terms of 'the bankruptcy of the Egyptian military capability.'⁷⁶ The Anglo-American intelligence community echoed an Egyptian statement by the Director of General Intelligence Service (GIS),

Ahmed Ismail that, 'Egypt was not ready for war...any attack mounted or led by Egypt under present conditions might lead to disaster.'⁷⁷ It is notable that during Ismail's yearlong stint as GIS director he ran a back channel with the CIA before being appointed War Minister in October 1972.⁷⁸

Yet there were some signs indicating an improvement in capability. British Air Attaché Barnicoat recorded his assessment of a clash between Egyptian and Israeli aircraft in 1972:

The fact that these pilots closed with the enemy when out-numbered showed courage and a press on spirit even if it was suicidal. This type of determination in the face of the enemy has not been noticeable in the past. If this is any guide to the morale of other MIG 21 planes it could be an important change.⁷⁹

The JIC also reported some improvements. Whilst acknowledging that the 'relative standards' of training, morale and equipment between Arab and Israeli military forces differed significantly, the Committee nonetheless noted, 'steps taken to weed out unreliable elements' in the army and recognised 'the impact of Soviet equipment and training.' However, the JIC definitively concluded that 'Arab officer cadres will not succeed in the period under review in matching the highly dedicated and professional Israeli commanders in morale or ability' and that this would 'remain the over-riding factor to be set against Arab numerical superiority.'⁸⁰ The sheer surety of the statement, with none of the hedging 'mays' or 'mights' for which JIC assessments are typically criticised, demonstrates the extent to which analysts were convinced that Egypt could never achieve anything resembling a military victory against Israel. Why were analysts so sure?

The recently declassified record suggests two overarching factors which influenced and distorted perceptions of Egypt's capabilities: the first was the precedent of 1967 and several cultural conceptions it contributed to forming and reinforcing. The second was the shift in the Soviet-Egyptian relationship, which not only lowered the guard of Anglo-American intelligence services but masked regional dynamics in a deceptively simplistic Cold War framework.

Arab political culture and the precedent of 1967

There was an undeniable 'Orientalism' to analytic assessments of Arab military capability. Former head of the JIC, Sir Patrick Wright recalled in an interview with the author that the two fundamental misconceptions the West held about the Egyptians was that they were 'bad fighters' and 'irrational.'⁸¹ CIA analysts published a handbook in 1971 asserting that the Arab fighting man 'lacks the necessary physical and cultural qualities for performing effective military services.'⁸² Former NSC staffer Robert Morris reflected that, 'the worst common flaw in the reading of the intelligence was an abiding cultural, perhaps racial, contempt in Washington and Jerusalem for the political posturing and fighting skills of the Arabs.'⁸³ Even once the war had started analysts wrote that, 'Egyptian forces face imminent and perhaps catastrophic defeat and that the ability of the Egyptian state to survive the defeat (and further Israeli military actions) is questionable.'⁸⁴ How did such absolutist beliefs take hold as 'common sense' within the psyche of the Anglo-American intelligence community?

Past experience was the first clue. There was a tendency to believe that a future Arab-Israeli war would resemble its 1967 forerunner – confused and unplanned. This also derived partly from a

reluctance to see Sadat as a strategic, political leader in his own right. In January 1973, Ambassador Beaumont reflected in his valedictory despatch that Sadat ‘has not the same vision and does not inspire the same trust’ as his predecessor.⁸⁵ Despite these negative comparisons with Nasser, assessments nevertheless tended to mirror assumptions of the 1967 war. Kissinger would later recall, ‘not knowing Sadat, I had to conclude that he was still playing Nasser’s game.’⁸⁶ Anthony Parsons, Assistant Undersecretary for the Middle East, thought:

The danger is that, in seeking to restore his [Sadat’s] credibility, he will not only convince himself that he must do something but will also create a momentum which he will be unable to check. He also seems to suffer from the dangerous delusion that, if he reopened hostilities on the Canal, he could keep them within acceptable limits pending some action by the Great Powers to bring about cease-fire and diplomatic progress toward a settlement. There is also the danger...that he will repeat the 1967 performance, i.e. he will provoke the Israelis into some form of pre-emptive strike.⁸⁷

That Nasser’s actions in 1967 had unleashed a Frankensteinian monster born of miscalculation and a dogmatic commitment to ‘face’ loomed large in the minds of analysts, many of whom were probably the same people in the same posts.⁸⁸ They feared that like his predecessor, Sadat was foolishly backing himself into a corner, which would once more put the onus of unrestrained action on Israel.

Implicit in assessments of Sadat’s personal and strategic inadequacies was a belief that Arab political culture was not inclined to objectively self-analyse and learn from past mistakes. In a controversial analysis of the ‘Arab national character’ almost a decade earlier, the CIA reflected that there was,

little evidence that Greek analytical self-critical philosophy ever entered the Near East. The motto ‘Know Thyself’ is not quoted by the Arabs...The concept of self-examination, whether for purposes of self-management or self-improvement, could not be accepted because of its conflict with the more honoured cultural requirement of blameless dignity.⁸⁹

This apparently ‘cultural’ characteristic had practical security implications. The JIC observed that, ‘so far as we are aware the Arab countries get virtually no hard intelligence on Israeli tactical moves or intentions.’ They added that ‘Arab contingency planning... has been unrealistic and probably based on misleading information. This heightens the risk of miscalculation and precipitate action by the Arabs.’⁹⁰ American analysts reported one prominent Egyptian complaining in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat that, ‘our intelligence service is the most ignorant in the world. Whereas the Israelis knew the name of every Egyptian on relief, and his wife’s name too, we didn’t even know where Moshe Dayan’s house was’!⁹¹

Yet as Kissinger commented during the course of war, the defeated Arab states had clearly learned more from the 1967 debacle than anyone had anticipated and this was the crucial determinant of their short-lived military success.⁹² Prior to war, however, the notion that Arab political and military leaders might actually have undergone a process of self-examination with the aim of identifying and improving their weaknesses was ill-considered. In an interview with the author, Nasser’s Secretary General, Abdel Maguid Farid stressed that the last years of Nasser’s life were dedicated to rectifying the military mistakes that had culminated in the ‘*naksah*’ (setback) of 1967.⁹³ A British intelligence analyst many years later agreed, confirming that ‘Nasser made a thorough examination of their failure in 1967 and ensured that Egyptian officers were trained accordingly.’⁹⁴

The theology of Islam was regarded as an important contributor to the absence of a self-critical culture in the Arab world. CIA analysts had observed that ‘by definition and by profession, Islam is the surrendering of the self to the will of Allah’ encouraging the belief that ‘all human actions and their consequences are but the sequels of God’s doing.’⁹⁵ Consequently, there was an inherent passivity associated with the Islamic faith and Arab culture. During the War of Attrition, U.S. diplomat Donald Bergus described the ‘classic Egyptian stance of standing pat, talking big, punishing the enemy as much as he possibly can and taking counterblows stoically.’ The Egyptians hoped, according to Bergus, that ‘perhaps an unidentified “something” will occur “somewhere” to create a situation favourable to Egypt. It is in the hands of Allah who must, in the fullness of time, reward his devoted servants.’⁹⁶ Ambassador Beaumont alluded to similar themes of passivity, describing Islam as ‘their lesson and their encouragement in their approach to the Arab Israel problem. For they recall, in particular, the extrusion from *outré-mer* of the Crusaders of the Western World, after 200 years of colonisation and they see in this the hope that Israel too will fade away or be absorbed. It is a reason for hope and also a reason for not trying too hard.’⁹⁷

The British Naval Attaché reinforced, that the ‘Muslim belief in Allah’s Providence and Will’ and an ‘innate fatalism’ enabled the Egyptian people ‘to survive a prolonged no-fighting war, but was not particularly conducive to sustained competence under pressure.’⁹⁸ Recent research has shown that the British intelligence community was in the habit of emphasising the passivity of other races, but in the Egyptian case Islam seems to have occupied a particular pride of place as a factor inhibiting a competent military performance and strategic capability.⁹⁹

The manner in which the underlying religiosity of the Egyptian people could be mobilised to fight a losing battle was evidently misunderstood. If indeed ‘Islam’ affected the Egyptian response to war, it evoked a widespread readiness to sacrifice life in such a way that was barely comprehensible to the secular political culture of the West. Diplomats were informed that, ‘most Egyptians were farmers and even if their sons joined the army they still regarded a decision of war and peace as being of little concern to them since whether their sons or relatives died was a matter entirely preordained by God.’ All levels of society in Egypt shared a ‘basic hatred of Israel.’ This was ‘not merely a national but a religious phenomenon. War would therefore be popular.’¹⁰⁰ The notion of individual sacrifice for the spirit of Egypt alluded to Islamic scriptural metaphors in which the personal defeats of individual men were transformed into collective victories.

There was something of a cultural schism here. Not only would a Western state rarely enter war in the knowledge that they would probably lose on the battlefield but even military victory did not always translate into political gain. In Egypt’s recent history, however, the experience had been quite different. President Nasser had lost on the battlefield in the Suez crisis of 1956 but had reaped enormous political gain and even after a spectacular defeat in 1967, managed to retain the support of the Egyptian public and other Arab states. This was partly a result of Nasser’s political acumen but was also facilitated by growing expressions of religiosity among Egyptians. Donald Bergus, the unofficial American representative in Cairo observed signs of a religious resurgence from 1970. He reported that ‘since Israel started deep penetration raids, we have noted lively sale by street vendors of Plastic mottos inscribed “Allah” or “Allah with us.”...Mrs Yael Vered (Israel’s Miles

Copeland) will doubtless inform anybody who will listen that this is another sign that Egypt is cracking under Israeli pressure. Our conclusion is just the opposite.’¹⁰¹ Sadat himself was more explicitly pious than his predecessor.¹⁰² In a speech to the *Al Azhar* mosque in 1971, Sadat reminded his listeners that ‘Man should not fear anything; for that which befalls him is only what is destined to happen.’¹⁰³ The ability of Nasser’s more pious successor to appropriate and mobilise this underlying religiosity among Egyptians to translate a military defeat into a political and spiritual victory was thus clearly underestimated.

The final belief about Arab political culture reinforced by the 1967 war was the notion that the rhetoric espoused by Arab political leaders bore little relation to their actual capabilities. In January 1973, the British Naval Attaché reflected on the peculiar relationship between word and fact in Egyptian politics, suggesting that ‘the present posture is...a timely demonstration that in Egypt there is a bizarre relation between word and fact; further that fact is a rare commodity that must usually be substituted by deduction and probability.’¹⁰⁴ The CIA had long made a similar analytic observation about the alleged subjectivity of the Arab mind, noting that that ‘the facts become what the Arab emotionally wants to believe is true.’¹⁰⁵ The implication was that the words spoken by Arab leaders bore little or no relation to military realities.

Ideas about the misleading nature of Arab rhetoric were reinforced by, or at least reflected in, the work of an anthropologist and Orientalist reviewed by the CIA’s in-house journal.¹⁰⁶ In a detailed study of ‘the Arab Mind,’ Raphael Patai argued that certain discursive features such as *mubalagha* (exaggeration) and *tawkid* (over-assertion) were anchored in the richness of Arabic language as well as a culture that prioritised ‘face’ or honour over other values. Patai suggested that verbal precision was largely a function of literate and industrial society. In contrast the personal independence that traditionally characterised the lives of Arabs allowed for greater discursive freedom as a form of communication. Patai argued, in long established industrialised society,

You must be on time for work, you are tied to a machine which will not tolerate imprecision, you live in a world of impersonal relations, you must be precise in what you do and in what you say. But if you are independent, say, you are a fellah [farmer] who works in the field, you come and go when you want, you talk the way you want. Verbal exaggeration, expansiveness, imagination, make man more free.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, Patai specifically linked the Arab tendency to exaggerate to ‘a cultural phenomenon with socio-economic foundations’, effectively serving as verbal compensation for a material deficit. From a military point of view this assessment was particularly significant. Patai wrote that ‘the Arabs have a proclivity for substituting words for actions...in the Arab mentality words often can and do serve as a substitute for acts’ suggesting that this characteristic had a pacifying function. ‘As long as what can be called the oral phase of action lasts, there is always the hope that the aroused passions will exhaust themselves within words and the swords remain in their hilts.’¹⁰⁸

That the CIA reviewed this book in its in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence* is significant. Though the review is dated in 1974, it seems plausible to deduce that ‘academic’ works such as this will have encouraged analysts to dismiss what Arab leaders (and Sadat in particular) had to say as a substitute for, rather than an indication of, meaningful action. Moreover, Sadat’s own practices

reinforced such beliefs about a dissonance between rhetoric and action in Egyptian politics. He had begun making periodic statements about the need to gain lost Arab territories by force, and the infamous 'year of decision', since 1970. It was not simply the West who believed his war-like rhetoric was sheer bluff. Estimates of Egyptian military capabilities were so low and such statements made so often without tangible consequences that these warnings were not even taken seriously in Egypt.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, some Arab diplomats were suspiciously forthright about the tenuous link between rhetoric and action in any future Arab-Israeli conflict. Just two months before the war, the Jordanian Foreign Minister Zaid Rifai explained to British ambassador Balfour Paul that 'governments in other Arab countries maintained two quite separate levels of policy – 'the Declared and the Real.' He suggested that Sadat and Asad were able to exploit 'their restored partners' [Jordan's] military inability' to join in hostilities towards Israel, 'as a pretext for calling them off, or deferring them.'¹¹⁰ Such diplomatic reporting confirmed the Anglo-American belief in the role of rhetoric as a substitute for action. Speaking to a post-Orientalist literature, it also demonstrates all too well the manner in which cultural stereotypes can be used or indeed advanced by the 'Other' to justify and perhaps even conceal a strategic goal. Whether this was a manifestation of 'native Orientalism' or strategic deception, it seems clear that these diplomatic interactions would have further complicated efforts to distinguish the 'signals' (indications of Egypt's intentions and capability) from the 'noise' of Arab rhetoric.¹¹¹

Analytical conceptions of Arab political culture thus loomed large in estimations of what Egypt could achieve militarily. The stunning military defeat of the Six-Day War undoubtedly played a major role in this but Anglo-American analysts also underestimated how much had been learned from this traumatic historical turning point. Simplistic recourse to Islamic 'passivity' misjudged how religiosity could be instrumentalised as an active weapon of war among an increasingly frustrated population and military. Intersecting through and exacerbating all these cultural preconceptions was the notion that Arabs often 'do not mean what they say.' Anthropological works like Raphael Patai's and Sadat's own professions only reinforced the perceived gap between rhetoric and action. Indeed, there are even hints that Western cultural preconceptions about Arab culture and resultant capability may have been cultivated in order to facilitate strategic surprise.

The shadow of Soviet-Egyptian relations

In a paradoxical way, notions of Orientalism also informed assessments of Soviet-Egyptian relations and the impact the expulsion of Soviet advisors would have on the eve of war. It is peculiar that one of the most notable features of CIA and JIC intelligence reporting on Soviet-Egyptian relations during the Nasser period was the emphasis on Egyptian agency in the relationship, particularly when Soviet influence was strongest in the post 1967 period.¹¹² Analysts clearly sought to quell the widespread fears of policy-makers that Egypt was merely a Soviet client state.

However, with the expulsion of 15,000 Soviet troops in July 1972, left also the caution with which analysts had approached Soviet-Egyptian relations. Ultimately the Soviet withdrawal served to confirm that in the absence of the superpower, the Arab world *could not* contemplate a successful military

initiative against Israel. Alongside this implicit denial of strategic agency, the expulsion seems to have lowered the guard of analysts and particularly military attachés, obscuring the extent of Soviet operational influence in the Egyptian deception plan.

The ‘relaxing’ effect of the Soviet expulsion on intelligence gathering in Egypt was made explicit by the British Military Attaché. He felt that,

While Soviet weapons systems and their performance in Egypt still constitute a worthwhile intelligence target, my Service Attachés’ time is now increasingly devoted to the promotion of defence sales...No longer are the Service Attachés regarded as potential spies to be hampered in their work as much as possible but as friends, trying to assist Egypt in equipping herself for her own defence.¹¹³

The psychological impact of more amicable relations between British and Egyptian officers that followed the Soviet expulsion meant important residual Soviet influences would be missed.

As Bar-Joseph has uncovered, Egypt’s war planners based their plans on Soviet doctrine, stipulating that a primary way to conceal real preparations for war is to disguise them as an exercise – ‘*maskirova*.’ The Egyptians sought to convince the Israelis that the information about military preparations they were collecting was connected to ‘*Tahrir 41*,’ a large-scale routine crossing exercise – yet another one in a series of similar exercises conducted twice a year since 1968.¹¹⁴ The secrecy of operations was thereby maintained. Platoon commanders heard that they were to start a real war only six hours before the attack. Similar levels of secrecy were maintained in the Syrian army.’¹¹⁵

The potential impact of these operational influences was undermined by the physical removal of Soviet advisors. After the expulsion, American analysts argued that Sadat ‘seems to have recognised that the withdrawal of the Soviet units has weakened Egypt militarily and at least postponed if not abolished his military option.’¹¹⁶ Their thinking mirrored heated debates about the move within the Egyptian establishment. Chief of Staff, Saad al-Din al-Shazly implored Sadat: ‘You must realise how dangerous this decision is...There is no question this will affect our capabilities. The Soviet units play such a large role in our defense and electronic warfare.’¹¹⁷

In March 1973, the British Defence Attaché concurred, although he included a crucial caveat:

Soviet military withdrawal has gravely weakened both Egypt’s ability to defend herself and any limited capability the Egyptians may once have had to mount an attack against the Israelis across the Suez Canal...My Defence Attaché believes the Egyptian Armed Forces are no longer capable of conducting a major military operation across the Canal, *except as a suicidal gesture designed to provoke intervention by the big Powers and the imposition of a Middle East settlement*.¹¹⁸

Only in hindsight was it seen that ‘the removal of the restraining hands of the Soviet advisers meant that the Egyptians were now masters of their own house, able to lay their own plans according to their own ideas.’¹¹⁹ Moreover, it was only *after* the expulsion that rearmament to the scale desired by Sadat, really began. Nonetheless, weeks before war analysts assessed (with a discernible tone of smugness) that ‘Sadat’s experience with the Soviets appears to have taught him a pragmatism that has enabled him to set a course and a pace better suited to Egypt’s capabilities.’¹²⁰

The extent to which the Soviet-Arab dimension blurred assessments is most pertinently illustrated in a CIA memorandum prepared on the morning of the attack, confirming that ‘as many as 1000 dependents have left Egypt.’¹²¹ Two plausible interpretations of the Soviet evacuation were put forth.

The first was that the Soviet Union had ‘gotten wind’ of plans to initiate hostilities and in protest were evacuating dependents and advisors. Analysts concluded that, ‘in so far as advisors are included in the evacuation, the effectiveness of an Arab attack is likely to be somewhat downgraded and the risks of Soviet involvement will lessen.’¹²²

The second interpretation and the one that, revealingly, was more ‘in favour with the intelligence services’ was that the remaining Soviet advisors were ‘being expelled from both Egypt and Syria.’ Into this assessment were incorporated considerations of the regional, inter-Arab dimension; specifically, that Saudi Arabia’s ‘King Faisal has been pressing hard to convince Sadat and Asad to cut their ties with Moscow.’ This was also consistent with the tensions that had characterised Arab-Soviet relations since Sadat’s presidency. Interestingly, the NSC staffer suggested that *despite* their assessment, certain actions should be considered in case of hostilities e.g. the evacuation of U.S. citizens, preparations for an oil boycott and consultations with moderate Arab leaders. There was in this short memorandum an almost intuitive, if implicit, reluctance to dismiss the prospect of war entirely.¹²³

JIC assessments of the days preceding the war remain unreleased. However, in an interview with the author, the head of the Middle East Desk of the Assessments Staff at the time, Colonel John Davies recalled his personal (and disregarded) warning that war was certainly coming. By spring 1973, Davies had become convinced that Egyptian stockpiles along the Canal portended an attack on Israel. He issued a draft assessment accordingly that was torn ‘to shreds’ by Sir David Willison in a JIC meeting, based on ‘his supposed expert assessments of Israeli defences.’¹²⁴ The JIC’s refusal to accept an Assessment Staff submission was ‘almost unprecedented,’ Colonel Davies recalled.

In September, Davies was alerted to further indicators of war based on communications between the Egyptians and Soviets by a contact in GCHQ. By the first few days of October, the increase in signals traffic between the two had become ‘so heavy that I became convinced that an attack was imminent.’ He recalls that ‘the pattern of SIGINT all that week was such as to leave me and...my GCHQ contact in little doubt that it was traffic and not deception.’ The evacuation of the Russians confirmed his suspicions. Davies issued a Special Assessment, which was passed to the FO duty clerk on Friday afternoon. Perhaps recalling Davies’ discredited draft submission in April, the Clerk decided that the assessment could wait until Monday. It was not passed to the head of the JIC until war had broken out the next day.¹²⁵ An interview with another veteran diplomat suggests that Davies’ was indeed a lone voice in the wilderness. Head of the Near East and North Africa Department, James Craig remembers that ‘we discussed thoroughly the evacuation of the Russians from Egypt and reached the conclusion that we didn’t understand it but Sadat would not attack! I remember ringing the FO [sic] duty manager to tell him so.’¹²⁶ During an invitation to Langley, Davies recalls (with understandable pride) DCI Colby’s admission that: ‘I had been the only analyst in the Western world to have forecast the Yom Kippur war.’¹²⁷

Conclusion

In effect, misjudgements about Arab capabilities, both as a result of rigid conceptualisations of Arab culture and the Soviet shadow, meant that although analysts had a good sense of Sadat's motivations and intentions, i.e. the various forces driving his actions, they underestimated his capability to carry them out. Even once war had started, DCI Colby thought that Israel must have initiated.

In May 1973, Sadat himself accused the American intelligence community of overlooking Arab 'psychology'.¹²⁸ Yet a detailed examination of the archival record shows that the issue was not overlooking 'psychology' – far from it, the analysis of the central intelligence bodies in both Britain and America demonstrated a conceptual and applied understanding of this dimension. They appreciated the importance of a limited military victory to regain 'honour', the significance of international diplomacy and the domestic context upon which Sadat's decision-making would depend.

The declassified record indicates particularly astute assessments of Sadat's 'mindset' by British analysts. Britain's more accentuated policy interests in the region appear to have influenced the rigour and sensitivity of their assessments. That the onus of action was on the U.S. rather than the U.K. may also provide some explanation – it is always easier to criticise or stress the need for action when the obligation to act lies on another party. It is likely that the closer diplomatic relations between Egypt and Britain that characterised the post-1967 period (in contrast to the lack of diplomatic relations between Egypt and the U.S. until after the Yom Kippur war) enabled more sensitive and comprehensive diplomatic reporting on the part of British analysts.

Though Sadat's intentions were broadly well understood, it seems clear that analysts failed to take his intentions *seriously* because they doubted his ability to carry out his goals. In effect the result was the same – an erroneously reduced perception of threat. There is a double irony to this underestimation of Egypt's capability. Beliefs about the specificity of Arab political culture were a major contributing factor to analytical strengths in reading Sadat's intentions in 1973, yet similar cultural beliefs culminated in a fundamental misreading of Egypt's military capabilities. The second irony surrounds assessments of the Soviet role in the crisis. In the years that Soviet influence was most pronounced in Egypt, analysts were uncannily conscious of the need to resist interpreting developments exclusively through the prism of the Cold War, rightly stressing the importance of regional dynamics.¹²⁹ *After* the Soviet expulsion however, analysts regressed to a simplistic assessment of Egypt's capabilities through a misleadingly basic Cold War framework: that without the Soviet backing, Egypt stood no chance of military success.

This dual underestimation of Egypt's capability by Anglo-American analysts also accentuates the psychological primacy of intelligence analysis – particularly the power of stated and unstated preconceptions in masking even the 'facts' i.e. the 'secrets' of a nation's capability. As one seasoned scholar of strategic surprise puts it, 'avoiding intelligence failures requires the elimination of strategic preconceptions,' but at the same time, as humans, 'we cannot operate without some preconceptions.'¹³⁰ In the case of 1973, this problem was even more acute because the cultural preconceptions with which the intelligence community had faced the Arab World in the decade before had been substantiated as accurate in, for example, the analytical 'success' of 1967.¹³¹ Notions like 'the Arabs do not mean what they say' were validated on many occasions, but October 1973 was an exception. As Kissinger later observed, Sadat, 'paralysed his opponents with their own preconceptions.'¹³² Here Kissinger

unwittingly raises an important point sometimes neglected in postcolonial readings: the role of Oriental agency in using, reinforcing and manipulating Western cultural preconceptions to serve strategic purposes in war and peace.

This instance of ‘failure’ is thus considerably more complicated and certainly less absolute than some of the historiography has hitherto suggested. Clearly there were analytical pitfalls that drew heavily on Orientalist beliefs about the ‘otherness’ of the Arab mind. However, this appears to have been more prevalent in assessments of Egypt’s capabilities than her intentions. To dismiss the political and intelligence community as having ‘failed’ to understand Sadat’s intentions, as the historiography does, is to misrepresent the role of these perceptions in their historical context. That war was not anticipated in October 1973 was not the result of an inability to understand the motivations of a leader in crisis, for which intelligence is often criticised, but rather a rarer failure to recognise an altered capability.

Nor was this an exclusively Western misconception. As Heikal and numerous others have indicated, no one was more surprised by Egypt’s military achievements early in the conflict than Sadat himself.¹³³ To this day, it is impossible to know whether the ‘signals’ and ‘noise’ problem that analysts faced with Sadat’s vehement professions in the 1971-1973 period was the intentional result of a long-term deception campaign, sheer indecision or something in between. Is it therefore plausible and historically accurate to lament the inability of Western intelligence services to reveal an outcome that Sadat was himself unsure about and call it a ‘failure’ of intelligence?

Most importantly, this discussion has shown that the ‘cultural lens’ can serve both as an aid and an impediment to analysis. How this double-edged sword cuts through an understanding of allies and adversaries depends on how much empathy and critical self-awareness accompanies it, as well as how the object uses and manipulates the subject’s cultural preconceptions. A closer look at this seminal historical juncture makes it clear that the narrative Kissinger has popularised of a ‘cultural divide’ fails to capture the contradictory impulses of understanding and misunderstanding that informed much diplomatic and intelligence analysis of the Middle East in the years preceding the Yom Kippur war.

¹ W. Burr, ‘The October War and U.S. Policy’, 7 Oct. 2003, *National Security Archive*, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/> (accessed 20 March 2016).

² Ibid.

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C. Beckerman-Boys, ‘Assessing the historiography of the October War’ in Asaf Siniver (ed), *The October 1973 War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

⁴ A. Shlaim, ‘Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The case of the Yom Kippur War’, *World Politics*, xxviii (1976), 348-380.

⁵ Beckerman-Boys, ‘Historiography of the October War’, 14-17.

⁶ A. Bregman, ‘Ashraf Marwan and Israel’s Intelligence Failure’ in Asaf Siniver (ed), *The October 1973 War*, 195-208.

⁷ U. Bar-Joseph, ‘The Intelligence Failure of Yom Kippur’ in P. R. Kumeraswamy (ed), *Revisiting the Yom Kippur War* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 15-28. A more recent article by Joseph argues that the claims of that Marwan was a double agent are ‘groundless.’ See, Uri Bar-Joseph, ‘A

Question of Loyalty: Ashraf Marwan and Israel's Intelligence Fiasco in the Yom Kippur War', *Intelligence and National Security*, xxx, (2015), 667-685.

⁸ M. Gamasy, *The October War: Memoirs of Field Marshall El-Gamasy of Egypt* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1993); S. Shazly, *The Crossing of Suez* (San Francisco: American Middle East Research, 1980), 213; H. Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (London: Collins, 1975) 4–6, 18, 24.

⁹ M. Handel, *Perception, Deception, and Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War* (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1976), 11-27.

¹⁰ The 'concept' revolved around the notion that Egypt would not attack Israel without acquiring from the Soviets fighter bombers that would allow air superiority. See A. Shalev, *Israel's Intelligence Assessment before the Yom Kippur War* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 77.

¹¹ R. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982), 68-69.

¹² K. Sindawi and E. Kahana, 'The Yom Kippur War: The successes of Israeli Intelligence', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, xxviii (2015), 772.

¹³ D. Morse, *Kissinger and the Yom Kippur War*, (North Carolina: McFarland) 13.

¹⁴ Memorandum from President Nixon to Kissinger, 17 March 1970, F[oreign] R[elations of the] U[nited] S[tates] 1969-1976, Vol. XXIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v23/d102> (accessed 20 March 2016).

¹⁵ M. Ferraro, 'Anglo American relations and the Yom Kippur War of 1973', (unpublished M-Phil thesis, Cambridge, 2005), 87-88. For a more recent evaluation see, A. Spelling, 'Recrimination and reconciliation': Anglo-American relations and the Yom Kippur War,' *Journal of Cold War History*, xiii (2013), 485-506.

¹⁶ This is particularly marked in the British case. See M. Goodman, 'The Dog That Didn't Bark: The Joint Intelligence Committee and Warning of Aggression', *Cold War History*, vii (2007), 531. For consideration of the American intelligence failure see C. Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

¹⁷ R. Aldrich, *GCHQ* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 290.

¹⁸ D[irector] C[entral] I[Intelligence] Memorandum, 'The Performance of the Intelligence Community before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A preliminary Post-Mortem,' 20 Dec. 1973, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001331429.pdf (accessed 20 March 2016).

¹⁹ M. Penney, 'Intelligence and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War' in *President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War*, 30 Jan. 2013, 7-10. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/international-relations/arab-israeli-war/nixon-arab-israeli-war.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2016). Like this article, the study also reveals 'documents that show the Intelligence Community grappling with reports that war might, in fact, be coming.' Regarding organisational initiatives the authors explain that 'having disbanded the Office of National Estimates, Colby had begun to replace it with a system of individual National Intelligence Officers (NIOs), whose new procedures were not yet effective. A number of personnel changes had recently been made, and some of the most knowledgeable Middle East analysts had moved to other jobs.'

²⁰ Colby cited in H. Ford, 'William E. Colby as Director of Central Intelligence, 1973-1976' in *President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War*, 30 Jan. 2013, 21, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/international-relations/arab-israeli-war/nixon-arab-israeli-war.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2016).

²¹ Ibid, p.19.

²² Morse, *Kissinger and the Yom Kippur War*, 3.

²³ H. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1982), 465.

²⁴ A. Ghorbal in R. Parker (ed.), *The October War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 33.

²⁵ See S. Yacub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); F. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); P. Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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- ³¹ D. Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 337.
- ³² Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War*, 336.
- ³³ E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
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- ³⁹ G. Gawrych, *The Albatross of Decisive Victory: War and Policy between Egypt and Israel in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press 2000), 146.
- ⁴⁰ J. Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders* (London: Random House, 2001), 251.
- ⁴¹ Transcript, 'Secretary's Staff Meeting', 23 Oct. 1973, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/octwar-63.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2016).
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- ⁴⁵ Camille Mansour, *Beyond Alliance: Israel and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8.
- ⁴⁶ M. Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: Volume I: From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2014), 214.
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- ⁶⁹ Hoda Abdel Nasser, interview with the author, Cairo, 2 March 2006; Hassanein Heikal, interview with the author, Cairo, 1 March 2006.
- ⁷⁰ Text of a Petition ("Baghdadi Memorandum" presented to President Sadat on 4 April 1972) from British Embassy in Cairo to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, TNA, FCO 39/1207.
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- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 John Davies, correspondence with author, 10 Jan. 2014. In a subsequent interview, Davies also alluded to personal rivalry between himself and Willison based on a prior altercation.
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 James Craig, letter to the author, 10 Nov. 2011.
- 127 John Davies, correspondence with author, 10 Jan. 2014.
- 128 Text of interview which Sadat gave to Arnaud de Brochgrave in *Newsweek*, 9 April 1973, TNA, FCO 93/44: Sadat used the Vietnam conflict to illustrate his point: ‘McNamara warned [President] Johnson that by feeding the wrong data into the computers he was getting the wrong answers. Well, McNamara was right and Johnson was wrong... You simply forgot to feed Vietnamese psychology into the computer... The U.S. has overlooked one factor – Arab psychology.’
- 129 Rezk, ‘Assessments of the Middle East’, 229.
- 130 R. Betts, ‘Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable’, *World Politics* xxxi (1978), 63.
- 131 Rezk, ‘Assessments of the Middle East’, 146.
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