



CHAPTER 1

The October War

Early in the afternoon of October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched near-simultaneous attacks on Israeli-held territory. It was Yom Kippur, the holy Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar. It was also the tenth day of Ramadan, a period of fasting and prayer for Muslims. The attacks initiated what would come to be known as the October War.

The first attacks came from Egyptian troops, who launched an artillery barrage against Israeli forces on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Egyptian missiles provided air cover, while high-pressure hoses drilled holes in the sand barriers Israeli forces had constructed. Once the holes were large enough, Egyptian armored tanks and vehicles moved through on temporary bridges. The Israeli troops were unprepared for the attack, and by midnight, nearly 80,000 Egyptian troops crossed the Suez and were positioned inside the Israeli fortifications.¹

At nearly the same time, Syrian troops moved south and attacked Israeli forces on the Golan Heights. Israelis in the northern and southern regions of the Golan Heights provided fierce resistance, but Syrian tanks were able to advance more easily in the southern por-



National boundaries in the Middle East shifted many times during the twentieth century. The map above shows the geography of the region as it was in 2004.

tion of the territory, and troops reached the Jordan River within 24 hours.

Israel's prime minister, Golda Meir, had received intelligence that Syrian and Egyptian troops were conducting military drills along the Israeli borders in May 1973. These observations suggested that the exercises seemed to involve large numbers of soldiers. In addition, the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, had publicly announced his intention to take military action against Israel in the near future. Sadat, however, had already threatened Israel multiple times without following up on the threats. Israel had successfully resisted previous attacks from Arab nations; in fact, its territory had increased dramatically with each successive

war. Based on the evidence and their assessment of Egypt's military capabilities, Israeli intelligence experts concluded that Sadat was bluffing once again.

Ultimately, the intelligence experts were mistaken, and the Golan Heights and Suez Canal became symbolic, as well as military, targets. The Gaza and Sinai territories leading to the Suez Canal had been seized from Egypt by Israeli troops during the Six Day War in June 1967. In that same conflict, Israeli troops had captured Syrian territory in the Golan Heights.

Six years after that bloody conflict, Syrian and Egyptian leaders had grown weary of waiting for diplomatic measures to force Israel from these occupied territories, and they were determined to take the land by force.

A QUESTION OF HONOR

Israeli forces were caught by surprise in the initial hours of the attack, but they quickly rallied. Within a week, Israeli troops were mounting strong counterattacks against both the Syrian and Egyptian troops. By October 25, Syrian troops had been pushed back across the 1967 cease-fire line into Syrian territory, and Egyptian troops were engaged in fierce combat with Israeli forces along the Suez Canal.

Two allies of the fighting nations became involved in the conflict. The Soviet Union and the United States were, at the time, the two most powerful nations in the world, and each favored a different outcome. The United States had long been a strong supporter of Israel, whereas the Soviets had assisted both Egypt and Syria with supplies.

The relationship between the Soviet Union and Egypt had grown prickly by the time President Sadat came to power in 1970. He had expelled Soviet advisers who, he believed, were threatening his leadership. In 1973, when the Soviet ambassador attempted to broker a cease-fire shortly after the war began (supposedly at the request of Syria), Sadat rejected the offer.



Golda Meir (above) was the prime minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974. The October War, during which Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked Israel, occurred during her tenure. A year later, Meir resigned from her post.

The Soviet Union did send supplies and equipment to Egypt and Syria. In his memoirs, Sadat charged that it was the involvement of the United States (in supplying tanks, missiles, and ammunition to Israel) that led him to accept a cease-fire. Sadat notified Syria of his decision, declaring, “I put on record, in that telegram, the substance of my stand on this issue.” He later wrote, “I was not afraid of a confrontation with Israel but . . . I would not confront the United States. I would not allow the Egyptian forces or Egypt’s strategical targets to be destroyed once again.”²

A cease-fire was tentatively agreed to on October 22, but numerous violations threatened to widen the conflict. Arab nations pledged their support to Egypt and Syria, and the Soviet Union suggested that both the Soviets and the United States should send military contingents to Egypt. American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was soon involved in “shuttle diplomacy” (a series of quick trips) between Israel, Egypt, and Syria to obtain agreements to end the fighting.

The war officially lasted only 16 days, but its consequences were serious and enduring. Both sides would claim victory in the conflict—the Israelis because their forces had prevailed in the end, and the Egyptians because they had finally proved that the Israeli forces could be defeated. Thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed or wounded. Both sides also suffered tremendous losses in military equipment and supplies. Israel’s failure to anticipate the attack would eventually force its prime minister, Golda Meir, and its defense minister, Moshe Dayan, to step down.

When the U.S. airlift of supplies and equipment to Israel became public, a coalition of Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, responded by instituting an oil embargo on the United States. As oil supplies dwindled and costs skyrocketed, the average American quickly realized that conflict in the Middle East had direct consequences in American cities and towns. Suddenly, more than ever before, peace mattered.