

Literature review on biases and errors in the assessment of information that resu...

[War](#), [Intelligence](#)



Literature Review

Given the nature of this paper, the literature review will be divided into themes and the relevant literature will be analyzed accordingly. There is a huge body of work from diverse sources related to this topic as it has had a lasting impact not only on the Middle East but also on world diplomacy in the past 40 years. The greatest legacy of the war was its shaping of people's perceptions of the two sides of the faction. The ideas of underdog and top dog have dominated the conflicts in the Middle East for decades. After the creation of Israel by the UK in 1948, the standard view of the fledgling nation was that it was the underdog. Coupled with the fact that the State was Israel was created for Jews who had been persecuted and displaced by World Wars 2, the fact that they were under constant threat of war from Arab states, from whose land Israel had been formed, allowed them to win diplomatic favor with the USA.

But this image had several flaws which led to the terrible events of the Yom Kippur War. The paradox of being both the underdog and being backed by one of the two great superpowers caused the Israeli government to develop certain perceptions and behavioral patterns in response to threats from the Arabs. This makes it all the more important to reassess not only Israel's choices and behavior but also the ways in which the USA dealt with the situations in the Middle East through the Cold War era because such readings of past will be heavily colored by current perceptions of the US-Israel relations and the longer it takes to create a clear picture the more likely it is that the picture will be distorted beyond recognition. When the

events around the Yom Kippur War took place, a very convoluted scenario was being played out – the tumultuous wars and rumors of wars in 1973 made Israel seem more powerful than it actually was and more prone to ignoring facts.

In fact, the argument can be made that the cause Yom Kippur War was entirely due to a denial of existing facts and circumstances leading to a conflict which any dispassionate observer would have known was brewing since May of 1973. There are four major reasons why the information was not acted on – Groupthink, failure to analyze information objectively, failure to share information, failure of the decision maker to act on the information available to them and failure to anticipate possible repercussions of the information available and their actions. A certain amount of historical background (not related directly to the Yom Kippur War) is also needed in order to understand the reason why it took the course that it did.

Group-thinking is a complex phenomenon which involves several cognitive processes which occur simultaneously in all the members of a group at the same time. The aim of this behavior is to force oneself to conform to the aims or ideals of the group – a fact which was seen extensively in the Israeli government during the Yom Kippur War. There are several points to look into to understand group-thinking – these will be analyzed separately depending on which points the relevant authors opt to address. An attitude of invulnerability, or, as several other critics have stated, a heightened need to deny threats stemming from Israel's political consciousness was built up over a long period before the war and only changed hue as the Yom Kippur war

broke out and progressed. Earlier that year, Israel had gained the upper hand in the region, after defeating a massive Egyptian force in May, 1973, Israel had a clear path to Cairo which allowed them to take huge tracts of land. The justification for this rampant expansionism was again to be found in the specific kind of group-thinking which was prevalent in Israel at the time of the war. P. R. Kumaraswamy explored these points extensively and arrived at the conclusion that Israeli unpreparedness started from their original victories against Egypt and their failure to recognize the fact that if Egypt did not have adequate airpower in May, it could have gotten it by October. The attitude is perfectly highlighted in a meeting between the American secretary of defense and Meir Amit where they made it clear that they believed that victory would be easy (no more than 6000 casualties). This leads the first and most important problem – the Israeli government and military suffered from Groupthink to a very high degree. Rabinovich and Bar-Joseph noted that the fact that the war started on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur was very important to understand Israeli behavior at the time. This was a festival where Jews believed that they needed to make an account to God and therefore could not (or rather did not want to) engage in warfare. As such, the four hundred or so soldiers who were stationed at Israel's borders did not take any action when they spotted the massive Egyptian Army approaching. This initial lapse cost Israel dearly. Rainovich goes on to explain how the various Israeli outposts were in a severe state of dilapidation and were in no way equipped for war. The crux of the matter here is the timing of the unpreparedness – from when did the Israeli government decide that it

was unnecessary to stay ready for all eventualities? Kumaraswami and Rabinovich clearly do not agree on this point, though the net result is the same - there was a sense of invulnerability on the part of the Israeli army which had been fostered in various ways for a long time. To understand to what degree each critic is correct in their assessment certain markers need to be examined. If Kumaraswami's notion is correct, then the Israeli sense of invulnerability would have evolved over a longer period of time - at least since May, 1973; whereas if Rabinovich is right, it would have to have happened almost instantly. This will be looked into as the analysis progresses.

Bar-Joseph, in his paper titled Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure noted how the Israeli army distorted information which they received in order to make it conform to their beliefs and expectations. These facts clearly fit into the category of collective rationalization. Bar-Joseph's paper also shows that the Israelis did distort information to fit into their pre-conceived mind sets which is another problem altogether which will be analyzed under its own theme. This is a classic case of culture and religion playing a huge role in shaping a nation's foreign policy and affecting its ability to take action whenever needed. Once again, a question of timing arises - when did the Israelis develop such a sense of rationalization? This is a question which merits a thesis entirely for itself.

Heichal notes that one of the most important psychological reasons for this was the fact that the leaders used certain coping strategies to give themselves security in a turbulent time - namely that they were well

protected by the USA. This was a time-tested idea which pre-dated May, 1973. This kind of coping falls strongly within the gamut of the last group-thinking indicators – Self appointed mind-guards. It differs from the illusion of invulnerability because an illusion is a belief which supplants an actual fact, the coping strategy which Heichal talks about has nothing to do with facts or beliefs - as she herself notes, it was a need for closure and political security which drove the leaders of Israel to do nothing. She goes on to show that the decision the ‘rationalize away’ the problem was one which was shared by almost everyone who held any power from the Prime Minister who refused to heed warning to the common folk who followed his decisions. But, at least in some senses, Heichal’s explanations contradict Bar-Joseph’s in that the historical fact is that Israel seemed to begin distorting facts only after May, 1973 – the USA’s involvement and backing could not have had as huge an impact on Israeli behavior as it first appears.

In order for the dream of a peaceful state of Israel to flourish, they had to push out any thoughts of war. This was further enabled by the fact that Yom Kippur is one of the holiest festivals on the Jewish calendar. There was naturally a need to suppress any threatening news. In addition to distorting the information they were given, they believed in the natural morality of their cause (the justification of the creation of Israel on lands which had been owned by Arab sultans for centuries was found in Hebrew scriptures and at a time like Yom Kippur, people turned to scriptures rather than intelligence reports). With a religious base, it was clearly a massive collective suppression of the fear of attack which led Israel to do nothing.

An interesting fact to add at this point is Magnus Norell's point that Israeli politics had been marked by a constant need to change and 'dissent'. Israeli politics and diplomacy is rarely ever completely stable which makes the era around the Yom Kippur War that much more interesting because this was a time of almost complete unanimity in Israel. This complete suppression of dissent from all quarters, from the highest political powers to the lowest ranking soldiers can be spread out into the categories of 'direct pressure on dissenters' and 'self censorship' in the group-thinking categories. This also ties in with the biases which the Israeli command used in order to create the illusion of security.

Magnus Norell makes an implicit point that Israel needed to have a degree of security in order to allow its own kind of dissent to take place, which was very much absent around the time of the Yom Kippur War. As mentioned earlier, Bar-Joseph noted how the Israeli command distorted facts to suit the situation they wished to create. The suppression of dissent caused the Intelligence reports to be skewed in order to conform to the biases of the Israelis. The reports received from the front were written off and no action was taken even when foreign intelligence confirmed that an attack was imminent. American intelligence was also responsible for this to a certain degree insomuch that they did not provide adequate warning to their Israeli allies.

The reasons for this distortion are a matter of debate. Norell and Bar-Joseph put it down to Israel's longing to keep the post-May, 1973 euphoria going, but Arie Kuglanski provides a different explanation that there may be deeper

psychological reasons for the attack and the failure of the Israeli army, intelligence and government to act on time to prevent the war. She explains that there was a high need for cognitive closure on the part of the Israeli command which was fed by American intelligence which was equally eager to avoid war. Instead of acting on information given to them, they decided to wait and watch. She explained that the judgment of the Israeli command was formed on grounds of conventional wisdom and the belief that the warning signs were not great enough to act on. This was based on a theory of 'lay epistemics' which stated that there were two specific reasons for this huge lapse – firstly, the Israeli command had formed an instant judgment based on what it wanted to be true and then colored all the intelligence reports in such a way it would conform to these expectations (this was a fact that Bar-Joseph also made in his paper which was quoted earlier). Secondly, once these biases were formed it 'trickles' down to the subordinates and each person who is involved in this loop will do everything he or she can to ensure that his bias is preserved and defended against all other contrary information. Using psychological tools, it is possible to understand why Israel behaved the way that it did, however, finding the right tools is a problem in itself. Unlike Kuglanski, Bar-Joseph has provided an example of how AMAN, Israel's intelligence agency, repeatedly distorted information. Kuglanski claimed that it was a collective distortion, though Bar-Joseph claimed that it was an organized attempt by a single institution.

These points stem directly from Group-thinking – a collective force which causes an entire group to behave in a certain way. But there are other points

which deal with international relations which cannot be put down to group-thinking. These will now be analyzed.

But the blame cannot be placed entirely on the Israeli army. Even in the 1970s, the USA possessed some of the most sophisticated weaponry and intelligence technology in the world. They could very easily have seen the joint Egyptian and Syrian armies approaching for a surprise attack and could have warned Israel of the danger well in advance, but they did not do it. The reasons for this are much more complex than simply attributing it to religious fervor or some other purely cultural reason. Both the USA and USSR were locked in a standoff – they were the two nuclear-powered superpowers of the world and if open war between the two was seen, it was very likely that the world would have ended in a nuclear holocaust. The involvement of both sides was covert in the Yom Kippur war. The famous Henry Kissinger was part of the entire affair but only as a go-between and, by and large, the USA only aided Israel laterally through supplies of various kinds. This covert aid only helped cause the war, not prevent it. The information which the US supplied to Israel was colored by the Israelis to suit the biases mentioned before. Furthermore, the Israelis were confident enough in American support that they did not find a need to be more cautious than they were.

Victor Israelyan, in his book *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, gave an hour-by-hour explanation as to what happened inside the Kremlin in Moscow. It was clear that Moscow was well aware of the situation in Israel and Gromyko, the Foreign Minister, had informed the highest officials of what was about to happen. The Soviets had very close ties with the Arab leagues

and were eager to aid them, to the point where a high ranking Russian official, Vinogradov, was appointed to Cairo to aid the Egyptians in their war. The Russian involvement in Egypt meant that the Arab forces were doubly prepared for the war and Israeli intelligence was playing at much higher stakes than they would have admitted to. This also implied a lack of information on the part of both American and Israeli intelligence. Having analyzed Israel's response to intelligence given to them ab initio, the degree to which this extra information would have affected the outcome of the war is questionable. It is very likely that the Israeli government, already under the influence of a group-thinking system and heavily biased, would have written off this information as equally insignificant. In retrospect, though, this information would be much more important as it clearly shows the two superpowers engaging with each other in this theater of war. Moreover, even if the Israelis would not acknowledge this information, the US would certainly have found a way to step in and stop the war before it began.

So far, the adamancy of the Israeli intelligence and government officials, was based mostly on their belief that it was too dangerous for the Arabs to attack them as they had American aid. Bar-Joseph noted in various works that the Israeli government and intelligence agencies were severely biased and, more dangerously, very close-minded. They believed a certain status quo would be maintained even if they did nothing and this was the danger – their enemies did not share their beliefs nor their practices. To most of the Arab nations, Israel was part of their land and was stolen from them. This fact was outright denied by most Jews at the time (and even today).

In summary, this review has found several areas of interest which will influence this paper significantly. Israel's dangerous leaning towards Group-thinking, its apparent over-reliance on American aid and its unique set of psychological appetencies make it a very interesting study in international politics and diplomacy. Two main problems have been identified and can be looked into for future research. Firstly, the timing of Israel's shift from being a pro-active and assertive presence in the Middle East to its sudden stagnation in late 1973 needs to be better understood and secondly, the exact psychological phenomena which caused Israeli leaders to behave the way they did must be looked into.

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