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40 years on, Yom Kippur War intel chiefs trade barbs

Eli Zeira and Zvi Zamir, respective heads of Military Intelligence and the Mossad in 1973, argue at Tel Aviv conference about Mideast war's outbreak

By Mitch Ginsburg October 6, 2013, 7:31 pm

In a dramatic showdown Sunday likened by its moderator to the Rumble in the Jungle, two octogenarian generals, bitter rivals who stood at the center of the drama leading up to the surprise Arab attack on Israel that launched the 1973 Yom Kippur War, shared their sharply divergent narratives about the outbreak of the fighting.

Eli Zeira and Zvi Zamir, former heads of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate and the Mossad respectively, have clashed over the years, suing each other for libel and for revealing the identity of a Mossad source — a crime that is considered a severe national security offense and which led, in 2007, to the death of the source, either by suicide or assassination.

Seeking to deflect the enduring public outrage over his performance, Zeira, the man who leaked the name of the source and was found to have committed “grave failures” of judgment in the run-up to October 1973 by the commission that investigated the war, asserted that “the Egyptians deserved a commendation for bravery for their deception operation,” and that defense minister Moshe Dayan and IDF chief of the general staff Lt. Gen. David Elazar knew on the Friday morning — 26 hours before the outbreak of the fighting — that war was imminent and that the discussion “was not about whether there *will* be war, but about *how* to call up the reserves.”

Zeira said that Dayan prepared a cable for secretary of state Henry Kissinger, stating that Israel would not attack; Israel’s knows that the Egyptians are about to attack; Israel knows they want it to be a surprise; and that Israel will be ready for their surprise.

Zamir countered by saying that the Mossad began to connect the dots leading to war in February-March 1973, six months in advance, and railed against the behavior of Military Intelligence under Zeira, which received word of imminent war from the Mossad, as passed on from the source, and failed to relay the information to the prime minister for 10 hours.

“It’s early warning intelligence. There’s nothing holier than that!” Zamir yelled.

The feud between the two men has revolved around Ashraf Marwan, son-in-law of former Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser and Mossad source, who twice warned of war in the weeks leading up to Yom Kippur 1973. The second such warning was delivered personally to Zamir, who had flown to London on the night of October 4, after hearing from the source that Egypt, with a standing army 1 million strong, would wage war against Israel on Saturday, October 6.

Zeira, who was dismissed from his post as head of Military Intelligence after the war, has long claimed that Marwan was an untrustworthy double agent. In 2004, seeking to promote this theory, he revealed the agent’s name.

Three years later — and five years after journalist Ahron Bregman first revealed his name in the pages of an Egyptian daily — Marwan tumbled off a London balcony to his death.

Zamir sued him for revealing the name of the agent, and though Zeira was found guilty of that offense, Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein in 2012 decided not to prosecute him, citing his rich contribution to Israeli national security, his advanced age, and the many years that have passed since the events in question.

Zamir called the decision “strange,” noting that several Israelis have served stiff jail sentences for far lesser security offenses.

On Sunday, 40 years to the day since the start of the war, the two men spoke on a panel about the war at the **Institute for National Security Studies**. Although the two generals did not engage with each other, the journalist who directed the panel — Amir Oren of Haaretz — said he felt a kinship with Zach Clayton, the man who judged the 1974 title fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire.

Zeira spoke first and did not mention Marwan. Instead, speaking at times over vocal heckling, he listed three mistakes he made leading up to the war and defended several other controversial decisions.

The first mistake related to the doctrine of defense in the Sinai Peninsula on the eve of the war. On the Israeli side of the Bar-Lev Line, he said, there were “around 12” strongholds, manned by 1,000 soldiers and 80 artillery guns; on the Egyptian side, there were 100,000 soldiers and 800 cannons. “This situation was unappealing to me,” he said.

He added later: “I should have fought harder for my opinion that a defensive line should have been formed along the mountain ridges (some 50 kilometers east of the Suez Canal).”

The second mistake, he said, related to the manpower enlisted in Military Intelligence. “I should have drafted Haim Gouri into my team of estimators,” he said. Gouri, a poet and a fighter of the 1948 generation, would have understood “the shame, the embarrassment,

the disgrace” that the Egyptians felt after “two-and-a-half million Jews from Europe trounced them and their glorious air force in six days,” he said. Not knowing the soul of the enemy, he added, was a critical error.

Last, he said he failed to consult the handwritten note he kept in his pocket at all times. The note read “And what if not?” The question was repeated so often, he said, that the research analysts in Military Intelligence “couldn’t stand me,” but was apparently not asked often enough in the days leading up to the war — when Israeli intelligence held fast to the concept that Egypt would not attack, despite the fact that all indicators seemed to point to a surprise attack.

Zeira, reading from handwritten notes and occasionally hesitant, further asserted that the IDF’s signal intelligence unit, 8200, managed a stunning achievement two-and-a-half days before the war, when it learned — before all other intelligence agencies in the world — that the Russians had withdrawn their advisers from Egypt in great haste. On the Friday morning, one day before the war, he said he told Dayan and Elazar that this could mean one of two things — either the Russians thought Israel was going to launch a war, or they believed that the Egyptians were going to start a war. If it were the former, he said, “we would have heard about it already from the Americans.”

Finally, he defended his decision not to operate “the special means” — Israeli listening posts in Egypt. The posts, once operated, can be quickly exposed and therefore are saved for emergency situations. He said he did not think such matters should be discussed publicly, but asserted that an officer named Dubi had operated the “special means” from 1:15 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. between Thursday and Friday “and he didn’t hear a thing.” The Agranat Commission, which found fault with Zeira and Elazar, among others, and effectively forced Dayan and prime minister Golda Meir out of office, criticized Zeira for not using the electronic devices more liberally.

Zamir, looking squeamish at first, described the Mossad as heavily invested in fighting the war on terror at the time — one year after the attack at the Munich Olympics — and noted that a Mossad head “did not have the authority to pass information on to the prime minister” at the time. That was the exclusive domain of Military Intelligence and yet, he said, raw intelligence regarding war from both Military Intelligence and Mossad operatives was not passed on to the prime minister.

He described Marwan as “an asset that was worth his weight in gold” and said the two had a friendship between them. “How can you not see it?” he related that Marwan had asked him during their meeting in London. “How can you not understand that this is war?”