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Civil-Military Relations and The Yom Kippur War

By Glen Segell

The 1973 Yom Kippur War is a case of civil-military relations, on both organizational and personal levels. Documents in the Israel State Archives show that it was the political elites that were to blame about policy decisions and strategy and not the military. Nevertheless the military elites were not without blame on the tactical level. The politicians didn't divulge important information to the military elites to the detriment of tactical decisions. However the military should have been prepared for all eventualities and they were not, relying too much on the Bar-Lev line and the deterrent factor of the Air Force. The military should have challenged the political decisions but they didn't.

Egyptian Anwar Sadat and Syrian Hafez Assad went to war to fulfill national objectives; political goals. Sadat was prepared to "sacrifice a million Egyptian soldiers" to recover its lost territory after Israel rejected his peace initiative, that proposed a full Israeli withdrawal to the pre-67 borders in exchange for a non-belligerency pact. In July 1972 Sadat expelled almost all of the 20,000 Soviet military advisers as détente was flourishing between the superpowers and could have hindered his intentions. From the end of 1972 Egypt began a concentrated effort to build up its forces. In an interview published in Newsweek (April 9, 1973), President Sadat threatened war with Israel. The Documents show that these facts were known to Prime Minister Golda Meir, and to her two primary partners in government, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Minister without Portfolio Yisrael Galili. The IDF Chief of Staff, David (Dado) Elazar, head of Military Intelligence Eli Zeira and Mossad head Zvi Zamir were unaware of what Meir, Dayan and Galili were aware of. The politicians didn't divulge important information to the military elites to the detriment of tactical decisions.

On the personal level of civil-military relations the Documents show how Dayan kept information from his principal rival, Yigal Alon. Alon's allies, Meir and Galili, also refrained from sharing information with him, even when he previously served as acting prime minister. The Agranat Commission's report correctly implicated rivalries between Elazar, Zeira, other senior IDF intelligence officers and GOC Southern Command Shmuel Gonen-Gorodisch. However the report incorrectly implied that Meir and Dayan were victims in the situation, and placed the blame specifically on Elazar and Zeira. Without regard to the liability, the result of the rivalry was that the military leaders lacked essential information; and hence they couldn't assess the situation; nor could they prepare for possible outcomes.

On the organizational level of civil-military relations, the Agranat Commission's report described that it was adequate for Prime Minister Meir that the Mossad and the Shin Bet (GSS) reported to her. The problem was that IDF intelligence only reported directly to the chief of staff and the defense minister. Dayan prevented Meir from being in direct contact with IDF intelligence. The military pipeline to Meir was controlled by Dayan and Elazar, who passed her summaries of information while withholding contradictory opinions for example the views of their ideological rival for the year and a half leading up to the war, General Yisrael Tal, commander of the IDF operations directorate, and deputy chief of staff. The military secretary, Brigadier General Yisrael Lior, was a one man show working without a staff. He was at the mercy of those making the reports, including the office of the Mossad chief. The prime minister's military secretary attended only a few IDF meetings as a silent participant, rather than a full, active member. As a consequence of this organizational structure of civil-military relations the Prime Minister and the IDF Chief of Staff and their respective staffs were undertaking evaluations, making decisions and implementing them, without direct coordination. This was apparent in the decision not to mobilize reservists on the eve of the war, a Friday.

So the important narrative is civil-military relations; exemplified by rivalry between Zaira against Zamir, and Elazar against Dayan showing that the original transgression was the political blunder. Clearly it was the politicians who caused harm to the soldiers even though the Agranat Commission's report did not discuss this. The political elites misinterpreted Egyptian intentions for peace prior to war, resulting in a traumatic war. The bottom line is that the political elites didn't inform the military elites of important information needed to make military decisions. The military however also failed in their duty to be prepared at all times for all eventualities and to challenge political decisions. The organizational structure of civil-military relations prevented this.

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