

Erol Araf: ‘Incalculable consequences’

[Erol Araf, National Post](#) | 07/10/13 | Last Updated: 03/10/13 3:44 PM ET



A destroyed Israel tank during the Yom Kippur War.

Forty years ago today, Israel stood on the brink of catastrophe. The day before — Oct. 6, 1973, the Day of Atonement — Egypt and Syria had launched a surprise and spectacularly successful offensive against Israel. Israeli forces were retreating, or being annihilated, at the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights. Faced with the prospect of Arab armies moving into Israeli population centres, the government began to consider unleashing Armageddon on its enemies.

Many documents pertaining to the nuclear crises that took place during the 1973 Arab-Israel War remain classified; participants who have written about the war are still vague. Over the years, however, numerous books and studies have been written, ranging from Seymour Hersh's dubious *The Sampson Option*, alleging that Israel used the threat of nuclear war to pressure the U.S into sending massive quantities of munitions, to an exhaustive research project by the U.S.-based research group CNA, entitled *The Israeli "Nuclear Alert" of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis*, published last spring. Thanks to these sources, we have enough facts at our disposal to construct a narrative that makes clear that between Oct. 7-25, there were three distinct nuclear

crises featuring deceptions, miscalculations, existential panic and missile launches that could easily have triggered a worldwide nuclear war.

With Syrian forces on the verge of taking Israel's largest cities, Prime Minister Golda Meir ordered her country's deadliest weapons readied for launch

The first crisis relates to the Israeli nuclear alert itself.

In the hours and days after the surprise attack, tank battles fought on the Golan Heights were comparable in size and intensity to the largest such clashes during the Second World War. Not even the indomitable Israeli Air Force could turn the tide. In the north, 177 Israeli tanks stood between Haifa and 1,460 Syrian armoured vehicles. In the south, Egyptian soldiers armed with hand-held anti-tank missiles knocked out 300 Israeli tanks in the first hours of the war. On that day, the ancient lines from the Book of Yom Kippur resonated with apocalyptic portent as reservists were raced to their mobilization centres: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on the day of the fast of Kippur it is sealed ... who shall live and who shall die ... who by water and who by fire ... who by the sword."

Howard Blum, in his book *The Eve of Destruction*, tells how Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Defense Minister, told Prime Minister Golda Meir on Oct. 8, two days into the fighting, that Israel must prepare to fight "to the last bullet" on the streets of Tel Aviv. He also urged the arming of Israel's ultimate weapon, code-named Temple. Ms. Meir gave the green light to arm 13 Jericho missiles with nuclear warheads. Nuclear bombs were also loaded onto six Phantom F-4 attack aircraft at the Tel Nof air base.

Israel's actions were quickly spotted, and just as quickly understood. William B. Quandt, who was a member of the U.S. National Security Council staff, confirmed that the U.S. knew that Israel had placed its nuclear arsenal on alert. He wrote; "It was also conceivable that a nuclear threat might be made if Egyptian troops broke through ... None of this had to be spelled out in so many words by the Israelis." The Americans found out about the nuclearization of Israeli missiles, according to Russell Warren Howe's book *Weapons*, when a U.S. Air Force SR-71 spy plane, specifically designed to monitor nuclear activity, flew over Israel. An American KH-11 intelligence satellite also detected missile launchers that had been left in the open specifically to signal Jerusalem's resolve. The Soviets, too, were monitoring the situation on the ground with their COSMOS satellites.

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The U.S. reaction to the possibility that Israel might go nuclear was twofold: Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor and newly sworn-in Secretary of State, authorized a badly needed conventional munitions resupply effort — after all, the Soviets were arming the Arabs. The U.S. also informed Moscow about Jerusalem's nuclear alert in an emergency hotline conversation between Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The

Americans were eager to make sure that there were no understandings that might lead to a nuclear exchange between the superpowers.

In response to Israel's nuclear mobilization, the Soviets decided to deploy their own nuclear weapons, under strict Soviet control, to Egypt, to dissuade Israel from going nuclear. But they didn't rush things, choosing a deliberately slow deployment to make sure that the Israelis would clearly see their activity, and understand that the Soviets were serious. Kissinger privately warned the Soviets that further Syrian advances into northern Israel, which could cut the country in two, would pose such an existential threat to Israel that the Soviet deterrence might not be sufficient to prevent Israel from going nuclear. The message was clear: Don't let their early successes spur your allies into pushing so hard that Israel felt it had to strike back.

The message was heeded. As Charles Wakebridge wrote in *Military Review* in 1976, the sudden Syrian halt when they could have advanced into Israel on Oct. 7 and 8 was one of the most intriguing and inexplicable decisions of the war. It is reasonable to infer from the Syrian decision to stop at the Jordan River, when they could have advanced all the way to Haifa, was due to the Israeli nuclear alert. The river was a red line that Damascus would not risk crossing.

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The second crisis occurred between Oct. 17-22, when the Soviet nuclear warheads arrived. Some were conspicuously deployed deep inside in Egypt, to deter any rash Israeli act. But the Soviets also deployed conventionally armed SCUD missiles in the Sinai, where Israeli forces were on the counteroffensive against the Egyptian invaders. The Israelis, quite reasonably, assumed that the Sinai SCUDs were also nuclear tipped. In Jerusalem's and Washington's view, this constituted dangerous escalation from a deterrence-based posture to war-fighting deployment.

Israel had to respond. The CNA researchers wrote that “[Israeli] Chief of Staff General Elazar ordered the deployment of an Israeli missile battery in an uncamouflaged fashion in such a way that Soviet satellites would be likely to detect the deployment and assume that such missiles were nuclear-capable.” Officials in Washington and Jerusalem were both worried that the Soviets, under pressure from their Egyptian allies, might escalate a conflict that was rapidly, and remarkably, evolving into a major Israeli conventional military victory.

On Oct. 22, hours before a UN Security Council ceasefire resolution was set to go into effect, the situation suddenly became even more tense when Egypt launched SCUD missiles at Israeli targets. In his book *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, senior Soviet diplomat Victor Israelyan relates that the authority to launch the missiles was given by Soviet Defense Minister Andrei Grechko to the Soviet ambassador in Cairo, Vladimir Vinogradov, in an emergency telephone conversation. “Go the hell and fire it!” was Gecko's response to the Egyptian request for authorization. The Egyptians fired.

Senior officials in Moscow were shocked, and outraged. “A few minutes later there was a call to Vinogradov from Moscow — [Foreign Minister Andrei] Gromyko was on the line,” Israelyan

recounts. “‘What did you talk about with Grechko?’ he asked. When he learned of Grechko’s order, Gromyko was outraged and strictly prohibited Vinogradov from carrying out the order. ‘I am sorry, Andrei Andreyevich, I can’t help it,’ was the reply. ‘The missiles have already been fired.’” The normally phlegmatic Gromyko was profoundly disturbed by this development — he had a bad feeling that things would soon get out of control.

He was right. The third crisis was at hand.

Forty-eight hours later, the Soviets and Americans found themselves facing the gravest nuclear crisis since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite the UN ceasefire having come into effect, the Egyptian Third Army, which had been completely surrounded by Israeli forces, was still fighting, desperately attempting to break out and avoid a humiliating surrender. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was demanding the Soviets save his army. After lengthy deliberations, Brezhnev informed Nixon that the Soviets were considering “taking appropriate steps unilaterally.” The Soviets began mobilizing troops and equipment. In all, 50,000 Soviet soldiers were readied for a possible intervention to save Egypt and, to be sure, a great deal of Soviet prestige.



Kissinger was furious with the Israelis for forcing Moscow’s hand, but could not possibly allow the unilateral introduction of Soviet forces into the Sinai. He responded to Brezhnev’s quasi-ultimatum by writing to Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. “We must view your suggestion of unilateral action as a matter of grave concern,” he said, “involving incalculable consequences.” After a lengthy National Security Council meeting, the U.S. raised the alert level of U.S. forces worldwide, including its nuclear forces, to Defense Condition [DEFCON] 3. Fifty nuclear-capable B-52 bombers moved from bases in Guam closer to the Soviet Union. Airborne tankers were prepared and dispersed. The carrier USS John F. Kennedy and its battle group sailed into the eastern Mediterranean. The 82nd Airborne Division was put on alert and told to be ready for action in the Sinai.

At that point two unrelated developments helped to swiftly reduce tensions: Kissinger demanded that Israel allow essential non-military supplies to reach the encircled Egyptian Third Army and desist from further military action or lose U.S. support at the UN; meanwhile, Sadat, having realized that his call for Soviet intervention had pushed the superpowers to the brink of war, opened direct negotiations with the Israelis. This unprecedented step by an Arab leader led to the establishment of a true peace between Egypt and Israel, and also saved Sadat's Third Army from annihilation or capitulation. With Israeli forces rapidly driving the Syrians back to Damascus, when the UN ordered another ceasefire, all sides saw fit to end the fighting. The superpowers stood back from the brink.

The modern Middle East was changed by the events of 40 years ago. And the Soviet Union, of course, is history. But to those closely following the U.S.-Russian brinkmanship over Syria's use of chemical weapons and Iran's drive to develop its own nuclear weapons, it's hard to ignore the similarities between now and then. Moscow and Washington butting heads of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East is nothing new. And Israel, as ever, must remain wary of what its neighbours may be planning.

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