

# Forty-Five Years Since the Yom Kippur War: Intelligence and Risk Management in the Thirty Hours Preceding the War

Shmuel Even

This article examines the conduct of Israel's military leadership prior to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War from the perspective of risk management and by looking at recently disclosed documents. From an analysis of the events, it appears that the chief of staff, David Elazar, had a clear risk management approach. On October 5, 1973, a day before the war, he put the regular army on high alert and reinforced the front lines. He did this despite the assessment of the head of Military Intelligence that the likelihood of war was extremely low. However, Lieutenant General Elazar's decision was far from being sufficient to withstand the attack that broke out the following day at 1:50 pm, in part because both he and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan failed to properly assess the risk that the regular army would struggle to contain the offensive before the arrival of reserve forces. In addition, Defense Minister Dayan and Prime Minister Golda Meir rejected the chief of staff's suggestion made the next morning to carry out a preemptive air strike against the enemies, as they were concerned about the diplomatic risk involved, which made it even more difficult for the regular army. The lessons learned from this sequence of events are that risk management is an essential part of the role of statesmen and military leaders, and the military and diplomatic risks on the strategic level should be managed jointly and should be subject to policy goals. The IDF and the other defense forces must map out

Dr. Shmuel Even is a senior researcher at INSS.

the risks involved in achieving their objectives and do what they can to reduce them—together with the political echelon—and by cooperating with them, the National Security Council, and the relevant government ministries.

**Keywords:** Deterrence, intelligence, Yom Kippur War, risk management, decision making, Israel

## Introduction

In 2018, on the forty-fifth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, archives in Israel released additional documents that clarify the intelligence picture and the decision-making process of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the political echelon in the thirty hours preceding the Egyptian-Syrian surprise attack on October 6, 1973 at 1:50 pm. While these documents do not disclose unfamiliar events, they allow us to understand the subtleties of the intelligence information and the situation assessment. One of the more exceptional documents is a telegram sent by the head of the Mossad, Zvi Zamir, to Prime Minister Golda Meir's military secretary, in which he transmitted information given at a meeting held on October 5, 1973 in London with Ashraf Marwan. Known as "the source," Marwan was a strategic intelligence source for the Mossad and the son-in-law of Egypt's President Nasser. In the telegram, Zamir, in Marwan's name, warns about the war.<sup>1</sup>

This article analyzes the decision-making processes in Israel in the thirty hours preceding the Yom Kippur War from the perspective of risk management and in the context of the strategic intelligence that existed then. It does this by using original documents recently disclosed, along with information divulged in the past. The article does not aim to explain the failure of the intelligence warning—a topic that many studies and publications have discussed—but rather the way in which decision makers analyzed and understood the uncertainty and how they acted as a result.

The main figures in this event are the head of Military Intelligence, Major General Eli Zeira (September 1972–April 1974); the chief of staff, Lieutenant General David Elazar (January 1972–April 1974); the minister

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1 Zvi Zamir, head of the Mossad, "Telegram to Military Secretary of Prime Minister Golda Meir, October 6, 1973," *Israel State Archives*, September 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y6shj4vw> [in Hebrew].

of defense, Major General (res.) Moshe Dayan (June 1967–June 1974); and the prime minister, Golda Meir (March 1969–June 1974).

## The Concept of Risk Management

Risk management is a management concept that has become increasingly common in the past few decades in the business and governmental sectors. Nonetheless, risk management itself is nothing new and has characterized business and military management from time immemorial, as will be described in this article. The concept of “risk” can be defined as the likelihood of a certain negative occurrence involving damage (loss of human life, damage to property, or not reaching objectives) for the risk-holder (person, organization, state). This concept has two components: the first is the likelihood that the occurrence will take place; the second is the amount of damage that will be incurred if the occurrence takes place. The combination of these two components allows for assessing the intensity of the risk (the “expected loss”).

Risk management aims to reduce risks or improve the risk-benefit ratio. The decision maker takes risks in order to exploit opportunities and also in order to reduce the cost of an error. Risk management in organizations is a methodical process in which risks are identified, mapped out in advance, ranked according to their expected loss, and the probability of the risk. This process also includes a plan for reducing risks, as well as for continuing to function in case of negative occurrences. Risk management exists even when its methodology has not been formally adopted but is inherent in activities of defining and mapping out risks, conducting research and gathering information for the purpose of assessing the probability of the risk and the possible loss; diversifying risks; reducing risks for which the loss, if they occur, will be great, even if the probability of their occurrence is low; strengthening weak links in critical processes; balancing between different risks by transferring resources to lower the most severe risks; taking steps to reduce the impact of uncertainty by hedging risks, preparing alternatives, maintaining stockpiles and resources for emergencies; and improving response capability and speed for unexpected events. Risk management can have costs, whether as a result of activities such as these or due to the possibility of errors in formal risk management. This in itself is a risk.

Strategic-security risk to the State of Israel can be defined as the possibility of an occurrence, such as a war, which could harm the population, property,

the state's sovereignty, and/or its image. The defense forces—primarily the IDF—are entrusted with lowering security risks by deterring the enemy from engaging in hostilities, and they are tasked with bringing victory if the risks materialize. From the perspective of the defense forces, the main risk is the failure to achieve the goals and objectives that the political echelon has determined for them. Given the extent of the potential loss from strategic-security risks, security-risk management is meant to support the carrying out of actions designed to lower risks, even in situations where the risk probability is not high.

### Managing the Risk of an Arab Attack Prior to the Eve of the Yom Kippur War

The main military risk that Israel faced from its establishment until at least the Six Day War was a large-scale invasion by the Arab armies. This risk, which was seen as an existential one, first materialized in the War of Independence in 1948 and took a heavy toll on human lives. After the war, Israel recognized that the economy's workforce could not be permanently enlisted, and that this risk had to be managed subject to the constraints of the resources and in consideration of the civic goals of the nascent state, which faced difficult economic conditions and the task of absorbing mass immigration.

Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion extensively analyzed this issue in a strategy document that he had prepared in 1953.<sup>2</sup> The document expressed his security doctrine and should be seen as a formative document for the framework of managing the security risks that Israel faced.<sup>3</sup> In the document, Ben-Gurion stated that Israel should manage the risk of an invasion by Arab armies by having a small regular army based on conscripts and career soldiers and a large reserve army that would be called to war upon receiving advanced warning, which intelligence should provide. In this way, Israel attempted to balance between the external risk posed by the enemy and the internal risk that an invasion posed to the country's social and economic stability.

2 David Ben-Gurion, "Army and State," memorandum submitted by the Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion to the government, October 18, 1953, *Maarchoth* no. 279–280 (June 1981) [in Hebrew].

3 Isaac Ben Israel and Nicki Kons, "Ben-Gurion's Approach to Risk Management," *Maarchoth* no. 452 (December 2013) [in Hebrew].

As a result of the security doctrine that Ben-Gurion had formulated, and despite the constraints, Israel succeeded in building a strong army that achieved victories in the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and the Six Day War in 1967. These events demonstrated another important element of risk management at that time, which was engaging in an offensive initiative as part of the security doctrine. Israel decided that it could not wait behind its defensive lines along its borders for the Arab armies to attack, but rather, it would preempt them. The offensive initiative aimed to thwart enemy attacks, to keep the war away from Israel's civilian population, to exploit the IDF's advantages of mobility, and to surprise the enemy. The alternative of waiting for a ground attack by an enemy army was considered a much greater risk. However, preemptive attacks had diplomatic risk as well; in the international arena, Israel risked being accused as the aggressor and of not receiving the support of the superpowers. This risk led to difficult deliberations within Israel's political echelon prior to launching the preemptive attack on June 5, 1967. In that instance, the military risk was weighed against the diplomatic risk; in the end, the army's high level of readiness, the heavy pressure on the senior officers, and a last-minute update on the US position tipped the scales in favor of the preemptive strike.

The beginnings of the Yom Kippur War can already be seen in the conclusion of the Six Day War. The Arabs did not accept the results of the 1967 war, while Israel sought to protect its achievements. Following the Six Day War, the territories under Israel's control grew more than fourfold, and the IDF needed to also defend the "territories held,"<sup>4</sup> until the political echelon decided their future. This was a complex challenge: On one hand, Israel won strategic depth on three fronts—in Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, while on the other hand, the IDF was required to deploy forces and logistics over large areas and had to rule over the population in the newly added territories. This led to a significant increase in defense spending. In 1971–1972, defense spending amounted to an annual average of 20.5 percent of GDP, compared to 9.2 percent on average during the years 1965–1966.<sup>5</sup>

4 "Protocol 159 of the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee," *The Knesset*, December 25, 1967. In this meeting it was decided to adopt the concept of "the territories held by the Israel Defense Forces," <https://akevot.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/1967-12-25-Shamgar.pdf> [in Hebrew].

5 Central Bureau of Statistics, "Defense Spending 1950–2015," no. 1680 (May 2017) [in Hebrew].

The strategy changed in the years following the Six Day War: The IDF moved from a strategy of a preemptive strike using multiple branches of the armed forces to a strategy of a defensive position at the new front lines. These front lines had serious limitations, however, given the possibility of an all-out attack. At the Suez Canal front, a defensive line was established (the “Bar Lev Line”), which included sixteen manned outposts (*maoz*) on the front line, and next to them outposts at a depth of ten kilometers (*taoz*; plural *taozim*). There were many kilometers between each *maoz*, such that the defensive line was not continuous. The combat method was based mainly on armored forces that were stationed along the line of the *taozim* and east of it. The standing force in Sinai consisted of Division 252 (the “Sinai Division”), and its defensive plan (“Dovecote”) was meant to handle limited enemy scenarios: opening fire along the front line, Egyptian attempts to capture IDF outposts on the canal line, and commando operations in Sinai. According to the plan, the Southern Command had to prepare to repel any Egyptian crossing attempts in western Sinai and in the Shlomo District (southern Sinai).<sup>6</sup>

In the Golan Heights, the strategic defensive depth was more limited and the border was close to population centers. The regular force included only two infantry battalions along the border, two tank battalions, and an artillery battalion. Before the war it was reinforced by an additional tank division and more than two artillery battalions.

**In May 1973**, following the assessment of the military leadership—with the exception of the head of Military Intelligence—that war was about to break out at Egypt and Syria’s initiative, the IDF went on alert and began its preparations for war, which included setting up new units and preparing operational plans (under the code name “Blue-White Alert”). Since the war did not occur on the estimated date, this assessment was mistakenly seen as a “false alarm,”<sup>7</sup> which bolstered the position of the head of Military Intelligence as the one person who had assessed that war would not break out. In retrospect, after the Yom Kippur War, it was learned that the Egyptians and Syrian had

6 Southern Command, “Dovecote Order, Summary,” December 17, 1972, *IDF Archive*, 1984; website of the 14th Armored Brigade, <https://tinyurl.com/y5maf858> [in Hebrew].

7 False alarm for war is an unjustified alert that involves a rise in the risk of deteriorating into a war that neither side wants, the attrition of the defense forces, and social costs (recruitment of reserves), as well as economic and diplomatic costs.

indeed intended to attack in May 1973, but the date had been postponed to October 1973.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in effect, the Blue-White Alert was justified and Major General Zeira, the head of Military Intelligence, was mistaken then too. Although the Blue-White Alert contributed to the IDF's preparations for the Yom Kippur War, the fear of false alarms became a concern that negatively influenced the risk management prior to the outbreak of war.

**On October 1, 1973**, at the General Staff's situation assessment, the head of Military Intelligence indicated a unique situation vis-à-vis Egypt and Syria. He claimed that "in Egypt a major exercise at the General Staff level is beginning today, accompanied by the movement of armored divisions, bridging units, paratroopers, and airborne units on an exceptionally large scale. All this is taking place as part of the Tahrir 41 exercise, and there is no intention to turn this into war." Adding that the Syrian Army was also engaging in an unprecedented emergency deployment, Major General Zeira reassured that "since it does not appear that Egypt is going to war, this means that Syria too will not go to war." In retrospect, it became clear to Israel that Tahrir 41 was a central component of Egypt's deceptive plan to launch the Yom Kippur War; the preparations for the attack were carried out through the exercise, while the transition to war itself occurred by means of a code word.<sup>9</sup>

**Until October 5, 1973**, despite the increasing deployment of forces on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts, Israel did not manage concrete risks and this apparently was due to three reasons: It had accepted the intelligence assessment that seemingly provided explanations for the unusual military activity (exercises, fear of Israel); Israel assumed that if the enemy decided to go to war, it would receive advanced warning of this, as the head of Military Intelligence had promised (for example, in the cabinet on April 24, 1973);<sup>10</sup> and it was assumed that the IDF's regular army could contain the attacking

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8 Yoel Ben-Porat, "Endnote: The Yom Kippur War, Mistake in May and Surprise in October," *Maarchoth* no. 302–303 (April 1986) [in Hebrew].

9 Aharon Ze'evi, "Egypt's Deception Plan," *Maarchoth* no. 289–290 (October 1983) [in Hebrew].

10 Uri Bar Yosef, "The Surprise of the Yom Kippur War and its Sources," *Maarchoth* no. 361 (November 1998) [in Hebrew] (based on the Agranat Commission Report on April 1, 1974).

forces until the arrival of reserves, as the chief of staff had promised.<sup>11</sup> These assumptions appeared to be compatible with the risk management framework up until that time.

### Risk Management the Day before the Outbreak of the War (October 5, 1973)

**On the night between October 4 and 5, 1973**, the intelligence picture changed dramatically. In a surveillance sortie that took place in the afternoon and was deciphered at night, it was discovered that the Egyptian army had fully prepared its emergency formations and that the armored and artillery units at the various levels, including at the General Staff level, were deployed in their positions on the front line.<sup>12</sup> That night, Military Intelligence received information that the families of Soviet advisors were being evacuated from Syria and Egypt without explanation. At 2:30 am that same night, the head of the Mossad, Major General (res.) Zvi Zamir, received a message that the important intelligence source, Ashraf Marwan, wanted to meet with him right away. Marwan's message included the use of a code word that was a signal for war. The head of Military Intelligence and head of the Mossad updated one another.<sup>13</sup>

**On October 5, 1973 at 8:20 am**, the chief of staff held a consultation in his office (around thirty hours before the Egyptian-Syrian surprise attack). The head of Military Intelligence opened by stating, "The basic assessment that the Arabs are afraid and will not go to war has not changed." The head of Military Intelligence did not have an explanation why the Soviets were evacuating the families of advisors, but estimated that if they believed that the Arabs were going to attack Israel, they would contact the United States, and it would contact Israel, and then "we would know what was happening."

11 Hagai Tsoref, conversation with Aharon Barnea, in honor of the publication of the book he edited, *Golda Meir, the Fourth Prime Minister*, "Hayu Yamim" program, *Knesset Channel*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yziTBtBsfq> [in Hebrew].

12 Yossi Barkan "Things that I Saw There," *Mabat Malam* no. 82 (October 2018) [in Hebrew]. The author was the head of the Egypt Department in Southern Command Intelligence during the Yom Kippur War.

13 Shimon Golan, "All the Signs Were There," *Yisrael Hayom*, September 13, 2013. This article was excerpted from the book *War on Yom Kippur – Decision-making in the Senior Command during the Yom Kippur War*, published by Modan and Maarchot, 2013 [in Hebrew].

The head of Military Intelligence informed that Zvi Zamir, the head of the Mossad, was expected to receive information from a reliable source about a “warning of war.”

The chief of staff said in that meeting that “Basically I do not suppose that they are going to attack, but there is no proof that they are not going to attack, so elementary preparations are necessary. Therefore, we decided on the cancellation of leave in the armored forces and now in the air force.” The deputy chief of staff, Major General Israel Tal, added that “Tonight all leave was cancelled and all of the tanks were equipped.” The chief of staff supported the air force’s recommendation to continue sorties for aerial photographs. In his opinion, this could deter the enemy (if it indeed intended to carry out a surprise attack).<sup>14</sup>

**On October 5 at 9:00 am**, the regular weekly discussion led by Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan began. The chief of staff said in the discussion that it was impossible to know with certainty whether the steps taken by Egypt and Syria were the result of fear of IDF actions, or if their purpose was offensive. According to the chief of staff, if he were not in a position that required him to make decisions, “I would say that it is not an attack,” but as the chief of staff, he stated that “I need to think about whether I have proof that there is not going to be an attack. I do not have proof that it is not going to be an attack.” Therefore, he ordered the cancellation of leave on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts and in the air force, and the reinforcement of the two fronts with standing forces.

The head of Military Intelligence emphasized in the discussion that the most worrisome development was the evacuation of the Soviet families. He claimed that this was not sufficient for changing the basic intelligence assessment that Syria and Egypt did not intend to attack, stating, however, that “it raises some doubts for me, and it is certainly justified to do what the chief of staff spoke of.” He stuck with his assessment that the enemy’s preparations stemmed from a fear of Israel. In addition, Major General Zeira reported that the head of the Mossad had received warning that night that

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14 “Summary of the Situation Assessment at the Chief of Staff’s Office, October 5, 1973, 8:25 AM” *IDF Archive*, 2018, quoted in Gadi Zohar, “One Discussion on October 5,” in “45 Years Since the Yom Kippur War,” special issue, *Mabat Malam* no. 82 October 2018, p. 50, <https://tinyurl.com/y6xzgr42> [in Hebrew].

“something is going to happen” and that he was planning to meet with “the source” (Ashraf Marwan) that night, October 5 at 10:00 pm.<sup>15</sup>

The defense minister said to the chief of staff that “For Yom Kippur, everything that you did is good and right.” He asked to consider the possibility of announcing in advance over the radio that people should listen to the Army Radio broadcasts during Yom Kippur, so that it would be possible, if necessary, to gather reserve forces and transport them to the front lines that same day. Dayan decided to recommend to Prime Minister Meir to contact the Americans with the following information: 1) The assessment in Israel was that the likelihood of an Arab attack was higher than previously estimated; there was various indications that Egypt and Syria were preparing for an offensive attack; and it was possible that the exercise in Egypt was camouflaging an intention to attack; 2) Could they find out whether the Arabs indeed intended to attack and that Israel promised that it did not have any offensive intentions. According to Dayan, Israel would then decide how to act after receiving the Americans’ response. The defense minister also asked to check if it would be necessary to request equipment immediately from the United States if it did confirm the indications that the Arabs were intending to attack.<sup>16</sup>

**On October 5 at 10:00 am**, a consultation began at the Prime Minister’s Office at the IDF Headquarters in Tel Aviv. The head of Military Intelligence said that an Egyptian-Syrian attack was “very unlikely,” but perhaps the Russians thought (mistakenly) that the Arabs were about to attack, since they did not know them well enough. Major General Zeira noted that Military Intelligence had assessed that the preparations and activities of the Egyptian and Syrian armies were mainly due to fear of Israeli actions, but it was impossible to ignore the evacuation of the Russian families, the meaning of which was unclear. The chief of staff reported on the steps of preparedness and reinforcement that he had taken, as a result of the lack of positive proof that Egypt and Syria did not intend to go to war on one hand, and from the ability of the armies of the two countries to strike on short notice on the other hand. However, he calculated that Egypt and Syria did not intend to attack and that “if they are going to attack—we will receive better indications.”

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15 Golan, “All the Signs Were There.”

16 Ibid.

The defense minister suggested to contact the Americans, to report to them that there were indications of a possible Arab attack that was more realistic than in the past, to ask them to contact the Soviets and send them the message that Israel did not have any offensive intentions, and to warn them that if the Arabs started a war, they would “get cold water.” The prime minister said that it was possible that the meeting of the UN General Assembly was spurring the Arabs to demonstrate activity and motivating them to take action. She accepted the defense minister’s recommendation to contact the Americans and his suggestion to notify additional ministers about the information on the recent developments.<sup>17</sup>

**On October 5 at 12:30 PM**, a discussion of the General Staff began, led by the chief of staff and with eleven major generals present. The minutes of the meeting were published in October 2018.<sup>18</sup> The head of Military Intelligence reported on the emergency preparations of the Syrian Army starting on September 5, 1973 and on its exercise of conquering the Golan Heights according to the attack plan. He also reported on the advancement of two air force attack squadrons close to Damascus, which would improve their ability to attack deep into Israel. Major General Zeira said that in Egypt, a large-scale military exercise was taking place; the canal area was reinforced with 300 artillery guns; and many tanks had been brought closer to firing positions along the canal. He estimated that the activities of the Egyptian and Syrian armies were out of defensive motivations, due to a fear of Israel. The head of Military Intelligence noted a series of unusual events: the arrival of eleven Soviet transport aircraft in Egypt and Syria, possibly in order to remove “Russian personnel” from those countries, and the evacuation of the Soviet vessels from the Port of Alexandria. Nonetheless, he concluded his assessment by saying that the likelihood of war was “low, and even lower than low.”<sup>19</sup>

The chief of staff, although he seemingly accepted the Military Intelligence’s assessment, actually calculated it differently: “I see the danger that war will break out today or tomorrow as being less likely than that of war not occurring.” He added, “I do not think that this is ‘zero hour’ for this evening

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17 Ibid.

18 “Minutes of the General Staff Discussion that Took Place on October 5, 1973,” *Archive of the IDF and Ministry of Defense*, October 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yxfup23u> [in Hebrew].

19 Ibid.

or tomorrow, and if this is their intention and they have a ‘zero hour,’ I hope that we will receive advance warning.” Lieutenant General Elazar noted that “the defensive formation is certainly also an offensive formation” and that “we do not have positive proof that they are not going to attack,” and added, “If I were a commentator, I would put a period here and say that I do not think that it is going to happen. Since we are not only commentators, but responsible for the situation, we have to take the necessary security measures, and we are indeed taking them.” In his words, “If the worst possible situation happens, that is if they attack without another word, then we will have to contain them using the standing forces. That means using the air force and all of the forces that we have on the front lines. To this end, we are not only declaring a state of alert [level] 3,<sup>20</sup> but also reinforcing the front lines with standing forces that we have in Israel.” The chief of staff also announced that they were checking how to call up reserves on Yom Kippur (without listening to the radio) “in case of a catastrophe.”<sup>21</sup> Following this, the Army Radio prepared for the possibility of having to broadcast on Yom Kippur. At the end of the discussion and given the steps decided upon, Lieutenant General Elazar said that if war occurred that day, it would no longer be a “complete surprise” but an “almost complete surprise,” and the war would start with “opening conditions that are not exactly preferable.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Analysis of the Risk Management on October 5, 1973**

Concrete risk management began on October 5, considering the change that occurred in the intelligence picture. This process was apparent, first and foremost, with the chief of staff, who began making decisions under conditions of considerable uncertainty, which meant he lacked a warning of war based on intelligence. The most significant steps taken were raising the alert to the highest level in the regular army and reinforcing the front lines. The cost of these decisions was significant, and at the time there was seemingly concern that they contributed to the risks of deterioration, considering the Military Intelligence’s assessment that the enemy’s actions resulted from

20 The highest state of alert in the standing army, without large-scale recruitment of reserves.

21 “Minutes of the General Staff Discussion that Took Place on October 5, 1973.”

22 Ibid.

the fear of the IDF. Important steps, whose costs were low, were also taken, such as the preparations of the Army Radio to broadcast on Yom Kippur.

The way in which the chief of staff managed risks clearly had accelerated: If on the morning of October 5, he decided to augment the forces on the front lines using standing forces within Israeli territory, in the afternoon he had already placed the regular army on high alert level 3. However, the chief of staff did not cross the line of recruiting reserves, which required the approval of the political echelon.

The following factors seem to have influenced the chief of staff to begin managing risks:

- a. **Erosion of confidence in the assumption that the head of Military Intelligence would provide a concrete advanced warning.** It became clear that Military Intelligence had been surprised and was unable to provide convincing explanations for significant events, such as the evacuation of the Soviet families from Syria and Egypt and the Egyptian army's full emergency preparations on the Suez Canal front ("Tahrir 41" was defined, as noted, mainly as a command exercise). Although the chief of staff continued to hope that he would receive advanced warning from intelligence, he already began speaking about the possibility of not having any advanced warning. He began to act not only on what he knew but also on what he knew that he did not know.<sup>23</sup>
- b. **Substantial shift in the assessment of the likelihood that war would break out.** The chief of staff and head of Military Intelligence seemingly agreed that war would not break out, but the range of likelihood that they attributed to the outbreak of war was substantially different. While the head of Military Intelligence estimated that the likelihood of war was "lower than low," which can be interpreted as only a remote possibility, slightly above zero, the chief of staff estimated that the likelihood of war was less than the likelihood that war would not break out, which can be interpreted as a likelihood in the range of under 50 percent.
- c. **Drastic reduction of the "advanced warning timespan,"** referring to the time from the moment advanced warning is received until the outbreak of war. According to the chief of staff, the minimal advanced

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23 Shimon Golan, "The Advanced Warning on the Eve of the Yom Kippur War – Military Intelligence's Assessment and the Basis for the Leadership's Decisions," *Mabat Malam*, 67 (November 2013) <https://tinyurl.com/yyycvr7q> [in Hebrew].

warning timespan necessary for recruiting the reserves before the onset of an enemy attack was at least twenty-four hours.<sup>24</sup> Since the enemy forces were already prepared in territories that enabled them to attack (also according to the assessment of the head of Military Intelligence), the advanced warning timespan that could have been expected from intelligence was significantly reduced and was insufficient for recruiting the reserves.

Behind all of these factors was Lieutenant General Elazar's exceptional recognition that risk management was an integral part of the role of the chief of staff. In this respect, the distinction that he made between the positions of a commentator and chief of staff as commander in-chief is interesting. It shows that his expectation of commentators was to provide a binary assessment (either war will take place or not), whereas the commander in-chief's professional assessment required operating also in situations of uncertainty, even if the situations went against the prevailing assessment and even if that assessment was shared by the chief of staff himself.

The political echelon manifested its risk management in its decision to contact the United States in order to create a shared understanding and send a message to the enemies. This idea seemed correct in terms of diplomacy and also because it could have (ostensibly) lowered the risk of a surprise attack, or alternatively it could have justified a preemptive response by Israel. Although the cost of this step was not high, in practice, it happened too slowly and too late and did not achieve its objective.

Henry Kissinger, then the US secretary of state, later explained that he did not see the urgency in passing on the message that he had received from Israel until the moment that the assistant secretary of state, Joseph Sisco, sent him a message about the imminent war on October 6, close to 1:00 pm Israel time (less than an hour before the attack). Only then did Kissinger call the Egyptian foreign minister, and Soviet and Syrian ambassadors in Washington; the latter did not answer him. Regardless, according to Kissinger, the wording of the message that Israel had asked him to pass on to the Arabs was "that Israel does not intend to carry out a preemptive strike."<sup>25</sup> That is,

24 "Summary of Consultation with the Prime Minister, Tel Aviv, Yom Kippur 1973 at 8:05 AM," *Israel State Archives*, October 2010 [in Hebrew].

25 Amir Oren, "Henry Kissinger: You Know We Saved You in '73, Right?" *Haaretz*, October 4, 2013 [in Hebrew].

the message was meant to prevent an Arab miscalculation regarding Israel's intentions, but it did not deter them from attacking.

Did the initial message of warning from the Mossad's intelligence source have any impact? It is hard to discern any impact that the message, which contained the code word for war, may have had on decision makers on October 5, 1973. Brigadier-General (res.) Gadi Zohar, who had served then as adjutant to the chief of staff, noted later that the report on the message was shared in the three discussions mentioned above without any reaction, nor did they mention the "special sources" of which everyone knew.<sup>26</sup> That is, the code word for war did not influence the intelligence assessment and it is doubtful whether it was expressed in the risk management, until the report of Zvi Zamir, the head of the Mossad, was received on October 6.

Furthermore, the fact that the cabinet waited to receive a full report that night may have been a factor that delayed the risk management at that time, since there is a natural tendency to wait for additional information that will dispel uncertainty, especially when considering the weight of the decisions and the cost of a mistake. The defense minister's approach that Israel should wait for a response from the United States in order to decide how to act could have also been a factor in delaying the decision making.

### Risk Management on October 6, 1973

**On Yom Kippur, October 6, 1973 at 4:30 am**, Chief of Staff Elazar received an initial report about the meeting of the head of the Mossad, Zvi Zamir with the "source," Ashraf Marwan on October 5 in London.<sup>27</sup> The main message of the report was that at 6:00 pm, an Egyptian-Syrian attack on the State of Israel was to begin. Later that morning at 7:25 am, Zamir sent a detailed telegram.<sup>28</sup> According to the telegram, "The Egyptian Army and the Syrian Army are about to start an attack on Israel on Saturday October 6, 1973 in the early evening."<sup>29</sup> The likelihood of the attack was estimated by Marwan to be 99 percent! The "source" shared how the Egyptian attack

26 Zohar, "One Discussion on October 5," p. 50 [in Hebrew].

27 "Chief of Staff's Log, 1973," *Archive of the IDF and Ministry of Defense*, May 2019 [in Hebrew].

28 Zamir, Telegram to Prime Minister Golda Meir's Military Secretary on October 6, 1973 [in Hebrew].

29 In actuality the time of the coordinated attack was moved forward from 6:00 pm to 1:50 pm.

was to be implemented, including the intention to carry out a strategic stop after conquering ten kilometers from the eastern bank of the canal—an important piece of information that the IDF did not internalize even after the war had broken out. According to the telegram, on October 3, 1973, Marwan himself had arranged for the transfer of Egyptian navy vessels and Egyptian civilian aircraft from Egypt to Libya, so that they would not be damaged in the war—additional evidence of the intelligence source’s accessibility. Zamir also wrote that given the tight timeline, the “source” had suggested publicizing Egypt’s intention to go to war, in order to eliminate the element of surprise that Egypt had planned and to deter them from carrying out the attack. The head of the Mossad supported Marwan’s suggestion.<sup>30</sup>

According to the chief of staff’s log from October 6, 1973, which was recently disclosed, **at 5:30 am**, the chief of staff held a short meeting with the heads of the IDF’s directorates, the major generals of the regional commands, and the branch commanders. **At 5:50 am**, a discussion was held with the defense minister, Moshe Dayan. **At 7:15 am**, the chief of staff held another meeting with the heads of the directorates, the major generals of the regional commands, and the commanders of the branches. The chief of staff said that given the intelligence information, he assumed that at 6:00 pm that day the attack would begin. He ordered the air force to prepare for a preemptive strike on the Syrian front in the afternoon but noted that at this stage, the defense minister opposed a preemptive strike.<sup>31</sup>

**On October 6, 1973 at 8:05 am**, a crucial meeting was held with Prime Minister Golda Meir. The meeting began, strangely, with two suggestions from the defense minister: to not prevent the Arabs from the territories from working in Israel; and to order the evacuation of the children from the Israeli communities in the Golan Heights (thirty children), from Abu Rudeis, and from the Shlomo District. Prime Minister Meir suggested that the children be evacuated immediately and not on the eve of the action, and the chief of staff corrected her and said, “We are already on the eve of the action.”

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30 Zamir, Telegram to Prime Minister Golda Meir’s Military Secretary on October 6, 1973 [in Hebrew].

31 “Chief of Staff’s Log, 1973,” *Archive of the IDF and Ministry of Defense*, May 2019 [in Hebrew].

Afterwards the discussion moved to the strategic level and centered on the letter of the head of the Mossad.<sup>32</sup>

In the meeting, the head of Military Intelligence said, “Despite the fact that they are prepared, in my opinion they know that they will lose. Sadat is not in a situation today in which he has to wage war, everything is ready, but there is no necessity, and he knows that the balance will not improve [...] he has not yet given the order to go to war. It is possible that by the last moment he will be deterred. Perhaps we can affect what he will do or decide.” Major General Zeira supported the suggestion to contact the United States and warn Egypt by way of the Americans.

The chief of staff remarked that “at night the Syrians brought forward their medium artillery, meaning that they are on the attack and not on the defense.” In relating to Zamir’s letter on the Egyptian attack, Lieutenant General Elazar stated that “for us this is very short notice. If they attack in ten hours, we are maximally prepared with the regular army. But we have not recruited reserves at all. The IDF’s might is 25 percent regular army and 75 percent reserves.” His recommendations were to recruit 200,000 reserve soldiers and carry out a preemptive air strike. According to Elazar, “a preemptive strike is of course a huge advantage. It will save many lives. If we enter a war in which the first stage is containment—and I have confidence that we will handle it—and then attack, it will be a serious war.”<sup>33</sup>

The political echelon only partly accepted the chief of staff’s recommendations. The defense minister believed that only limited reserves should be recruited, so that Israel would not be accused of aggression, in addition to internal considerations (“do we need to create a mood of war?”). During the discussion, the chief of staff agreed to the recruitment of 100,000–120,000 reserve soldiers, although Defense Minister Dayan suggested recruiting fewer than half of this number. The prime minister believed that the extent of recruitment that the chief of staff had requested would have had the same diplomatic effect as what the defense minister had suggested, and thus it was decided that the chief of staff would determine the number.

Both the prime minister and defense minister rejected the chief of staff’s suggestion regarding a preemptive air strike out of concern that Israel would

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32 “Summary of Consultation with the Prime Minister, Tel Aviv, Yom Kippur 1973 at 8:05 am.”

33 Ibid.

be accused of being responsible for the outbreak of the war.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted in this respect that the air force was ready to strike airfields in Syria toward 11:00 am, but as mentioned, the political echelon did not approve carrying out the attack.<sup>35</sup> Golda Meir supported the suggestion made by the “source” and the head of the Mossad to publicize (through foreign news agencies) the possibility of an Arab attack, in order to eliminate the element of surprise from the attack and perhaps even thwart it.

The question of Jordan joining the war hovered in the air. Considering the circumstances, this would have been a considerable military risk to Israel. Nevertheless, the minister of defense suggested that they not warn King Hussein about joining the war. The minister of defense did say, however, that Israel would bomb radar stations in Jordan should they be used to provide the Egyptians with an aerial picture of Israel.<sup>36</sup>

Later in the morning and in the afternoon, the defense minister and the chief of staff engaged in intensive staff work to prepare the IDF to contain the Egyptian-Syrian attack on October 6 at 5:00–6:00 pm. According to the chief of staff, the IDF’s order of battle to contain the attack at that time amounted to 180 tanks on the Golan Heights and 300 tanks facing the Suez Canal.<sup>37</sup>

## Analysis of the Risk Management on the Morning of October 6

The warning telegram from the head of the Mossad, Zvi Zamir, which, as already mentioned, was received on the morning of October 6, led to a change in the situation assessment. Questions as to why this information was not received earlier,<sup>38</sup> and why Israel’s preparations for war were not accelerated, beyond what was done, from the moment Zamir’s report was received at 4:30 am remain unanswered. Regardless, following the arrival of the warning, the political-military leadership had to make decisions and

34 Ibid.

35 Yossi Aboudi, “War from the Air: The Intelligence that Helped the Air Force Take Off,” *Mabat Malam* no. 67 (November 2013), p. 54, <https://tinyurl.com/y4qjrhrh> [in Hebrew].

36 “Summary of Consultation with the Prime Minister, Tel Aviv, Yom Kippur 1973 at 8:05 am.”

37 Detailed in “Chief of Staff’s Log, 1973,” *Archive of the IDF and Ministry of Defense*, May 2019.

38 Zohar, “One Discussion on October 5.”

take risks. The willingness of each member of the cabinet to take operative steps could indicate their level of understanding of the seriousness of the risk of war and their approach to risk management at that time.

Despite the clear warning, the head of Military Intelligence still tried to impose his logic upon the enemy and explained that war was not worthwhile for Egypt's President Sadat, and thus it might not occur. In effect, the head of Military Intelligence did not understand the reasoning and the purpose of the Egyptian attack to conquer the Eastern bank of the Suez Canal in order to bring about a diplomatic process. The lesson is that understanding the reason for the risk does not have to be a necessary condition in order to prepare to handle it.

The chief of staff was the only one who understood the risk of war. He was less troubled by the question of the reasons behind the Egyptian attack. His understanding of the risk was based on an analysis of the enemy's situation and the learning process that he had undergone since the previous morning. It seems that he saw in Zamir's report the concrete warning that he had been waiting for. The outline of the war also became clearer to him from the report—it was not the “heating up” of the border but rather a major attack on two fronts—and the steps that he took the day before were far from sufficient to address the risk. Now he demanded the full recruitment of reserves and approval for conducting a preemptive air strike in order to disrupt the attack on both fronts before it had even begun.

Defense Minister Dayan was less ready to make decisions to lower the risk posed by the war. He chose to limit the military steps that the chief of staff suggested, as he was concerned that the State of Israel would risk being perceived as the aggressor and he was also worried about hurting the country's morale. If not for the prime minister, Defense Minister Dayan would have dictated to the chief of staff a more limited recruitment of reserves (only two divisions, as opposed to the four divisions suggested by the chief of staff). In parallel, both Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan prevented the chief of staff from conducting an Israeli preemptive air strike out of concern for the diplomatic risk, which in turn would increase the risk to the regular army. As far as we know, this matter was not brought up in any of the meetings.

## The Materialization of the Risks

**On October 6, 1973, Yom Kippur, at 1:50 pm**, the Egyptian-Syrian attack began, and Israel's defensive lines along the Suez Canal and in the Golan Heights were breached along their entire length. It quickly became clear that the emergency warehouses were not properly prepared, which made it even harder to organize the reserves.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the recruitment of the reserves was successful, primarily due to the soldiers' determination to reach the front lines.

**At the end of Yom Kippur** that evening, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan appeared on Israeli television and reported to the nation about the state of the war. He stated that starting at 1:50 pm, Egypt and Syria had begun a simultaneous attack on two fronts, in the Sinai and the Golan Heights respectively. Regarding the Syrian front, Dayan said that in the Golan Heights "perhaps here and there several tanks have penetrated beyond our lines. Perhaps also they captured some of our positions, [but they are] not significant conquests." As for the Egyptian front, Dayan said that "the Egyptians have succeeded in crossing the canal in certain places, and we have suffered losses of soldiers and positions. But relatively speaking, this is more or less as we expected the first day of the battle to be, the same battle that will end with our victory in the coming days."<sup>40</sup> This description by the defense minister—whether it resulted from the fog of war or whether it was intended to calm the public—was exceedingly far from reality. Later in his address, Dayan sought to explain why the considerations of Israel's leadership were correct—in that Israel had sustained an Arab attack and did not counterattack. He said that Israel did not want to start a preemptive war as it did not want to get caught in a situation where it would be accused of instigating the war. Dayan explained that the alternative to the path that Israel took was to keep an exceedingly large number of soldiers on the front lines for years and to carry out a preemptive strike every time that there was

39 "The Yom Kippur War – the Story from the Ordnance Corps' History Book," *Technology and Maintenance Corps Association Website*, March 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y5uwocyy> [in Hebrew].

40 Moshe Dayan, appearance on Israeli television on October 6, 1973, in "Forty-five Years Since the Yom Kippur War, Looking Back," *Kan 11 Television Channel*, October 7, 2018 [in Hebrew].

concern that the enemy intended to start a war, a move that would depict Israel as the aggressor.<sup>41</sup>

The defense minister's description on television seemingly showed that the situation on the front lines matched the leadership's expectations according to the Israel's security doctrine and was consistent with its risk management framework. But in reality, its risk management had failed: Warning was not received in time; the recruitment of reserves occurred late; Israel did not conduct a preemptive air strike; the defensive lines of the regular army were breached; and the uncertainty was immense.

**On October 7, 1973**, in a meeting held in the morning, Golda Meir basically admitted that she had made a mistake by not allowing a preemptive strike as the chief of staff had requested. She said, "If, God forbid, we are ever in such a situation again, we need to disregard the world and let the army attack."<sup>42</sup> Although the defense minister was not present at this particular meeting, at the meeting that afternoon he too admitted his mistake on the eve of the war, saying, "I underestimated the strength of the enemy, his belligerent magnitude, and I overestimated our forces and their resilience."<sup>43</sup> In these words, Dayan made a distinction between surprise at the enemy's capabilities (the intelligence surprise) and at the IDF's lack of resilience at the onset of the war (operational surprise); Dayan was shocked at both. Dayan also surmised that the "war is about the Land of Israel," meaning not only about the "territories." At that time, his risk assessment of the war shifted from one extreme to the other.

Golda Meir was also shocked by the results at the beginning of the war. Dr. Hagai Tsoref, director of documentation and commemoration at the Israel State Archives, later said that the minutes from the meetings held with the top military echelons indicate that the prime minister was not surprised by the outbreak of war. According to Tsoref, Prime Minister Meir certainly thought before the war that a war could break out, even on Yom Kippur, but she was stunned by the terrible results of its first few days. Throughout all the discussions Meir held with the military leadership prior to the war, she received promises mainly from the chief of staff that in any situation, the

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41 Ibid.

42 "Minutes of Discussion with the Prime Minister in October 1973, 9:10 am," *Israel State Archives*, October 20, <https://tinyurl.com/y2nonk94> [in Hebrew].

43 "Minutes of Discussion with the Prime Minister in October 1973, 1:40 pm," *Israel State Archives*, October 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/y662sr22> [in Hebrew].

IDF's regular army would be able to contain the attack, while recruiting the reserves was important mainly for the counterattack, and not for defense.<sup>44</sup>

As the war progressed, Israel took some other high risks, such as leaving the border with Jordan almost undefended, in the assumption that Jordan would not join the war (a risk that justified itself); the failed counterattack in Sinai on October 8; and the decision to cross the canal in the middle of December (Operation Abirey Ha-Lev), which led to the war's reversal in Israel's favor.

## The Main Risks and Their Management in Retrospect

### *The risk of a surprise attack*

Although the Israeli leadership had considered the risk of an Arab attack before the war, it suffered from being overconfident in Israel's strength, while it underestimated the determination and strength of its opponents; that is, the war itself was not a surprise and the leadership even took it seriously (for example, in the Blue-White Alert). However, the leadership had little awareness of the risk that war would break out by surprise, because the cabinet was confident that the Military Intelligence would fulfill its role and provide warning so that at least they would be able to recruit the reserves. As a result, without having received any prior warning from Military Intelligence, the outbreak of the war was met with shock not only by the head of Military Intelligence Eli Zeira, but also by the Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

In contrast, Chief of Staff David Elazar was less surprised, because he had engaged in risk management. On October 5, he already had considered that the likelihood of the risk of war was real and required taking operative steps even without warning from Military Intelligence. Following the report of the head of the Mossad on the morning of October 6, the chief of staff understood that he had received the concrete warning that he had expected earlier, and the outline of the war became more apparent to him. At that point, he also understood the intensity of the risk and adjusted his orders accordingly, but they were given too late. In the end, the risk materialized and its management was inadequate.

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44 Tsoref, conversation with Aharon Barnea.

*The risk of a false alarm*

The awareness of the risk of a false alarm increased unjustifiably after the Blue-White Alert. Nonetheless, this was a counter-risk that should not have been ignored in a situation assessment that discussed the risk of surprise. The challenge of the decision makers is to find the right balance by estimating the expected loss of each risk. In the situation that prevailed on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, estimating that the expected damage of the risk of a surprise attack was much greater than the risk of a false alarm was appropriate. In the end, this risk stood in the way of the decision makers.

*The risk of the regular army's failure to contain the attack*

The strategic risk that the regular army would have difficulty containing the attack until the arrival of reserve forces was not sufficiently established by the cabinet before the war. There is little evidence in prior discussions about this risk. The collapse of the regular army at the containment stage seems to have shocked the chief of staff and the defense minister, as well as the prime minister, who had trusted their judgment. On this matter, the military leadership erred in their concept, which was no less erroneous than the intelligence concept.<sup>45</sup>

The expectation that the regular army would contain the attack was unfounded, due to the extreme force ratios at the front lines, which were detrimental to the IDF (one division versus the Egyptian army and one division versus the Syrian army), especially when the two enemy armies were deployed at emergency positions on the front lines. For example, the Dovecote Plan was not built for containing a large Egyptian offensive order of battle. The mission (according to Dovecote) of preventing the enemy any achievement in the early stage of the war was not compatible with the balance of power on the ground and the risks posed to the regular army. A different risk management could have actually led to the early evacuation of the *maoz* outposts. In the end, the risk materialized; either it was not managed, or its management had failed.

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45 Shmuel Even, "The Conceptual Failures of Advanced Warning in the Yom Kippur War and What Can Be Learned from Them?" *Maarchoth* no. 388 (November 1994).

*The risk involved in a preemptive strike*

The political echelon decided not to take the risk of a preemptive strike in the hours before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, lest Israel be seen as the aggressor and bear the consequences. From the perspective of the chief of staff, the risk that the political echelon would prevent him from carrying out actions that he saw as essential for the campaign had been realized. Unlike the situation in 1967—when it was decided to conduct a preemptive strike—the strategic depth in 1973 gave the political echelon the feeling that it had greater room to maneuver; thus it was decided not to take the risk of a preemptive strike. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan even insisted on not taking this risk in a meeting with the prime minister on the morning of October 6.

This case is an example of the tension between managing diplomatic and military risks. The decision by the political leadership to refrain from a preemptive air strike exacerbated the regular army's inferior position at the onset of the war and was a mistake, as Golda Meir understood immediately after the war began. We can speculate that if the political echelon had been aware of the strategic risk that the regular army would not contain the attack, it might have approved a preemptive air strike. It seems that the meetings with the prime minister lacked any mention of the cross risks, when avoiding one risk intensifies the other risk.

It should be noted that Henry Kissinger later conjectured that the decision not to carry out a preemptive air strike “was a reasonable judgment by Golda, in balancing between the image of Israeli aggression, if you had acted first, and the actual effectiveness that would have been achieved in the short time that remained.”<sup>46</sup> However, Kissinger's conjecture regarding the effectiveness of an attack was not based on knowledge about the readiness of the air force and the amount of time that Israel had to prepare (from the morning hours). In summary, it seems that not taking the risk of a preemptive strike was a grave error by Israel's cabinet.

## Conclusion

Risk management supports carrying out operative actions, even in situations in which the likelihood of the risk is not high, but the potential damage is great. One of the advantages of risk management is having a high level of

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46 Oren, “Henry Kissinger: You Know We Saved You in '73, Right?”

awareness of the possible risks and being prepared for them, which should shorten the response time and even reduce the cost of an error.

The IDF and the other defense forces must map out the risks that stand in the way of achieving their objectives (including cross risks) according to different scenarios and to find ways to lower the risks, in cooperation with the various defense forces as well as with the political echelon, the National Security Council and the relevant government ministries. To do so, they must maintain a dialogue with the political echelon regarding operational plans, especially on situations where a political decision will be necessary.

It is important to emphasize that military and diplomatic risks at the strategic level should be managed together, as strategic military objectives are not separate from diplomatic goals. The military leadership must be aware of the constraints that the political echelon may dictate and the level of maneuvering room that it may have in different circumstances. This applies between wars, prior to war, and during war.