

# REFLECTING INTELLIGENCE FAILURES FORTY YEARS SINCE THE 1973 YOM KIPPUR WAR

*Dr Glen Segell*

*(FRGS, is Researcher at The Institute for National Security  
Studies Tel Aviv and Lecturer at Bar-Ilan University)*

Copyright: [www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)

This year, 2013 marks 40 years since the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and her neighboring states. It was the last major Arab-Israel inter-state war in the Middle East that was symmetrical between the conflicting states. Since then there have been numerous asymmetrical military operations by Israel into Lebanon, and even more military operations involving the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Interspersed have been two Palestinian Intifada (uprisings) and substantial counter-insurgency, anti-terrorist and anti-weapons of mass destruction strikes. These have included the 1976 rescue of hostages at Entebbe Airport, and the 1981 destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor under construction. Despite this large accolade of military successes and political stalemates, it is the 1973 Yom Kippur War that dominates history as Israel's military nightmare in intelligence failures as well as standing out as the start of her political dream of a peace-treaty with a Muslim country, Egypt.

It is the theme of this article to revisit the psychological principles underlying the intelligence analysis that led to the intelligence failure of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This serves as an important example in today's world where inter-state conflicts are few and far between. Such infrequency could easily lead analysts to make the same errors given their inexperience in considering conflicts between states. Although inter-state conflicts are not likely on the European or North American continents it is worth considering that dormant tensions can easily escalate. The intensification of inter-state conflicts are more likely to occur in the Middle East, Asian and African conflicts such as between North and South Korea, those resulting from the Arab Spring and especially involving Iran and Mali, those pertaining to China in the South China Sea and in various Sub-Saharan contexts such as between Sudan and South Sudan.

It is for these reasons that a reflection on the intelligence failures of 1973 Yom Kippur War provide analysts with a good example of valid inferences and true premises layered upon an unexamined assumption. A leading assumption of Israel was that Egypt would go to war only for the sake of a military victory. However, this required that Egypt had sufficient air power to neutralize Israel's air force. In making this assumption Israel made the failure of not asking "What are the assumptions am I bringing to the data?" In doing so this brought about a critical chain-reaction leading to a melt-down. As the first step was not adhered to the second question was also not asked "What grounds do I have for adopting the assumptions?" Hence Israel didn't proceed to reevaluate the assumptions or to check the intelligence asking "is there any information that should cause me to rethink my initial assumptions?" So the final level of certitude attached to Israel's erroneous conclusions became consistent with the certitude levels of the assumptions on which the original conclusions were built.

Israel could have correctly predicted and forecast the onset of the Yom Kippur War, especially Egypt's intentions, if it had asked some basic intelligence questions starting with "Is this really something I have seen before, something that is routine or is it something new that should give me cause for concern?" This should have been asked when considering Egypt's military exercises preceding the surprise attack by Egypt against Israel on the Suez Canal. Egypt was holding military exercises as it had for a number of years, but this time it was not an exercise it was preparation with the intent to engage in war. This would have led Israel to recognize that this was something new disguised as the familiar. Israel didn't ask this crucial question and thus fell to the failure of being conditioned by previous false positives not to pay attention to what was happening on the eve of the war.

In the months preceding the war Egypt was a strategic deceiver whose goal was to try to manage the perceptions and the cognitive processes of Israel. Israel as the audience tried to figure out what was really going on and tried to detect and penetrate any attempts to deceive them. Israel's first erroneous assumption was that if it was not possible for Egypt to have a military victory, then Egypt would not attack. This became an unexamined assumption also known as "the Concept". So the assumption proceeded falsely that if Egypt didn't have sufficient air power, then it was not possible for them to have a military victory. This was a reasonable military judgment. However Egypt was not considering a military victory, it was aiming for a political victory.

What enabled Israel to be deceived was that certain features of the human visual and cognitive apparatus allowed her analysts to misperceive what was going on and/or to draw the wrong inferences from observations. This was a traditional element of strategic deception where the attempt to deceive is deliberate and calculated. There is a deceiver and there is the deceived. The same visual and cognitive mechanisms that make these sorts of deception possible also make self-deception possible.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, because of these same cognitive mechanisms an intelligence analyst can make faulty judgments even if he or she is not the victim of purposeful deception. This happened when Israeli analysts made a well-established observation that Egypt had insufficient air power. So Israel made the false assumption that this would mean that it was not possible for Egypt to have a military victory and therefore, Egypt would not attack.

In selecting this hypothesis Israel should also have asked the additional question "What are my reasons for rejecting this hypothesis?" However there was no attempt to ascertain whether there was a principled or evidential reason for rejecting it. So Israel never considered that it was possible that the hypothesis could be rejected and that the evidence could in any way be contrary to it or that could be reconciled in some way. There was no attempt to consider the conditions that would require Israel to reconsider the viability of the hypothesis or an alternative hypothesis. Israel made not attempt to ascertain if conditions had changed that would affect the initial assessment of the plausibility of the hypothesis. Clint Watts and John Brennan in an article titled "Capturing the Potential of Outlier Ideas in the Intelligence Community," describe this case as happening frequently because data and hypotheses are too quickly dismissed because they are "outlandish, unthinkable, and wholly anomalous."<sup>2</sup>

The effectiveness of Egypt's deception was thus a function of how successful it was able to utilize applied psychology or perception management. Perception management thus defined is "the Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning ultimately resulting in behaviors and actions favorable to the originator's objectives."<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Israel's reasoning was deceptive because although some of the arguments were valid and several of the premises were definitely true the chain of reasoning was built upon a questionable assumption or hypothesis without any alternative assumptions or hypothesis. The assumption was the motive for war. Rather than pursuing a military

victory, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt went to war to accomplish political goals. By initiating an attack, Sadat not only hoped to reestablish his credibility after the dramatic failure during the 1967 Six day War, but he calculated (correctly) that the superpowers would intervene and force Israel into a settlement.

Israel needed to ask if it was failing to consider a hypothesis because of its unexamined preconceptions concerning what is possible, likely, or believable. Instead Israel underestimated its opponent's, Egypt's, willingness to take risks, choose less than optimal alternatives, and accept short-term losses in order to achieve their long-term goals. Israel's preferred hypothesis was consistent with the data where the appeal of the solution resulted from deception and preconceptions. In embracing only one hypothesis, Israel ignored evidence that would support other hypotheses. In settling on only the one solution, there were no sufficient reasons for contemplating other hypotheses which was Israel's intelligence failure. Israel made no attempts to consider evidence would which cause her to reject her sole and only hypothesis. Israel was not willing to concede prior to the outbreak of war the possibility of the conclusions turning out to be completely wrong.

It is rare that a correct hypothesis is consistent with all the data in intelligence; every large-scale theory has some conflicts. However, it was tempting for Israel to lighten its task by eliminating a hypothesis prematurely, simply because some information couldn't be reconciled with it. The problem was that once a hypothesis had been eliminated, it was hard to put it back on the table again.

Paradoxically, the challenge facing Israel was both too little information and too much information. At any given time, Israel was only dealing with a very limited slice of the world around them, from which they had to draw conclusions about the whole. From the fragmented and partial sensory input Israel had constructed a limited model of the whole reality it was confronting. In this limited perception, Israel could only see a few sides of the whole object. Israel tried in a simulation to fill in the details by assuming the contents of what existed in that portion that fell outside of what could be directly perceived. Israel did so from memory of what had been experienced before. At the same time, Israel was bombarded with more stimuli than it could handle.

The Israeli sense of what was familiar, routine, repetitive, or "normal" thus became an important weapon in the hands of the Egyptians. The Egyptian attack in the 1973 Yom Kippur War took place in a context that was carefully designed by Egypt to exude a sense of normalcy and business-as-usual. For years the Egyptians had engaged in annual autumn military exercises. This became an exercise of repetition that was utilized for the purpose of strategic deception. The seemingly familiar actions of Egyptian military exercises caused Israel to miss the novel, the unusual, and the sneaky that was embedded within routine actions. This was the preparation for actual war, starting with a surprise attack on Israeli forces on the Suez Canal.

Egypt's use of the annual military exercises provides the deception. R.V. Jones, the British intelligence expert, wrote "No imitation can be perfect without being the real thing."<sup>4</sup> Barton Whaley expanded on Jones's insight with Whaley's "Plus-Minus Rule."<sup>5</sup> He points out that every imitation must lack a characteristic that the original has (a minus) and it usually has some characteristic not found in the original (a plus). If Jones and Whaley are correct, every routine will necessarily contain some incongruities. The unnatural actions will have to be disguised and made to look normal in some way and the gratuitous actions will have to be artificially motivated or justified. This was the case with Egypt's military exercise preceding the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

In 1973, Egypt's annual military exercises were highlighted in Egyptian newspapers. Ironically, drawing attention to the exercises actually served to diminish their importance. In late September, Egyptian troops began to move forward toward the Suez Canal, consistent with the annual autumn

exercises. However, to give Israel the impression that this was nothing to be concerned about, the soldiers were forbidden to wear helmets. Furthermore, they could regularly be seen without shirts or weapons. Special units known as “lazy squads” sat on the bank of the canal fishing and eating oranges. The atmosphere was casual and low-key. The Egyptians knew their enemy well. They exploited the Israeli prejudice that the Egyptians lacked military discipline and competence.

Israel failed to observe that this was preparation for war because there are four psychological effects of repetition. If you see something done repeatedly in a particular way: (a) you will expect that it will continue to happen in the future and (b) you suppose that what happens in the future will always happen in the same way that it did in the past, and (c) since what is happening now is similar to what happened before, you infer that they are exactly the same type of event, and, finally, (d) since repetition tends to be both reassuring and boring, it leads to complacency, which caused Israel to lose focus and to diminish her attention. Israel told itself “Nothing to be suspicious about here, I’ve seen this before – Egyptian military exercise in September and October.” Hence the understanding that repeated actions that are familiar, consistent, and uniform create the feeling that things are normal, which reduces the sense of suspicion on the part of the target. This is also known as a “conditioning action.”

Also the Egyptian attack was preceded by a series of false alarms. Since 1971, three major mobilizations and several minor ones occurred which did not culminate in an offensive strike. These unfulfilled threats reinforced Israeli preconceptions of the Egyptians as incompetent and indecisive. From these Israel thought that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was only capable of posturing. Israel took in and processed what it decided was relevant and ruthlessly ignored 95 percent of what was happening.

The fact that Israel necessarily interpreted the data it received and the fact that it had to select what data it deemed relevant and block out the rest are important features of experience. This is explained by Mark Lowenthal in an article on “Intelligence Epistemology: Dealing with the Unbelievable,” when he describes the category of the “unbelievable” as “facts that are true but are so staggering, so far from the norm or the predictable, as to not be believable.”<sup>6</sup> Lowenthal’s most important point is that the unbelievable is too often identified with the “impossible,” whereas very few things belong in the latter category.

Political psychologist Robert Jervis helps to understand the enormity of Israel’s failure when he observed, “Facts can be interpreted, and indeed identified, only with the aid of hypotheses and theories. Pure empiricism is impossible.”<sup>7</sup> This provides an additional construction for understanding the failure of Prime Minister Golda Meir who made her decision not to mobilize Israeli forces or engage in a pre-emptive strike based on the erroneous military intelligence analysis when she said: “No one in this country realizes how many times during the past year we received information from the same source that war would break out on this or that day, without war breaking out.”<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that misdirection also plays a central role in strategic deception. Misdirection is an attempt to control what the audience or a target perceives and how they interpret what is perceived. Apparently, the Egyptian preparations for an attack contained some detectable, non-normal, anomalous characteristics. Israel didn’t question the anomalous in the exercises that it was observing. On the morning of October 6, 1973, as the attack was taking place, the U.S. President’s daily briefing for that day was being read. (It had been prepared before the news of the attack.) It said: “The Egyptians and Syrians have engaged in military exercises every fall. This year their military exercises are unusually realistic.”<sup>9</sup>

Israel did not dwell on this anomaly. The Egyptian exercises were “unusually realistic” because this year it was different. This year the exercises were preparation for a real and imminent surprise attack. Israel should have asked if there was something missing that should be there if things were normal and if there was something extra that should not be there if things were normal. However Israel didn’t which follows the dictum of psychologist Gustav Kuhn that “Misdirection can literally be defined as pointing out the wrong way.”<sup>10</sup> A more complex definition of “misdirection” that applies to strategic deception is how any number of actions, words, events, or set of conditions that direct the target’s attention (Israel) away from what the deceiver (Egypt) wants concealed or ignored and that focuses attention on what the deceiver (Egypt) wants the target (Israel) to perceive or to think (annual military exercises and not war).

To analyze the 1973 Yom Kippur War and intelligence illusions is to separate two kinds of misdirection: physical and psychological.<sup>11</sup> Physical misdirection, which is usually visual, is an attempt to control the spectator’s gaze, by influencing where the spectator looks. To do this, the Egypt needed to create areas of primary (or high) interest and areas of secondary (or low) interest. Intelligence refers to these two subjective divisions of the perceptual field as “illuminated areas” and “dark areas.” In reality, the area of secondary interest is what should be of maximum interest, for this is where the sneaky moves are made. However, the area of secondary interest appears to have minimal relevance to Israel and the area designed to be of high interest attracts all the attention. Hence, there is a slogan says, “Big actions cover little actions.” The big area was the annual Egyptian military exercises and the small area was the preparation of amphibious landing craft and pontoon bridges on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal and with a large number of water hoses to break down the Israel sand banks of its defensive Bar-Lev line. Israel had constructed the large defensive sand banks to prevent Egyptian tanks and troop carriers with the notion that an Egyptian attack would need to destroy these with explosives and would take 48-72 hours to do so. Egypt used water-houses with water pumped at high force from the Suez Canal to destroy these within 12 hours.

Psychological or cognitive misdirection is an attempt to control the spectator’s attention and to shape what the spectator thinks. As with physical misdirection, there are areas of high interest and low interest that are created in the data provided, so that the focus of attention is misplaced. According to some theories, attention is like a spotlight. It is focused, but can miss what is in the periphery. In psychological misdirection, the deceiver pivots the spotlight of the mind toward the wrong place at the right time. Once again these were Egypt’s annual military exercises. As Richards Heuer, a former CIA analyst says: “Deception is, above all, a cognitive phenomenon; it occurs in our minds.”<sup>12</sup> Israel could have avoided this cognitive misdirection had it considered alternative assumptions and hypothesis. So the 1973 Yom Kippur War as Israel's everlasting intelligence nightmare was not just Egypt's successes in spotlighting but also Israel's failures to consider the periphery.

To be sure, Israel needed to fill in the gaps of intelligence with experience, but these were also lacking. Instead Israel made assumptions only about what it was observing. The problem was that the assumptions were taken for granted, implicit, unexamined, and insufficiently grounded. In intelligence the reliance on unexamined assumptions can make one the subject of deception or even self-deception. One way in which this happens is in the phenomenon of “layering.” This is the mistake of basing conclusions on previous assumptions without carrying forward the uncertainties of the previous layer.<sup>13</sup> Egypt played the gamble that Israel’s assumptions would play a central role and even where there were no explicit external deceptions, Israel’s own preconceptions and biases would be the source of unwarranted assumptions. Egypt’s gamble played off for the initial surprise.

To conclude this article is to sum up Egypt’s intelligence offensive as “Canceling Methods.” The same effect of military exercises was repeated multiple times in multiple years. This would not have

been successful had Israel not failed to understand Egypt's real intentions. Israel didn't adhere to the intelligence dictum that there may be (1) multiple possible explanations for any given data and (2) the situation may be dynamic. What was true at time T<sup>1</sup> may not be true at time T<sup>2</sup>. Israel also didn't adhere to the opposite of prematurely pruning a hypothesis. This is the cognitive pitfall of a premature closure on one particular hypothesis. Israel failed to follow the subtle intelligence technique known as "the method of false solutions." Egypt planted a false action in Israel's minds leading Israel to construct a bogus interpretation of what was happening, which lead Israel away from the real intention. Israel's reason and logic were satisfied, because of what it considered a rational explanation. By the time that Egyptian forces were crossing the Suez Canal it was too late for Israel to reconstruct an alternative story of what had been in preparation for months preceding the event.

The lesson for any intelligence analysis especially those evaluating potential inter-state conflicts, international tensions and escalating strives is not to ignore a situation that is dynamic. Take care of all available data and information. It is not to ignore events that might violate previous paradigms and previous settled conclusions. Such actions could make analysts blind to the unique features of the evolving situation. The lesson of 1973 Yom Kippur War for intelligence analysts is to understand that it is also essential to analyze assumptions and hypotheses that are not even on the horizon of possibilities. Intelligence analysts needs to integrate into strategic planning theories climb up the cognitive ladder from "impossible," to "unbelievable but possible," to "believable but highly unlikely," to "believable and worthy of consideration," and finally to acceptance. Such a reflection may well have changed the course of Middle East and Mediterranean history reflecting back 40 years after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Had the 1973 Yom Kippur War not have been so traumatic for Israel, it may not have felt the necessity to enter the US sponsored Camp David peace process for a peace treaty with Egypt and all subsequent issues relating to Sinai, and Gaza may have taking a different turn. History created all for the want of neglecting accurate intelligence analysis.

### **References:**

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Giobbi, R. *Card College*, vol. 2 (Seattle: Hermetic Press, 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Watts, C. and John E. Brennan, "Capturing the Potential of Outlier Ideas in the Intelligence Community," *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 55, no. 4 (December 2011), pp. 1-10.
- <sup>3</sup> Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 12 April 2001. (As Amended Through 17 December 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> Whaley, B. and J. Busby, "Detecting Deception: Practice, Practitioners, and Theory," in Godson, R. and J. Wirtz, (eds.), *Strategic Denial and Deception: The Twenty-First Century Challenge* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 197.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- <sup>6</sup> Lowenthal, M. "Intelligence Epistemology: Dealing with the Unbelievable," *The International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 319-325.
- <sup>7</sup> Jervis, R. "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, vol. 20, no. 3 (April 1968), p. 457.
- <sup>8</sup> Shlaim, A. "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War," *World Politics*, vol. 28, no. 3 (April 1976), p. 356.
- <sup>9</sup> Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft May 15, 2009 (Workshop presentation audio transcript) [http://www7.nationalacademies.org/bbcss/DNI\\_Scowcroft\\_Audio.mp3](http://www7.nationalacademies.org/bbcss/DNI_Scowcroft_Audio.mp3)
- <sup>10</sup> Kuhn, G. and Luis M. Martinez, "Misdirection—Past, Present, and the Future," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, vol. 5, no. 172 (January 2012), [http://www.frontiersin.org/human\\_neuroscience/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00172/full](http://www.frontiersin.org/human_neuroscience/10.3389/fnhum.2011.00172/full)
- <sup>11</sup> Lamont, P. and Richard Wiseman, *Magic in Theory: An Introduction to the Theoretical and Psychological Elements of Conjuring* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999), p. 36.
- <sup>12</sup> Heuer, R.J. "Strategic Deception and Counterdeception: A Cognitive Process Approach" *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2 (June 1981), p. 321.
- <sup>13</sup> Cooper, J.R., *Curing Analytic Pathologies: Pathways to Improved Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), p. 33; and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *S*

---

*Report 108-301, Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, S. 2386* (Washington D.C.: 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, July 2004), conclusion 4, pp. 22-23.  
<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/pub108thcongress.html>.