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Golda Meir: The Civilian Who Exposed Israel's Lack of Preparedness for the 1973 War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Although Israeli PM Golda Meir lacked military knowledge, her questions during government discussions on the eve of the Yom Kippur War exposed the fact that deterrence and early warning, the two cornerstones of Israel's security conception, had not been adequately addressed. If the IDF officers and the many *bithonistim* (officials with a security background) in her government had heeded her questions, the war could have gone very differently and perhaps even have been averted.

On the eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the IDF's alertness and preparedness were affected by two conceptions. Both were based on intelligence assessments, but their endorsement by the chief of staff and the defense minister made them established IDF conceptions. The first, and better known, was that Egypt would not initiate a war until it had long-range warplanes that could attack the Israeli home front, while Syria would not go to war without Egypt. The second was that Egypt and Syria were deterred by the IDF and hence "would not launch a war and certainly not a big one," as military intelligence averred as late as October 5, 1973, a day before the outbreak of hostilities.

The seeds of this notion of deterrence were planted in 1971, but it gained most of its strength in April 1973 when an intelligence assessment that Egypt and Syria would not go to war—despite indications on the ground—was indeed borne out. No one knew at the time that the war the two countries had intended to launch was forestalled by Soviet pressure, not by fear of the IDF.

In September 1973, bolstered by the belief that these two notions had been vindicated by the April events, Israeli military intelligence claimed that subsequent recurring signs of an imminent war were false alarms: "Today,

from a military standpoint, the main reason for the fact that there is no war is the Arab feeling and assessment that their air forces are not sufficient for a war with any chance of success." In a discussion held on October 1, the intelligence officers argued that "the Syrians are taking this [emergency] footing because of fears of our forces...and not [because of] offensive plans." Military intelligence told a foreign inquirer on October 1 that "they [the Syrians] do not believe they could win." On October 5, one day before the war broke out, intelligence claimed that "the Egyptians...are truly apprehensive" and "neither the Egyptians nor the Syrians have any great optimism about their possible successes [if they were to start a war]."

The intelligence assessments that the enemy was deterred and hence would not initiate a war were accepted not only by the chief of staff but also by the *bithonistim* in Meir's government. They included Defense Minister and former chief of staff Moshe Dayan; Deputy PM and Education Minister Yigal Allon, who had been commander of the Palmah and an outstanding general in the War of Independence; Industry and Trade Minister Haim Bar-Lev, who had also been chief of staff; Minister of Transportation and Communications Shimon Peres, who for many years was director-general of the Defense Ministry; and Minister without Portfolio Israel Galili, who in the lead-up to the War of Independence was political commander of the Hagana.

Despite her inexperience in military and security matters, PM Meir apparently did not put her trust in the confidence of the intelligence branch regarding Arab fears of the IDF. During the cabinet discussions, she raised several questions about those ostensible fears:

- What factors caused the Arabs to fear the IDF? Intelligence replied that "the Arabs are always apprehensive" and that "the alert stems from their fear of us" after Israel had downed 13 Syrian planes in September.
- Meir then inquired as to the possibility that "the Egyptians will keep us a little busy when the Syrians want to do something on the Golan." The response of the intelligence branch (not the chief of staff) to that question was that "Assad knows his limitations, because they are aware of Israel's strategic superiority...he is deeply cognizant of Israel's strategic superiority."

In answering Meir's incisive questions, intelligence did not add any facts to substantiate its assessment that the Arabs were deterred that stemmed from an appraisal of the enemy's logic, intentions, and perceptual and psychological state. Yet no alarm bells went off for the chief of staff and the many other experienced military men who took part in the discussion, and most oddly not for Galili. As the Hagana's political commander, he must have recalled the dismissive intelligence assessment before the War of

Independence regarding an all-out Arab invasion—an assessment that David Ben-Gurion fortunately tossed in the trash.

A post-Yom Kippur War investigation by the IDF found that Egypt and Syria were aware of the great weight accorded by Israel to the assessment of how much the Arabs were deterred, and hence made sure to supply a glut of false information about their fears of Israel.

Meir was familiar with the basic operational picture as well as the fact that, whereas the Egyptian and Syrian armies were deployed on Israel's borders at full strength, the IDF had deployed only the thin forces of the standing army. Hence her third question focused on the margin of time that an early warning in the Egyptian arena would provide. Intelligence responded that the warning on that front would not only be tactical but also operational—that is, a warning of several days. This was a reiteration of what the chief of military intelligence had said in May: "I do not think there could be a surprise crossing of the [Suez] Canal.... I can promise a warning on the subject of the crossing."

Meir was also familiar with the advance warning that intelligence was asked to give before 1967, which entailed identifying as early as possible the departure of the Egyptian forces from their encampments west of the Canal toward the Israeli border, which was 300 kilometers away. That distance enabled the IDF's reserve forces, which were located 100 kilometers from the border (between Hadera and Gedera), to mobilize rapidly, arrive quickly, and take over parts of Sinai before they could be seized by the Egyptian army, and thereby defend Israel far from its border.

The PM apparently understood that the post-1967 close proximity between the IDF and its enemies (albeit at a greater distance from Israel's borders), with only a few meters separating them in the north and the Suez Canal separating them in the south, had erased the large margin of warning that Israel had hitherto enjoyed. Thus, in response to the high confidence expressed by intelligence regarding an early warning on the Egyptian front, she raised the fourth and inevitable question: "How will we know when we know?" That is, how could intelligence provide a warning without the necessary margin for such a warning?

The answer mainly concerned early identification of a clearing of the Egyptian positions along the Canal—but for purposes of a new "war of attrition" (of the sort that raged along the Canal in 1969-70) and not for a wholly different all-out war. Hence the government was exposed to the fact that another basic component of the Israeli security conception—getting an intelligence warning early enough to mobilize the reserves and transport them to the borders (a distance of about 400 kilometers)—was not really being addressed.

This discovery should have shocked a government with so many officials rich in military and security experience and brought an end to the futile discussion, which was based on the intelligence assessment of the enemy's logic, intentions, and feelings. Instead, the chief of staff should have initiated an operational discussion on how to prepare the IDF for containing a possible surprise attack (like the one that indeed occurred) solely with the standing army for many hours and even days.

If such a discussion had been held, it would presumably have concluded with a directive from the political echelon to the IDF to pull back the soldiers along the Bar-Lev Line immediately after their task of warning of the outbreak of war had been fulfilled, because keeping them on the front line would have turned them into an operational burden and entailed the potential for a national trauma—like the one that indeed occurred.

Meir's bold questions during the prewar cabinet discussions did not change a thing. The proof is that on the eve of Yom Kippur, intelligence issued its notorious last assessment that "no change has occurred in the Egyptians' assessment of the balance of power between them and the IDF. Therefore the probability that the Egyptians intend to renew the fighting is low."

Golda Meir was known as a stubborn and authoritative leader, and apparently the only explanation for her acquiescence in the lack of preparedness that her questions exposed (particularly the lack of an early warning margin that would enable mobilizing the reserves) was her expectation that spies Israel had recruited deep within the Egyptian government and military would provide such a warning. She was also relying on Dayan, who, until the outbreak of the 1973 war, was a defense minister of mythical stature. Like the intelligence branch, Dayan maintained that the Egyptians knew that if they crossed the Canal, they "would find themselves in an extremely inconvenient position... [because] there are many difficulties in crossing the Canal, and after that they have to traverse an endless expanse, and we will be coming at them from all sides."

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