

40 Years Later: Conflicted Accounts of Yom Kippur War

Former Israeli Spy Chiefs Face Off at Tel Aviv Think Tank

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EL AVIV, ISRAEL — Stooped by age but unbending in blaming systemic dysfunction and a domineering military intelligence chief for failure to heed warnings of imminent attack, Israel's head of Mossad during the Yom Kippur War faced off against his former counterpart in uniform at an Oct. 6 symposium here commemorating the 40-year-old war.

In their first joint appearance in four decades of battling narratives and embittered legal disputes, Israel's octogenarian spy chiefs from the 1973 war offered respective accounts of the days preceding the coordinated attacks that caught Israel unprepared on its holy Day of Atonement to defend its northern and southern fronts.

Former Mossad director Zvi Zamir recounted for a packed audience at Tel Aviv's **Institute for National Security Studies** the organizational obstacles and clashing egos that prevented critical early warning of Egypt's imminent attack from reaching then-Prime Minister Golda Meir.

Zamir cited the "strange" and "unhealthy" relationship between then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, who he said repeatedly sought to withhold critical information from Lt. Gen. David "Dado" Elazar, IDF chief of staff at the time. The former Mossad chief faulted institutional group think and over-reliance on technical sources by military intelligence and regulatory compartmentalization that prevented him from conveying his intelligence assessments directly to government and military leaders.

"When I got closer to the issue of intelligence collection, it was obvious they were not tapping resources fully," Zamir said of IDF intelligence's "rigid" structure. "Even the best collection officer, once he passes what he's got ... is not providing as good an assessment as one based from direct contact where you learn to read his eyes."

Zamir specifically faulted retired Maj. Gen. Eli Zeira, military intelligence chief at the time, for discrediting the Mossad's pivotal Egyptian intelligence source as a double agent and for sitting on specific information of Egypt's imminent crossing of the Suez Canal.

“He [Zeira] was in charge of the national assessment, but it was essentially a single person’s opinion. And when the Mossad says there is war, our assessment was disqualified by the head of military intelligence who said it was a double agent,” Zamir said in reference to Ashraf Marwan, the son-in-law of former Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and top aide to then-President Anwar Sadat.

Zeira was recommended for dismissal by a post-war commission of inquiry for intelligence failings and had been under investigation until last year for allegedly identifying Marwan as a key Mossad informant. Zeira succeeded in July 2012 in his bid to get Israel’s attorney general to close the case against him, but lost his libel suit against Zamir.

In 2007, Marwan was found dead on the sidewalk below his London flat and it remains unclear whether he jumped or was pushed from his balcony above.

The former Mossad chief lamented his mistake of prematurely reporting Egypt’s plans to attack in May 1973. His warning prompted a partial call-up of reserve forces and allowed detractors to discount more pinpoint warnings on the eve of the war as disinformation.

“We had information on intent, but we didn’t have information on the concrete date. The information wasn’t complete ... that’s what I did and that was my mistake,” Zamir said.

In his account to the **INSS** audience, Zeira praised the military’s 8200 intelligence collections unit for accurately discovering — four days before the outbreak of war — that the Soviets were rushing to evacuate technical personnel from Syria. He said Dayan knew with “high probability” that war likely would break out on Saturday, Oct. 6, Yom Kippur, and that “to this day, it remains some kind of riddle” why government leaders did not call up requisite reserve forces.

The former military intelligence chief insisted he inherited the “concept” that Egypt did not intend to cross the Suez Canal, where an anemic Israeli defensive force of barely 1,000 was outnumbered by some 100,000 Egyptian troops. “Yes, I must admit I also believed [the concept] ... It wasn’t a figment of someone’s imagination,” he said.

In a talk repeatedly interrupted by a hostile audience, Zeira acknowledged several mistakes, but did not address his refusal to accept the authenticity of Zamir’s Egyptian source.

“My first mistake is we didn’t have a mechanism with which to learn and understand the soul of the Egyptian people and their mindset. ... Their problem was shame and humiliation, and the fact that 2.5 million Jews that arrived from Europe within five an half days defeated their glorious army,” Zeira said in reference to Israel’s astounding victory in the 1967 war.

He also cited his mistake for not questioning Israel's reliance on the so-called Bar-Lev line, insisting that he had always known that Israel required much more early warning maneuvering space with which to blunt an Egyptian attack.

Amir Oren, a veteran military analyst who spent the past two years on a new Israeli documentary series, "The Avoidable War," said the Oct. 6 event showed the residual resentment and heated passions of a war that remains seared in the Israeli consciousness.

"These two elderly gentlemen, both 85-plus, are still fighting the intelligence war of 1973. After four decades and volumes of information, they are still disputing whose assessment was wrong and who is to blame," said Oren, moderator of the INSS event.

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