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## Superpower Dominance: The Yum Kippur Case

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**Abstract.** The Yum Kippur War, or as the Egyptians call it The October War, is one of the most important wars in the history of the Middle East between the coalition of Egypt and Syria versus Israel. It occurred at a time when the two superpowers then, the Americans and the Soviet Union, were in engaging in what was called the Cold War. For that every Superpower used to support a certain party of conflict to assure the balance of global dominance isn't affected. This paper reviews American foreign policy during the war in 1973. It concentrates on how the American institutions and foreign policy activists acted and influenced the outcome of the war. The paper finally conducts a counter analysis on what could have happened if the Americans didn't support the Israelis in the war.

**Keywords.** USA, The Soviet Union, Yum Kippur War, Israel, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Diplomacy, Military, Kissinger, Nixon

### Introduction

October 6 1973 was no ordinary day in the Middle East. On this day at exactly 2:00 p.m. (Cairo time), Israel got surprised by two Arab armies launching attacks on its forces. Egyptian and Syrian armies planning to recover the lands they lost in the 1967 war decided to start an unexpected attack on Israel. "To intelligence historians, the October 1973 War is almost synonymous with "intelligence failure." On 6 October the armies of Egypt and Syria attacked Israel, catching the Israeli and U.S. Intelligence Communities by surprise" (Linda,2013). And whether you call it the October war, like the Egyptians, or the Yom Kippur war, like the Israelis, this war remains very special for all U.S. foreign policy researchers. Foreign policy during this crisis was not as always with President Nixon having to deal with domestic crises in Washington, internal turmoil, the soviets capitalizing on the crisis in the Middle East, and several other issues. "In his memoirs, Nixon referred to the debilitating effect of the domestic turmoil on his ability to run U.S. foreign policy and prevent the Soviets from capitalizing on the crisis in the Middle East" (Siniver, 2009). Of course, the Middle East being of high interest to the two superpowers back then, the Soviets and the Americans, this crisis was put on the top of their foreign policy agenda. But what if one of the superpowers decided back then not to interfere in this crisis? How could things have changed? Would the outcome of the war remain the same? In this paper, we are going to study an in-depth analysis of the American foreign policy during the October war to have a clear view of all its aspects, and then we are going to assume the Americans had not interfered and then analyze the difference in the outcomes of the war.

### **Count Down For the war**

The fourth Arab-Israeli war came at a time the two superpowers were practicing détente and putting the conflict in the middle east away from the table of negotiations. This situation didn't suit the Egyptian president Anwar Al-Sadat which was frustrated with the resting U.S. role in the Middle East. During the time between 1970 and 1973, Sadat made two initiatives addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict. "Sadat's first attempt to break the deadlock came in February 1971. Addressing the Egyptian National Assembly, he signaled his willingness, should Israel agree to withdraw forces from the Sinai Peninsula, to reopen the Suez Canal which had been closed since 1967, and to resume negotiations with Israel based on UN Resolution 242, which set the formula of 'land for peace' as the basis for Middle East peace negotiations" (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). The Nixon administration didn't benefit from the chances Sadat gave them to settle the conflict of Arab-Israeli peace which gave Sadat no other choice than to force the issue on the table. Although Sadat has sent several signs of his will to go to war with Israel the Americans and Israelis didn't take his threats as seriously as they should be. During an interview to Newsweek magazine in April 1973 Sadat sent one of the most threatening messages to the Americans:

"My main difficulty with the U.S. . . . has been to get the Administration to take a position in the conflict and put it on the paper. To this day there is no solid position paper on the whole problem . . . Everyone has fallen asleep over the Mideast crisis. But they will soon wake up to the fact that Americans have left us no way out . . . times have changed. And everything is changing here too – for the battle . . . Everything in this country is now being mobilized in earnest for the resumption of the battle – which is now inevitable" (Siniver, 2009).

Henry Kissinger being the United States Secretary of state at that time misinterpreted all the messages sent by Sadat to the Americans. "The October war was a surprise to Dr. Kissinger—and to Israel—though it should not have been.... He did not ignore the evidence. Like the Israelis, and like the C.I.A., he misinterpreted it" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, 2013).

In June 1972 the famous Watergate scandal took President Nixon's priority over foreign policy taking most of his time working on driving off all tracks leading to the white house.

With the United States President busy with internal problems, the Americans misinterpreting the Egyptian messages of an inevitable war, and the Israelis believing that the Arabs won't start a war after the 1967 defeat President Sadat and President Hafez Assad agreed on starting a surprise attack on the Israelis. President Sadat was planning to benefit from the attack to achieve his goals diplomatically while President Assad believed in his ability to achieve his goals militarily. Although the two presidents had different visions on how to benefit from the attack both agreed that October 6 1973 was the day Israel is going to be surprised with two Arab armies attacking its soldiers from two different sides. It is important to be aware that 6 October 1973 was the Yom Kippur which is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar which means many public and private workplaces will be closed and the military sites will be undermanned. Moreover, October 1973 was the month of Ramadan for Muslims which made the Israelis not expect any attack by Arabs during this holy month.

President Sadat, President Assad, and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia also agreed on using oil to pressure Americans to assure an agreement with the Israelis leading to their withdrawal of the occupied territories.

After agreeing on the date and the strategy of the attack the relations between Egypt and the Soviets started improving and the arms supplies by the Soviets in 1973 exceeded all previous supplies. President Sadat was quoted saying " They are drowning me in new arms" (Haykal, 1981).

Three days before the war on October 3 1973 the Egyptians informed the Soviets that the war is close but they didn't tell them the exact date. The next day Soviet diplomats were evacuated from Egypt and Syria.

October 6 1973 2:00 p.m. Cairo time the fourth Arab-Israeli war started with Syrian forces attacking from the North towards the Golan Heights and the south with Egyptian troops crossing the Suez Canal.

### **Conflict Breaking Out**

The National Security Council issued a report in May 1973 speaking about several actions taken by the Egyptians which could reflect preparation for hostile acts. "The NSC analysts who may have prepared this report believed that various moves that U.S. intelligence had picked up--the movement of surface-to-air missiles and bombers, higher alert for air forces, reports on war planning, and the like--indicated that those states were "preparing for war." Nevertheless, they could not be sure whether these developments indicated intentions to attack or a ploy to put "psychological pressures" on Tel Aviv and Washington. A safe conclusion was that "whatever the Egyptian and Arab leaders intend at this state, the pattern of their action thus far does not provide the Arabs with a rational basis for an attack at an early date" (Burr, 2003).

In addition to that in Nixon's memoirs, he stated that they were totally surprised with Arabs attacking Israel. Also "On 4 October, an Intelligence Community memorandum stated: "We continue to believe that an outbreak of major Arab-Israeli hostilities remains unlikely for the immediate future" (CIA Information Management Services, 2013).

Having all reports neglecting the possibility of war in the middle east was considered one of the major deficiencies the American Intelligence had faced in this crisis which gave the Arabs the surprise factor leading to the achievement of some important military goals at the beginning of the war.

Although the Americans were surprised by the Arab's attack but the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) quickly adapted to the crisis. Two weeks before the war Kissinger was sworn in as the new United States Secretary of State and took over his new position along with being the United States National Security Advisor. Being responsible for the two positions made Kissinger comfortable in leading the crisis. "As the war developed, the immediate objectives of the administration were to stop the fighting, to prevent the Soviets from intervening, and to end the Arab oil embargo which had been in place since the second week of the fighting" (Siniver, 2009). Based on these objectives the decision-making process during the war occurred on the cost versus benefit strategy. U.S. foreign policy during the war occurred based on opening to diplomatic talks with the belligerents, backstage talks with the Soviets, putting the case in the United Nations, and finally the usage of American power to end the war.

During the war, the WSAG held a meeting under the chairmanship of Kissinger and the important decisions were taken by Kissinger alone or in collaboration with President Nixon who was not fully engaged in the crisis. "While it was important to support Israel, it was crucial not to let her win too decisively, as another Arab defeat could prompt a Soviet intervention" (Siniver, 2009). In addition to that, the Americans believed that the threat of an oil embargo by the Arabs cannot be ignored anymore. Kissinger suggested agreeing with the Soviets to raise the issue of the war to the United Nations security council and President Nixon along with the Soviets agreed on that. But the two superpowers couldn't make their allies accept a cease-fire since the Israelis didn't want to end the war before changing the situation on the battlefield which gave the Arabs important progress at the beginning of the war and the Arabs wanted to continue and build upon their achievements. After the first day of the war ended Kissinger still believed that the Israelis are going to regain the lead during the next few days so the Americans

didn't take any action rather than moving the Sixth Fleet closer to the region. This feeling later changed after the Israelis faced serious losses on the battlefield the next few days of the war.

"On Tuesday, 9 October, Kissinger explained to the Israeli Ambassador, Simcha Dinitz: 'Our strategy was to give you until Wednesday evening, by which time I thought the whole Egyptian army would be wrecked'" (Siniver, 2009). Dinitz asked Kissinger during this meeting for full American assistance and supply of military arms. President Nixon accepted all of Dinitz's requests and here the Americans realized that a diplomatic solution for the crisis is hard to achieve at this point.

As for the Soviets, after supplying the Arabs with all weapons needed, they decided to resupply the Arabs with big amounts of arms from the first days of the war and daily. And although Nixon had approved Dinitz's requests they no military supply reached Israel before October 14. Being late to assist America's allies while they were in a serious situation with heavy casualties was strange especially with Dinitz's several requests for assistance from Kissinger. "Assessing the situation on 9 October, William Quandt wrote to Kissinger that on the matter of Israeli arms requests, 'if we act too early or too visibly on this key issue, we will ensure attacks on US citizens and an oil embargo in key Arab states'" (Siniver, 2009). Moreover, Kissinger was thinking on two sides at the moment where he didn't want to see the Israelis lose the war and he didn't want the war to affect the Arab-American relations. At the same time, the Americans knew that if they didn't support the Israelis immediately, they would lose leverage over their allies at the end of the war. Kissinger was so careful not to affect the relations with the Israelis and for that when he was asked about the delay in the assistance, he blamed the bureaucratic difficulties and especially the Pentagon along with the Secretary of Defense. Kissinger wanted to make sure the Israelis see him as their true friend and he assured Dinitz that Nixon decided to supply and replace military losses. At the same time in order not to affect the relations with the Arabs, Kissinger decided to work on the airlift operation through commercial airlines. William Quandt, a staff member on the National Security Council in the Nixon administration, stated in a private interview that Kissinger is the one who ordered James R. Schlesinger, the Secretary of Defense, to postpone the military supply to Israel:

"I remember Kissinger saying to Schlesinger in one of the meetings, 'You are going to have to bear the responsibility for whatever delay there is because I have to deal with the Israelis on the diplomatic front. Nixon and I cannot be viewed as the problem; right now, is not the time' . . . It wasn't Schlesinger, he was doing what he was told: 'get ready to do it but don't do it!' and so he had to take the fall" (Morse, 2015).

But Kissinger's view at the beginning of the war of not supporting Israel directly and maintaining a low profile in the military support soon changed on October 9 where he was caught saying during the WSAG meeting: "Israel has suffered a strategic defeat no matter what happens, [they] can't take two-to-one losses" (Siniver, 2009). Keeping in mind that the WSAG have met eight times during the first week of the war but the only action taken was to order the sixth fleet to move closer to the region. Day after the day the perception of the war started to change in the United States with Arabs achieving important advancements on the battlefield and the Israelis suffering huge losses during the first two weeks of the war. It was time Dinitz raise the voice and send a clear threat to the Americans warning Kissinger: "If a massive American airlift to Israel does not start immediately, then I'll know that the United States is reneging on its promises and its policy, and we will have to draw very serious conclusions from all this" (Kalb 1974).

Nixon being fully disturbed by major domestic problems the last thing he wanted at the moment was a foreign policy crisis and after the Israeli threat, he couldn't but interfere directly in the process of supporting it. Nixon even didn't consider Kissinger's recommendation on how



and what to send and ordered him to work on sending everything that can fly. After Nixon's interference Kissinger's strategy of postponing the supplies and keeping a low profile during the supply process ended. It is important here to point out that the Israelis all the way believed Kissinger's story blaming the Pentagon in the delay of supplies were Foreign minister Eban stated: "Our heroes were Nixon and Kissinger. Our enemies were the Pentagon and Schlesinger" (Siniver, 2009).

Now that Nixon issued his order to fully supply Israel, Kissinger on October 16 during the WSAG meeting set a goal for the group to keep the supply 25% ahead of the Soviets.

"The airlift had an immediate impact on the fighting, and by 16 October, the Israelis had completed a successful counter-offensive in the Sinai and crossed the Suez Canal" (Siniver, 2009).

On October 17 after a meeting combining Kissinger and the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, and Kuwait in the White House Kissinger wasn't expecting an oil problem which gave him another incentive to keep the supply until the Arabs and the Soviets capitulated. At that moment Kissinger realized diplomacy alone can never end a crisis the way he wants it to end. During the WSAG meeting, that day Kissinger was quoted: "We have to keep the stuff going into Israel. We have to pour it in until someone quits. . . . The worst thing that would happen would be for some eager beaver to start moving in the Security Council until the pieces are in place" (Siniver, 2009). After the meeting ended President Nixon met with the WSAG officials and explained to them that his order for direct military supply was not out of love to the Israelis but rather he wanted his supply to give him leverage in the negotiations after the war and to gain the confidence of the Israelis for the negotiations.

The positive atmosphere in Washington didn't last long and on October 18 the Arab oil ministers decided to put a 70% increase in prices of crude oil and a 5% cut in the production per month until the Israelis withdrew from the occupied territories. This did not end here and continued the next day where after Nixon continued his aid to Israel, Saudis decided a 10% cut in oil production and cancelation of shipments to the United States.

While the diplomatic situation was being harder the battlefield was having Israeli leverage after the American huge supplies. This ground leverage was a concern for the Americans since they were afraid that it will make the Israeli's acceptance of a cease-fire much harder.

On October 19 the WSAG decided in his meeting in addition to the airlift to speed up the sealift too. This decision worried the Soviets who directly sent a message from Brezhnev to Kissinger inviting him to Moscow to discuss a cease-fire. Washington received the message positively and Kissinger was on his way as early as October 20. Kissinger and Brezhnev agreed that a cease-fire is important at the moment and the military situation on the battlefield shall stop. The next day on October 21 the Egyptian Third Army being besieged by the Israelis made the situation harder and Sadat was asking hard for a cease-fire. This situation agreed the two superpowers imminent and the next day on October 22 the agreement was established between Kissinger and Brezhnev and was translated in the United Nations Security Council under Resolution 338 which stated that a cease-fire shall happen within twelve hours and the Resolution 242 shall be implemented. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 states that "The resolution calls for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories, acknowledges the claim of sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the region and calls on the UN Secretary-General to appoint an Envoy to facilitate an acceptable solution to the conflict" (United Nations, 1967).

The diplomatic agreement in Moscow wasn't welcomed in Israel and the Israelis felt cheated in Moscow by the Americans. Although the Israelis were drained by the war but the

way the Americans reached the agreement didn't satisfy them. Kissinger directly adapted to the situation in Tel Aviv and started giving guarantees to the Israelis regarding the release of Israeli prisoners and the continuation of the American airlift. As for the cease-fire "Kissinger now suggested to the Israelis that they disregard it and finish the job along the Suez Canal to reach the negotiation table from the most propitious position" (Siniver, 2009). After Kissinger left Israel the ceasefire collapsed and the Israelis made significant advancements on the battlefield through "the complete encirclement of the 25,000-strong Egyptian Third Army on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, the severance of Egyptian supply routes, and the road to Cairo left wide open to Israeli forces" (Siniver, 2009). At that point, Brezhnev understood what Kissinger has done and he explained: "Here, in Moscow, Kissinger behaved cunningly. He vowed fidelity to the policy of *de tence*, and then while in Tel-Aviv he made a deal with Golda" (Siniver, 2009). Although Kissinger wanted the Israelis to have a better position on the battlefield so that this will help him in the post-war negotiations but a clear Israeli victory and a big Arab defeat doesn't serve Kissinger's tactics since it won't make him acceptable from all parties and thus doesn't give him the privilege of ending the war through an American led diplomacy.

This situation moved the Americans and the Soviets back to the table of negotiations. The serious point at that time was the encirclement of the Egyptian third army which made Sadat plead that the superpowers send joined forces to enforce a cease-fire. Accordingly, Brezhnev sent Nixon a message proposing sending Soviet and American forces to assure the cease-fire and the implementation of the UN security council resolution. Brezhnev's letter wasn't accepted by Kissinger since having a Soviet presence in the region affects Kissinger's later plans. But Brezhnev's message didn't end on that point and continued stating that shall the Americans refuse the idea of the joint forces the Soviets won't have any solution rather than having to act unilaterally. "Nixon interpreted the message as 'perhaps the most serious threat to U.S.-Soviet relations since the Cuban Missile crisis eleven years before'" (Siniver, 2009). Here it is important to state that the Soviets didn't intend to interfere unilaterally and the message was a matter of threat to the Americans to get them to accept forcing the Israelis to end the war. "[It] was obvious to everyone that carrying out a complicated military operation in the final stages of the war was very risky and almost impossible . . . Then the issue of sending troops unilaterally came up [at a Politburo meeting]. Nobody liked or supported the idea. 'We have already made a principal decision not to be involved in the Middle East war, and there are no reasons to change our decision,' noted Brezhnev. Thus, any military involvement unilateral or together with the United States was ruled out" (Siniver, 2009).

Brezhnev's message wasn't interpreted as he wanted in Washington and the WSAG decided to put American forces around the world on high alert. Moreover, Kissinger considered that the domestic Watergate scandal has a great effect on the way the Soviets are acting. "Before convening the crucial meeting just before midnight, 24 October, Kissinger said to Alexander Haig, 'You cannot be sure how much of this is due to our domestic crisis . . . I don't think they would have taken on a functioning president . . . Don't forget that is what the Soviets are playing on. They find a cripple facing impeachment and why shouldn't they go in there'" (Siniver, 2009). At that night Nixon was away from the picture and Kissinger thought that it is better not to have him in the WSAG meeting that night. This meeting on the night of October 24-25 concluded to "three possible reasons for the Soviet threat: (1) Moscow intended all along to intervene in the war, (2) Moscow decided to intervene as a result of the Arab defeat on the battlefield, or (3) Moscow was responding to the Israeli violation of the cease-fire" (Siniver, 2009).

The next morning on October 25 a message was sent to the Soviets rejecting their proposal and warning from the consequences of unilateral intervention. At the same time, the Americans sent a message to Sadat telling him to retract his opinion regarding having a joint

force on his ground and stating that it may lead to the confrontation of two superpowers on Egyptian soil. Sadat accepted the American suggestion and replied to the Americans asking for the implementation of security council resolutions 338 and 339 and sending international forces to the region. The next day Sadat agreed on a new resolution "calling for an increased observer force which would exclude representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Resolution 340 also called for an immediate cease-fire, a return to the 22 October lines, and the implementation of Resolution 338" (Siniver, 2009). This time the ceasefire came to action and the war came to an end.

### **The Counter Analysis**

The question now is what if the Americans had decided not to interfere in the war? Has the outcome of the war been the same? Would we have seen a different middle east? Would this affect the superpower dominance struggle? To answer all these questions let us benefit from the previous parts in the paper and state the important stages the Americans interfered in and analyze what would have happened if they decided not to interfere.

Based on the previous explanation of the U.S. foreign policy during the 1973 October war, we have seen that the interference happened in two ways, militarily and diplomatically. Militarily wise the interference occurred through the American airlifts to Israel and through the repositioning of the sixth fleet to be near the region of crisis. As for diplomatically, the interference occurred with the Arabs, Soviets, and Israelis. In the above parts of the paper, a thorough explanation of the U.S. foreign policy during the Yom Kippur war was explained so now let's move on to the counter analysis part and suppose the Americans decided not to interfere neither diplomatically nor militarily in that crisis. Although one shouldn't differentiate in the types of interference since they are complementary to each other to be able to reach a clear and objective result we are going to state every type and its results and built up a conclusion over the non-interventionism scenario.

### **Military Interference**

The non-interference of the Americans would mean first that the Israeli requests for military support wouldn't have been fulfilled. As Dinitz said to Kissinger after the first few days of the war: "If a massive American airlift to Israel does not start immediately, then I'll know that the United States is reneging on its promises and its policy, and we will have to draw very serious conclusions from all this" (Kalb, 1974). This Israeli message clearly states the consequences had the Americans didn't interfere militarily in the war. Their non-interference would have given the Israelis the impression that the U.S. policy towards them is changing and based on that the Israelis would have pressured Nixon through the Jews in the U.S. and through the Americans supporting Israel. This would have caused serious domestic problems for Nixon which at the moment would have been so hurtful since they came along with the Watergate scandal, Saturday Night Massacre, and other domestic problems. Moreover, the military non-interference would have meant that the Arab advancement on the battlefield could have continued and the Israel losses would have been much more which could have affected the Israelis so much since Israel's military is the reflection of its power. The continuousness of the Arab advancements in that war may have changed the result of the entire war and the Arabs would have won their first war against the Israelis. But here we should pay attention to one important point. Would the Soviets have accepted that the Arabs continue their advancements on the battlefield and thus achieving a huge victory? If the Soviets accepted this Arab advancement would the Europeans accept it and stand still? In my opinion, if the Americans didn't interfere to support the Israelis the Soviet support to the Arabs would have been different



and they would work on ensuring that the Arabs achieve a slight advancement and a small victory, not a big clear one so that they could play the role of the mediator and be accepted by both parties. This may mean that they could have decreased the support to Arabs at a certain point and supported the Israelis to a limit that lets them just stop the Arab advancements. In this way, the Soviets will try and work on gaining the trust of both parties which will lead to the growth of their role in the region.

### **Diplomatic Interference**

As for diplomatically, the non-interference of the Americans means that they wouldn't have engaged in talks with the Israelis to agree on the American support to stop the Israeli losses on the battlefield, they wouldn't have participated in talks with the Soviets to reach a cease-fire agreement, they wouldn't have met with the Israelis to assure the implementation of the cease-fire, and they wouldn't have worked with the Soviets to put the crisis on the United Nations' table. Have all of the above didn't happen means that the region in which the superpowers were fighting would finally fall into the hands of the Soviets based on several reasons. First of all the Soviets, being a superpower would have been forced to interfere with the Arabs and the Israelis simultaneously to stop the war and reach an agreement. To do that the Soviets should be accepted by both parties and thus they would work on benefitting from the absence of the Americans in this conflict. Second, they would have the privilege of sending troops to the region to assure the implementation of the cease-fire which means either a near confrontation with the Americans would have happened or an American retreat from the region should occur. Third, the Soviets would have worked with the United Nations Security Council alone to reach a resolution that stops the conflict in the Middle East. This means that for the international community the Soviets are the ones responsible for the issues in our region which means the American role in our region has decreased and the Soviets could work freely on the new ground now. Fourth, the non-interference of Americans in talks with the Israelis would have meant so many new domestic crises to Nixon. And these new problems along with the Watergate scandal and other domestic challenges that occurred in October 1973 would have caused serious problems to Nixon. Finally, the Soviet presence in all the diplomatic actions stated above means that their role in the middle east entered a new stage and the cold war entered a new level the Americans worked hard to avoid.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, American interference with the existence of another superpower is a necessity in light of the dominance struggle between them. The non-interference of Americans in the Yum Kippur war means that they handed off the region to the Soviets and this is impossible since the struggle between Soviets and Americans at that moment was primary. Moreover, the American non-interference doesn't suit the containment theory they were implementing in their conflicts with the Soviets. Not only the non-interference would have opened the middle east doors to Soviet interventions and expansion, but it would have affected American Israeli relations which could have had serious effects on the domestic level inside the U.S. In brief, the absence of one of the superpowers in a certain conflict means the presence of the other superpower instead of it which affects the total battle between the two.

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