

The Role Of Egypt In The Yom Kippur War (1973): Navigating Superpower Influence And Cold War Dynamics

Charlotte Soulé

About the author

Charlotte is a Master's student at University College Dublin, pursuing a double degree in International War Studies in collaboration with the University of Potsdam. Her thesis, currently in development, examines the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in shaping global counterterrorism policies, assessing its influence on both counterterrorism strategies and international approaches to terrorism. She previously completed a Master's in European and International Fundamental Rights Law at Nantes University in partnership with the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie. Her first thesis provided a detailed analysis of the Yemen conflict through the lens of international humanitarian law. Charlotte also holds a Bachelor's degree in European and International Law from Bordeaux University, during which she spent her third year at the University of Kent in England. Her academic trajectory has fostered a strong interest in geopolitics, humanitarian law, and military strategy, with a particular focus on the Middle East.

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Table of contents

Introduction	66
PART I - Egypt's Role in The Yom Kippur War and Regional Strategy under Anwar Sadat	69
<i>1.1 The Yom Kippur War (1973)</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>1.2 The Egypt of Anwar Sadat in the Middle Eastern Region</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>1.3 'No-Deterrence': Egypt's Military Strategy</i>	<i>74</i>
PART II - Egypt's Agency in Balancing Superpower Influence in The Yom Kippur War	76
<i>2.1 Superpowers Interventions and Miscalculations</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>2.2 Egypt's Agency in Navigating Superpowers Influence</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>2.3 Post-War Consequences on Middle East Cold War Dynamics</i>	<i>81</i>
Conclusion	83
Bibliography	85

Introduction

*“Without Sadat’s precise assumption that Moscow, and the equally committed Washington, would protect Egypt and prevent a colossal defeat in the war, Cairo would never have launched [its attack], considering the shameful 1967 debacle.”*¹³⁴

This statement encapsulates the complex interplay of superpower influence during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, a conflict that can be considered a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern history. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s decision to initiate hostilities was not driven solely by military ambitions; rather, it was a calculated political strategy aimed at reclaiming the Sinai Peninsula and restoring Egypt’s national pride following its defeat six years earlier. The Cold War dynamics played a crucial role in shaping Sadat’s approach, as he sought to engage both the United States and the Soviet Union to secure support for Egypt’s objectives. By carefully navigating these superpower relationships, Sadat aimed to alter the balance of power in the region, leading to a new framework for Arab-Israeli relations.

It is essential to place the conflict within a broader geopolitical context to gain a deeper understanding of the power dynamics surrounding the Yom Kippur War. The early 1970s represented a central era in Middle Eastern geopolitics, significantly influenced by the region’s key role in the global oil economy, Cold War dynamics, and ongoing political upheavals surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹³⁵

Oil emerged as the most strategic global resource during this time, with control over its production and distribution granting substantial economic and political leverage. The region, rich in oil reserves, became instrumental in shaping global geopolitical relations.¹³⁶ The oil crisis of the 1970s exposed the vulnerabilities of Western powers to interruption in oil supply, inducing inflation, stagnation, and rising unemployment in the West, consequently undermining confidence in US global leadership.¹³⁷ By this decade, oil-producing nations began to assert greater control over their resources, diminishing the influence of international oil companies, and thus reshaping the global energy landscape. During the Cold War, oil played a critical role in military power.

¹³⁴ Israeli O. (2013), *The 1973 War: Link To Israeli-Egyptian peace*, Middle East Policy, p.90.

¹³⁵ Painter D. S. (2014), *Oil and Geopolitics: The Oil Crises of the 1970s and the Cold War*, *Historical Social Research*, Special Issue: The Energy Crises of the 1970s: Anticipations and Reactions in the Industrialised World, p.187.

¹³⁶ *Idem*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid* 2., p.194.

On the one hand, the United States, whose military operations heavily depend on oil, had to secure access to Middle Eastern oil reserves, which became a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy.¹³⁸ Yet, the US faced significant challenges maintaining its influence during the oil crises and broader socio-economic issues. The Nixon Doctrine, which indicated a reduced direct military involvement in the region, highlighted a strategic recalibration favouring military and economic assistance over troop deployments.¹³⁹ On the other hand, although vital to Soviet power, Moscow struggled to leverage its oil production effectively for geopolitical influence. Nonetheless, while Soviet oil production faced challenges due to overproduction, the post-1973 era allowed the Soviet Union to capitalise on rising oil revenues and bolster arms sales to Middle Eastern states, thereby intent on expanding its regional influence.¹⁴⁰ The influx of oil revenues transformed the economies of key Middle Eastern countries, facilitating modernisation of infrastructure, military expansion, and increased regional influence, rendering these nations increasingly valuable allies to both the US and the Soviet Union. These economic challenges contributed to perceptions of Western decline, deepening Cold War tensions as the US struggled to maintain dominance in the face of growing Soviet assertiveness in the region. This interplay of oil dynamics, Cold War rivalries, and regional politics in the early 1970s set the stage for the significant geopolitical developments surrounding the Yom Kippur War, ultimately shaping the subsequent course of Middle Eastern relations and superpower involvement.

The war unfolded in the backdrop of complex political upheavals in the Middle East, deeply intertwined with the broader Cold War dynamics between the United States and the Soviet Union. The US had long viewed Israel as a strategic ally, counterbalancing Soviet influence. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the US increasingly backed it with military and diplomatic support, especially as the Soviet Union aligned with various Arab nationalist regimes.¹⁴¹ During the Nixon administration, this US-Israeli alignment was solidified, as Washington saw Israel as crucial in maintaining regional stability and protecting American interests. Yet, the 1973 Yom Kippur War highlighted the limitations of this unilateral approach. Not only did the war's sudden outbreak and its aftermath underscore the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict(s), but it also challenged the US dominance as the

¹³⁸ *Ibid* 2., p.187.; and Deutch, J., and J. R. Schlesinger, "National Security Consequences of U.S. Oil Dependency", *Independent Task Force Report No. 58*, Council on Foreign Relations (2006).

¹³⁹ *Ibid* 2., p.196.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid* 2., p.195.

¹⁴¹ Slater J. (1991), *The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement: The Cold War Years*, Political Science Quarterly, p.575.

Soviet Union capitalised on their ties.¹⁴² In response, the US recalibrated its Middle East strategy, recognising the need for diplomatic engagement with Arab states. This shift became most evident with the Camp David Accords, where the US-brokered peace between Egypt and Israel, facilitated Egypt's transition from a Soviet ally to a critical US partner, marking a significant realignment and reducing Soviet influence. Simultaneously, the latter sought to reassert itself by strengthening alliances with radical Arab regimes, but despite these efforts, the Soviet Union faced growing internal and external challenges that constrained its ability to fully profit from the shifting regional dynamics.¹⁴³ These political upheavals not only intensified the Cold War competition in the region but also set the stage for ongoing geopolitical struggles, the effects of which continue to resonate in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts. The superpower rivalry that once defined the region, left behind a legacy of strategy alignments and confrontations, many of which persist in shaping modern geopolitical relations.

The Yom Kippur War is significant for its geopolitical ramifications, as well as for its military innovations and strategic insights. Although naval warfare plays a marginal role, it remains the first historical instance of battles involving missile boats.¹⁴⁴ The war also exposed serious flaws in Israel's defence preparations, revealing doctrinal deficiencies, while concurrently demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, from the Egyptian viewpoint, the Yom Kippur War was a significant political victory, even though it resulted in a military stalemate. The successful crossing of the Suez Canal and the initial victories against Israel bolstered Egypt's prestige within the Arab world, allowing it to recover some of the national pride lost in the 1967 defeat.¹⁴⁶ Under President Sadat, Egypt's agency in the conflict was defined by the use of both military and diplomatic strategies to gain both domestic and international advantages. Sadat leveraged the war to secure the return of the Sinai Peninsula and used Egypt's position in the Cold War to extract military aid and economic support from the US.¹⁴⁷ This war thus served as a turning point for Egypt's international posture, allowing Sadat to achieve long-term political goals, including economic liberalisation and the eventual peace agreement with Israel.

¹⁴² *Idem.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid* 8., p.577.

¹⁴⁴ Safran N. (1977), *Trial by Ordeal: The Yom Kippur War, October 1973*, International Security, p.167.

¹⁴⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁴⁶ Brownlee J. (2011), *Peace Before Freedom: Diplomacy and Repression in Sadat's Egypt*, Political Science Quarterly, Oxford University Press, p.651.

¹⁴⁷ *Idem.*

This shift also prompts the central question of this analysis: *How did Egypt's military strategy during the Yom Kippur War influence the balance of power between the superpowers in the context of Cold War dynamics?*

To address this question, it is necessary to first examine the role of Egypt in the Yom Kippur War and the regional strategy under President Sadat's regime (I), beginning with an overview of the 1973 war itself (1.1), then moving to the broader regional role of Egypt (1.2), and concluding with a focus on Sadat's military strategy (1.3). Then, Egypt's agency in balancing superpower influence will be explored (II), starting with an assessment of superpower interventions and strategic miscalculations (2.1), followed by an examination of Egypt's agency in navigating Cold War rivalries to its advantage (2.2), and lastly analysing the post-war consequences on Middle Eastern Cold War dynamics (2.3). This structure will provide a comprehensive understanding of how Egypt's actions contributed to shifting the regional balance of power and influenced the broader geopolitical landscape of the Cold War.

PART I - Egypt's Role in The Yom Kippur War and Regional Strategy under Anwar Sadat

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 (1.1) marked a significant turning point in Middle East history, igniting a series of geopolitical transformations that would shape the region for decades. In this context, the leadership of Anwar Sadat emerged as essential, as he sought to redefine Egypt's role and bolster its standing within the Arab world (1.2). Sadat's approach was characterised by a departure from his predecessor's strategies, aiming to reclaim lost territory and restore national pride. Central to this endeavour was Egypt's military strategy, which adopted a 'no-deterrence' doctrine (1.3), reflecting a bold commitment to engage directly in the conflict despite the risks involved.

1.1 The Yom Kippur War (1973)

The Yom Kippur War, fought from October 6 to 25, 1973, involved a series of military manoeuvres and strategies, reflecting both the immediate tactical concerns of the belligerents and the broader context of Cold War geopolitics. The war unfolded in four distinct stages, each characterised by shifting fortunes and decisions made by Israel and the Arab coalition of Egypt and Syria.

The conflict commenced on October 6, 1973, with a meticulously orchestrated surprise assault by Egypt and Syria. This initial phase aimed to exploit perceived vulnerabilities in Israel's security, a result of its prior confidence following the 1967 Six-Day War. President Sadat of Egypt, along with Syrian leadership, President al-Assad, sought to reclaim territory lost to Israel, specifically the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. The Arab coalition's strategy was based on leveraging Soviet military support and executing a limited war plan designed to achieve specific political objectives, rather than outright military defeat of Israel.¹⁴⁸ This coordinated offensive aimed to overwhelm Israeli defences and restore Arab pride by demonstrating military resolve. In contrast, Israel's response during the initial phase was hampered by shock and unpreparedness. The Israeli leadership, Golda Meir, underestimated the strength and determination of the Arab armies, leading to delays in mobilisation and a fragmented defence strategy. Israel's leaders were cautious about mobilising reserves or launching a preemptive strike, fearing repercussions from the US, their primary ally.¹⁴⁹ This hesitation reflected the broader geopolitical landscape, wherein Israel arguably sought to maintain its image as a defender rather than an aggressor. Consequently, the initial surprise attack by the Arab coalition marked a turning point, as Israel scrambled to respond to the unfolding crisis.¹⁵⁰

By October 9, 1973, Israel began to regroup and mount a counteroffensive, shifting its strategy from defence to a more aggressive posture. The Israeli military focused on leveraging its technological advantages and superior training in concentrated tank warfare and air superiority. This phase highlighted the critical role of foreign military support; while Arab forces received substantial aid from the Soviet Union, Israel's fortunes improved dramatically with American resupply efforts.¹⁵¹ The US response was indicative of Cold War dynamics, as superpower involvement directly influenced the battlefield outcomes, underscoring the geopolitical stakes in the region. As Israeli forces gradually pushed back against the Egyptian and Syrian advances, the impact of Cold War considerations became evident. On the one hand, the decisions made by both superpowers affected the operational capabilities of the belligerents, as shown by military support. On the other hand, the belligerents' choices escalated superpower involvement and dynamics, as illustrated by

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* 11., p.133.

¹⁴⁹ Brecher M. and Raz M. (1977), *Images and Behaviour: Israel's Yom Kippur Crisis 1973*, International Journal, Summer, Sage Publications, Ltd. on behalf of the Canadian International Council, p.475.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid* 11., pp.144-166.

¹⁵¹ *Idem*.

Israel's critical juncture with the US, as it primarily sought to regain lost territory and stabilise its front lines.¹⁵²

As the conflict progressed to mid-October, the war entered a phase characterised by a stalemate, with both sides suffering substantial losses. The front lines solidified along the Suez Canal and Golan Heights, and Israeli strategies increasingly focused on attrition and localised counterattacks, exploiting weaknesses within Arab formations. Meanwhile, the Arab States coordinated their military efforts, emphasising combined operations to maintain pressure on Israeli forces. This period can be described as one where both sides attempted to outmanoeuvre each other while sustaining heavy casualties.¹⁵³ During this phase, Cold War dynamics intensified, especially due to the mutual distrust between the US and the Soviet Union. This was particularly evident in their inability to convince the Egyptians to agree to a ceasefire on acceptable terms.¹⁵⁴ Diplomatic negotiations became intertwined with military manoeuvres, as both superpowers sought to avoid a confrontation that could escalate into a broader conflict. As noted by Brecher and Raz, the conflict stalemate was reflective of the complex interplay of military strategy and geopolitical calculations, with both sides navigating external expectations and pressure.¹⁵⁵

The war's concluding stage, from October 15 to 25, marked a significant shift as Israel regained its offensive capabilities. Utilising combined arms tactics that integrated air power with ground assaults, Israel crossed the Suez Canal and advanced into Egyptian territory intending to encircle the Egyptian Third Army.¹⁵⁶ This aggressive strategy sharply contrasted with the earlier phases of the conflict. Thus, despite initial successes by the Egyptian forces, the challenges they faced intensified, due to Israeli air superiority and the inability to adjust quickly to the evolving military situation. The dynamics of the war were further influenced by Cold War considerations, as US Secretary of State, Kissinger, engaged in shuttle diplomacy to emphasise the necessity of a ceasefire to prevent further escalation.¹⁵⁷ The war ultimately concluded with a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations, although not before Israel had achieved substantial territorial gains that altered the regional balance of power.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² *Ibid* 16., p.498.

¹⁵³ *Ibid* 11., pp.144-166.

¹⁵⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid* 16., p.499.

¹⁵⁶ Siniver A. (2013), *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy*, p.109.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid* 23., p.57.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid* 11., pp.167.

In retrospect, this overview of the Yom Kippur War illustrated a complex relationship between military strategies and Cold War dynamics, emphasising how superpower rivalries influence regional conflict. In this context, the strategies employed are particularly significant in light of Sadat's policies, as the latter reflects his broader vision for Egypt's role in the region and its relations with superpowers.

1.2 The Egypt of Anwar Sadat in the Middle Eastern Region

The evolution of Egypt's foreign policy from the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser to that of Anwar Sadat is a pivotal chapter in the geopolitical history of the Middle East, marked by significant shifts in alliances and strategic orientations. This transition set the stage for critical strategic decisions leading up to the Yom Kippur War, as Sadat sought to reclaim lost territory and restore Egypt's dignity.

The transition from Nasser to Sadat marked a shift in Egypt's political stance, particularly within the context of Cold War dynamics. Under Nasser, Egypt established itself as a pivotal Soviet ally, benefiting from substantial military and intelligence support during critical conflicts, notably in the 1967 war. Nasser's commitment to Arab socialism and unity resonated with the Soviet model of state control over the economy, bolstering Egypt's position as a leading Arab power despite the subsequent setbacks from the war.¹⁵⁹ However, Nasser's failure in the 1967 conflict diminished Egypt's influence, forcing Sadat to reassess the country's foreign alliances. Indeed, Sadat's pivot towards the United States represented a strategic departure from Nasser's policies. During and following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Sadat sought to recalibrate Egypt's role in the region by fostering closer relations with Washington. This realignment not only included a significant influx of military and economic aid but also served to reduce Soviet influence while enhancing US access to the region.¹⁶⁰ The Camp David Accord of 1978 embodied this shift, laying the groundwork for a new diplomatic framework in the region that would alter the trajectory of Arab-Israeli relations.¹⁶¹ Thus, the period from 1967 to 1977 saw the Egyptian-Israeli conflict unfold against the backdrop of these evolving alliances. Key events during this time, such as the loss of Sinai in

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid* 2., p.647.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid* 2., p.644.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid* 2., p.645.

1967, the restoration of national pride in 1973, and Sadat's peace initiative in 1977, were influenced by Nasser's legacy and mainly Cold War dynamics.¹⁶²

Furthermore, Sadat's foreign policy was significantly shaped by economic considerations, marking a deliberate shift from Soviet reliance towards a closer partnership with the US. This strategic pivot was not merely political but also aimed at securing vital economic aid; Egypt benefited from substantial US financial assistance following the Yom Kippur War.¹⁶³ The culmination of this shift was embodied by the abrogation of the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1976, which underscored Egypt's growing frustration with Soviet ineffectiveness in addressing its military and economic needs.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, Sadat's 'October Paper' of 1974 reflected his commitment to economic and social reforms, advocating for decentralisation and increased foreign investment. According to Rubinstein, although the implementation of these reforms faced challenges, they signalled a departure from Nasser's state-centric model towards a more liberalised economic approach. Despite the advantages of this realignment, Sadat faced substantial domestic criticism for his drastic foreign policy changes. Some critics argue that closer ties with the US compromised relations with the Soviet Union and alienated traditional Arab allies like Libya and Syria.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the domestic opposition to Sadat remains rooted in economic grievances rather than purely foreign policy concerns, illustrating the multifaceted nature of political discontent.

Finally, in the context of the Yom Kippur War, the decision for Sadat to go to war was a culmination of various strategic calculations, influenced heavily by Cold War dynamics. Despite facing internal dissent, Sadat concluded that military action was necessary to alter the diplomatic impasse resulting from ongoing negotiations with Israel.¹⁶⁶ Thus, the expulsion of Soviet forces in 1972 and a renewed reliance on US diplomacy shaped his approach, compelling him to prepare for conflict as a means of changing the balance of power.¹⁶⁷ By April 1973, Israeli intelligence reports indicated a significant military build-up in Egypt, supported by military equipment from Arab allies. This build-up, prompted by dissatisfaction with diplomatic failures, was closely intertwined with the Cold War context, as both the Soviets and the US played a crucial role.¹⁶⁸ Despite the awareness among Israeli leaders that

¹⁶² Bar-Joseph U. (2006), *Last Chance to Avoid War: Sadat's Peace Initiative of February 1973 and its Failure*, Journal of Contemporary History, Sage Publication, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, p.545.

¹⁶³ Rubinstein A.Z. (1977), *The Egypt of Anwar Sadat*, Current History, The Middle East, p.37.

¹⁶⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid* 30., p.39.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid* 29., p.547.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid* 29., p.552.

rejecting Sadat's peace overtures could lead to military confrontation, their confidence, bolstered by US support, led them to dismiss the possibility of war, setting the stage for the eventual outbreak of hostilities.¹⁶⁹ In retrospect, Sadat's strategic choices and the resulting military conflict were instrumental in reshaping the political landscape of the Middle East, illustrating the intricate interplay between domestic ambitions and international relations during a transformative era.

In summary, Sadat's foreign policy, contrasting with Nasser's regime, and driven by the need to restore national pride and stabilise the economy, ultimately led to the decision to engage in the Yom Kippur War. This policy is evident in Egypt's military strategy, which adopted a 'no-deterrence' tactic while coordinating with Syria and other Arab states within the context of Cold War dynamics.

1.3 'No-Deterrence': Egypt's Military Strategy

Egypt's military strategy during the Yom Kippur War was defined by a 'no-deterrence' approach, which aimed to engage Israeli forces boldly without traditional deterrent measures. Coordination with Syrian forces highlighted a unified Arab effort to exploit Israeli vulnerabilities through synchronised operations. Lastly, Egypt grappled with a strategic dilemma regarding Jordan's involvement, balancing the advantages of collaboration with the complexities of regional and global alliances.

Egypt's military strategy revolved around a deliberate choice to adopt a 'no-deterrence' tactic'. Sadat's decision to launch a full-scale war on October 6, was driven by the belief that Egypt's military capacity and capability were underestimated by Israel and the US.¹⁷⁰ Despite lacking the long-range bombers and Scud missiles deemed necessary for an effective military engagement by Israeli intelligence, Egyptian leadership chose to execute a surprise attack. This bold decision disrupted Israeli expectations and demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of regional military dynamics.¹⁷¹ This strategy involved crossing the Suez Canal, an operation that took advantage of surface-to-air missile protection to counter Israel's air superiority. This initial success not only showcased the sophistication of Egyptian military planning but also fundamentally reshaped perceptions of Arab military capabilities in the region. By launching a surprise attack, Egypt disrupted Israeli expectations

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid* 29., p.555.

¹⁷⁰ Kahana E. (2002), *Early warning versus concept: the case of the Yom Kippur War 1973*, Intelligence and National Security, p.84.

¹⁷¹ *Idem*.

and forced both the United States and the Soviet Union to recalibrate their roles in the ongoing Middle Eastern conflict.¹⁷² The effectiveness of Egypt's military approach in the war highlighted the limitations of Israeli intelligence, which failed to adequately assess the changing dynamics on the grounds. This led to significant military setbacks for Israel, illustrating the strategic importance of Egypt's no-deterrence policy. In this situation, the familiar deterrence strategies of the Cold War proved to be ineffective for Egypt, irrespective of superpower involvement.

Another critical aspect of Egypt's military strategy during the Yom Kippur War was its coordination with Syrian forces, which exemplified a strategic approach to leverage regional alliances among the complexities of Cold War dynamics. The simultaneous military actions taken by both Egypt and Syria were designed to exploit weaknesses within Israel's defence system, thereby enhancing their overall effectiveness. This cooperation allowed for a more robust offensive strategy, as both nations aimed to reclaim lost territories and challenge Israeli military dominance in the region.¹⁷³ Moreover, Egypt's coordination with Syria was particularly strategic given the backdrop of the Cold War, where military actions were not only about territorial gain but also about broader geopolitical manoeuvring. The effective use of Soviet-supplied air defence systems by both countries played a crucial role in mitigating Israel's superior air power, allowing them to conduct operations more effectively within the contested landscape, and it also asserted the regional and global relations.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, this coordination was not without its challenges. The effectiveness of their collaboration was somewhat undermined by a lack of comprehensive integration and communication between the two militaries, particularly as the conflict evolved. While both countries shared the common objective of challenging Israel, their military strategies often remained somewhat disparate, with Egypt focusing on its own operational goals and Syria trying to capitalise on Egyptian momentum.¹⁷⁵

Lastly, Egypt demanded help from other Arab states, such as Jordan, which ended up facing a strategic dilemma. In fact, during both the Six-Day War, 1967, and the Yom Kippur War, 1973, King Hussein faced considerable domestic and international pressure to engage Israel militarily, particularly from the Palestinian population. Moreover, the Arab states surrounding Jordan also expected King Hussein to support Egypt and Syria in their

¹⁷² *Ibid* 11., pp.136-138.

¹⁷³ Rodman D. (2012), *Friendly Enemies: Israel and Jordan in the 1973 Yom Kippur War*, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, p.91.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid* 11., p.136.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid* 11., p.163.

coordinated attack.¹⁷⁶ However, the historical context of Jordan's prior military losses to Israel, created a strong deterrence effect, which made Hussein cautious about direct involvement in the conflict.¹⁷⁷ This reluctance was compounded by the geopolitical climate of the Cold War, where both the United States and the Soviet Union sought to influence Jordan's actions. On October 9, a Soviet envoy attempted to persuade Hussein to join the war, while Washington exerted pressure on Jordan to remain neutral, warning of severe repercussions if Jordan opened a third front against Israel.¹⁷⁸ As the Yom Kippur War progressed and the military situation for Egypt and Syria began to deteriorate, King Hussein found it increasingly difficult to maintain a position of non-involvement. By October 10, both Egypt and Syria began pressuring Jordan to send military forces to the Golan Heights to assist their efforts. Ultimately, Hussein agreed to deploy an armoured brigade to support Syrian forces, although this was done with a careful understanding of the need to avoid direct clashes with Israeli troops.¹⁷⁹ As advanced by Rodman, Jordan participation in the war can be viewed as a form of 'damage limitation', an effort to appease domestic pressures while maintaining a cautious stance to protect his regime's stability. By the end of the conflict, Jordan's limited involvement was a reflection of both its strategic calculations and the broader geopolitical constraints imposed by the Cold War, revealing the complexities faced by smaller states among the regional dynamics of the time.

In sum, Egypt's military strategy during the Yom Kippur War was marked by a decisive rejection of conventional deterrence principles, which allowed for a successful surprise attack that caught Israeli forces off guard. By effectively coordinating with Syrian forces and navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, Egypt demonstrated its ability to reshape regional dynamics and assert its military capabilities. Ultimately, the war highlighted not only Egypt's strategic planning and operational adaptability but also the limitations of Israeli intelligence, setting the stage for future diplomatic negotiations and navigating the balance of power in the Middle East.

PART II - Egypt's Agency in Balancing Superpower Influence in The Yom Kippur War

Superpowers, as defined by Efrat, are not characterised by territorial control or direct sovereignty over other nations, but by their ability to exert influence across global political,

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid* 40., p.91.

¹⁷⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* 40., p.94.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid* 40., p.96.

military, and economic domains.¹⁸⁰ Both the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as global superpowers post-World War II, shaping international politics through alliances, proxy wars, and ideological confrontations. However, despite their vast capabilities, the superpowers often found themselves unable to manage regional complexities or stabilise global affairs effectively (2.1). In the Middle East, Egypt played a pivotal role in navigating the influence of these superpowers, particularly during the Yom Kippur War (2.2). The post-war consequences had profound implications on Cold War geopolitics, reshaping alliances and further complicating the dominance of superpower influence in the region (2.3).

2.1 Superpowers Interventions and Miscalculations

Both the United States and the Soviet Union were deeply invested in the outcome of the conflict, which pitted Egypt and Syria against Israel. Egypt's strategy during the war was not only about confronting Israel but also about positioning itself in the wider Cold War context, where the US and Soviet Union vied for influence over the region.

From the outset of the conflict, Egypt aligned itself strategically with the Soviet Union, which had long been a primary supplier for military aid to the Arab states. As part of its broader Cold War strategy, the Soviet Union saw Egypt as a key regional ally, providing not only significant arms but also intelligence and logistical support in the lead-up to the Yom Kippur War.¹⁸¹ Soviet backing was essential for Egypt and Syria, who were determined to reverse the territorial losses suffered during the Six-Day War of 1967. In the months preceding the conflict, Egypt and Syria strengthened their coordination, thanks in large part to Soviet advisors, who played an instrumental role in planning the attack on Israel, bolstering Egypt's capabilities and confidence on the battlefield.¹⁸² As the war progressed, the Soviet Union found itself drawn deeper into the conflict. Sadat had calculated that Soviet backing would deter Israel from launching a retaliatory offensive of overwhelming force, and for a time, the Soviets were willing to provide the necessary military resupply to ensure that Egypt and Syria could continue their campaigns.¹⁸³ However, Soviet involvement came with a delicate balance. Moscow was eager to prevent a total Arab defeat but equally determined to avoid direct confrontation with the United States. By October 24, the conflict reached a critical point when the Soviet Union threatened unilateral intervention, increasing its naval

¹⁸⁰ Efrat M. (1991), *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence*, p.74.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid* 16., p.475.

¹⁸² *Ibid* 11., p.140.

¹⁸³ *Ibid* 1., p.92

presence in the Mediterranean and putting airborne divisions on high alert.¹⁸⁴ The Soviet leadership's warning of military action if Israel continued its advance underscored the Cold War tactics at play. However, despite this posturing, Moscow ultimately refrained from further escalation, wary of provoking a direct superpower clash with the United States.¹⁸⁵ In the end, the Soviet Union's role in the conflict was one of overstretched ambition. Its extensive military assistance to Egypt and Syria had helped to prolong war, but its unwillingness to directly intervene left the Arab states vulnerable to Israeli counter offensives. Although the Soviets had succeeded in asserting their influence in the region, their support for Egypt and Syria ultimately fell short of achieving the decisive victory Sadat and al-Assad had hoped for. Moscow's credibility as a reliable ally was diminished, and its influence in the Middle East began to wane in the aftermath of the conflict.¹⁸⁶

The United States, meanwhile, initially approached the Yom Kippur War with significant miscalculations. Washington intelligence had failed to anticipate the full scale of Egypt's military ambitions, largely underestimating Sadat's willingness to engage in a major conflict. This oversight was rooted in the Nixon administration's broader Cold War strategy, which prioritised containing Soviet influence in the Middle East, while maintaining stability in its alliances with both Israel and pro-western Arab states. In the lead-up to the war, US policymakers, including Kissinger, assumed that Israel's military superiority would deter any serious challenge from Egypt or Syria. This complacency, combined with Kissinger's 'stalemate policy', which aimed to maintain the status quo rather than push for meaningful peace negotiations, contributed to the outbreak of the war.¹⁸⁷ When Egypt and Syria launched their coordinated attack, Washington was caught off guard. Despite these setbacks, Kissinger remained convinced that Israel would ultimately prevail, delaying any decisive US intervention.¹⁸⁸ The US response was initially cautious, with the Nixon administration balancing its support for Israel against the risk of provoking an oil embargo from the Arab states and further inflaming tensions with the Soviet Union. As the war intensified, the United States was forced to confront the limits of its non-interventionist stance. The Arab oil embargo, imposed in retaliation for US support of Israel, placed enormous economic pressure on the West, marking a turning point in the US engagement in the Middle East.¹⁸⁹ Ultimately,

¹⁸⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁸⁵ Rodman D. (2001), *The United States, Israel, and the Yom Kippur War*, Midstream a monthly Jewish review, p.18.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid* 8., p.561.

¹⁸⁷ Vanetik B. and Shalmon Z. (2011), *The White House Middle East Policy in 1973 as a Catalyst for the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War*, Israel Studies, p.55

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid* 23., p.90.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid* 1., p.93.

the US recognised that continued Israeli losses would threaten not only its Cold War interests but also the survival of its ally. Thus, on October 12, Washington initiated an airlift of military supplies to Israel, a move marked by a significant shift in US policy. By providing Israel with critical military aid, the United States ensured that Israel could turn the tide of the war, while simultaneously positioning itself as a key player in post-war negotiations.¹⁹⁰ The US intervention, though belated, was decisive in shaping the conflict's outcome. However, the Nixon administration's initial miscalculations and delayed response revealed the complexities of managing Cold War diplomacy in the region, where strategic alliances often clashed with economic and political realities.

Finally, the war not only transformed Egypt's relations with the superpowers but also reshaped the dynamics between the superpowers themselves. While both superpowers had long vied for influence in the Middle East, the conflict exposed the limitations of their respective strategies. For the Soviet Union, the war highlighted the difficulties of sustaining its role as the primary patron of the Arab states. As Moscow's attempt to assert its authority through threats of unilateral intervention fell flat, the war revealed the fragility of Soviet influence in the Middle East. Hence, Egypt, under Sadat's leadership, began to pivot away from Moscow in favour of closer ties with Washington.¹⁹¹ Conversely, the Nixon administration, while initially reluctant to become embroiled in another Middle Eastern conflict, recognised that its strategic interests required a more proactive approach. Sadat's eventual decision to break with the Soviet Union and seek US mediation in peace negotiations further solidified America's growing influence.¹⁹²

To summarise, the war exposed the limits of Cold War bipolarity in managing regional conflicts. Despite their influence, neither the US nor the Soviet Union could fully control the outcomes of local disputes. Both had to balance their regional allies' interests while avoiding direct confrontation. Ultimately, Egypt shifted towards the US, diminishing Soviet influence. This realignment highlighted Egypt's agency in navigating superpower dynamics, marking a turning point in Cold War politics in the Middle East.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid* 52., p.19.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid* 40., p.97.

¹⁹² *Ibid* 23., p.50.

2.2 Egypt's Agency in Navigating Superpowers Influence

As a key player in the Middle East, Egypt demonstrated notable agency in navigating its relationships with both the Soviet Union and the United States. The Yom Kippur War embodied Egypt's ability to influence global powers and regional outcomes through a combination of military strategy and diplomatic manoeuvres.

Egypt's agency was evident in its calculated engagement with both superpowers, seeking to maximise national interests while avoiding dependence on any single foreign power. Under Nasser, Egypt embraced Soviet support when Western powers, particularly the US, refused to sell arms. This marked the beginning of a relationship with the Soviet Union that would involve substantial military and economic assistance.¹⁹³ However, despite its reliance on Soviet resources, Egypt maintained a degree of independence, illustrated by its decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, asserting control over its own affairs and challenging Western influence.¹⁹⁴ Nasser's vision of pan-Arab unity, grounded in anti-colonialism and nationalism, allowed Egypt to assert leadership in the region while keeping superpower rivalry at bay.¹⁹⁵ Anwar Sadat, demonstrated even greater flexibility in realigning Egypt's international alliances. Though he inherited a strong relationship with the Soviet Union, Sadat sought to pivot Egypt towards the West, especially the US, recognising the limits of Soviet support. This culminated in the expulsion of Soviet advisors in 1972, an act that showcased Egypt's growing autonomy and desire to reconfigure its alliances.¹⁹⁶ Sadat's decision to launch the war was not merely a military endeavour but also a strategic move in response to Egypt's diminished credibility in the global Cold War landscape. According to Rodeman, by compelling the US to intervene diplomatically, Egypt was able to leverage superpower involvement to its advantage.

Furthermore, Sadat's shift away from Moscow was driven by several factors, including dissatisfaction with Soviet restrictions on arms supplies and pressure for political concessions. Soviet support during the 1973 war, while essential, was also constrained by Moscow's desire to avoid direct confrontation with the US.¹⁹⁷ This created frustration within the Egyptian leadership, leading Sadat to seek greater autonomy in shaping Egypt's future.

¹⁹³ Erdoğan Şafak A. (2024), *The Soviets and Arab Republics' Alliance Amid Cold War Dynamics*, Avrasya Etüdleri, p.98.

¹⁹⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid* 60., p.93.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid* 60., p.94.

¹⁹⁷ Soueidan M.H. (2021), *Superpower Dominance: The Yom Kippur Case*, Technium Social Sciences Journal, p.670.

The expulsion of Soviet advisors in 1972, though initially misinterpreted by Israel as a sign of weakness, was a calculated move to assert Egypt's independence and court US support.¹⁹⁸ Additionally, the war exemplified Sadat's ability to use regional conflict as a diplomatic tool. By initiating the war, he aimed to force the superpowers, particularly the US, to engage more actively in peace negotiations. The war's outcome, including the US-brokered ceasefire and subsequent peace talks, positioned Egypt as a key player in Cold War diplomacy, while diminishing Soviet influence in the region.¹⁹⁹ This strategic recalibration not only altered Egypt's relationship with the superpowers but also set the for a broader realignment of alliances in the Middle East. The shifting alliances had broader consequences for Cold War politics. The Soviet Union's support for Arab states had been a cornerstone of its strategy to expand its influence in the Middle East. However, the limitations of Soviet power became apparent during and after the Yom Kippur War, as Moscow struggled to maintain its foothold in the region while avoiding a direct confrontation with the US. The war escalated tensions between superpowers, with the Soviet proposal for joint peacekeeping operations being rejected by the US, leading to, according to Soueidan: 'one of the most serious US-Soviet confrontations since the Cuban Missile Crisis.'²⁰⁰

In the aftermath of the war, Egypt's realignment with the US contributed to the erosion of Soviet influence in the Arab world, with other regional powers reassessing their alliances. Consequently, Egypt's ability to navigate these shifting dynamics, asserting its agency in foreign policy played a notable role in shaping the trajectory of Cold War alliances in the region.

2.3 Post-War Consequences on Middle East Cold War Dynamics

The strategic decisions of Anwar Sadat not only reshaped Egypt's military stance but also fundamentally altered its diplomatic relations within the Arab world and with superpowers. The implications of these changes reverberate throughout the region, influencing Arab-Israeli relations and the broader geopolitical landscape.

The 1973 war initially showcased Egypt's military capability through its surprise offensive across the Suez Canal, marking a significant shift in the narrative surrounding Arab military prowess. This operation caught Israel off guard and demonstrated Egypt's ability to

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid* 16., p.480.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid* 40., p.97.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid* 63., p.672.

penetrate Israel's previously considered impregnable defences, thereby shattering the myth of Israeli invincibility that had prevailed since the 1967 Six-Day War.²⁰¹ As mentioned before, this military endeavour was not merely about reclaiming territory; it was a calculated political move by Sadat to re-establish Egypt's position as an effective player in regional and global politics. The war's early successes provided Egypt with the leverage necessary to engage in diplomatic negotiations with both Israel and the United States. Yet, Sadat recognised that military victories alone could not resolve the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict. Hence, he sought a diplomatic resolution that would culminate in the Camp David Accords of 1978. These agreements ultimately led to the peace treaty signed in 1979, making Egypt the first Arab nation to officially recognise Israel.²⁰² This shift was not without consequences, as it triggered a wave of criticism from other Arab states, which viewed Sadat's actions as a betrayal of pan-Arab unity. Economically, the war imposed heavy burdens on Egypt, mirroring the military expenditures faced by Israel. In the aftermath, Sadat implemented his 'open door policy', aiming at attracting foreign investment and bolstering the economy, particularly through alignment with Washington.²⁰³ Consequently, the influx of American aid following the peace treaty altered Egypt's economic landscape, allowing it to recover from the war while simultaneously distancing itself from its previous Soviet alliances.²⁰⁴

In the broader context of Arab-Israeli relations, the Yom Kippur War served as a pivotal moment that catalysed a shift in diplomatic strategies among Arab states. Prior to 1973, the prevailing consensus among Arab nations was encapsulated in the 'three no' policy, established at the 1967 Khartoum Conference: 'no peace with Israel, no negotiations and no recognition.'²⁰⁵ However, the war's outcome prompted a reassessment of this stance, with Egypt emerging as a case study for pursuing diplomatic solutions over military confrontations. The initial military successes instilled a renewed sense of Arab pride, countering the narrative of defeat that had dominated the previous decade. Yet, despite Egypt's apparent gains, the subsequent peace treaty did not lead to a wider Arab-Israeli rapprochement. Instead, violence escalated in the region, exacerbated by Israel's continued settlement activities in the West Bank and its annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.²⁰⁶ Moreover, public opinion in Egypt remained sceptical about the treaty's long-term

²⁰¹ Jackson H.F. (1982), *Egypt and the United States after Sadat: Continuity and Constraints*, A Journal of Opinion, p.70.

²⁰² *Idem*.

²⁰³ Korany B. (1983), *The Cold Peace, the Sixth Arab-Israeli War, and Egypt's Public*, International Journal, The Middle East after Lebanon, p.656.

²⁰⁴ *Idem*.

²⁰⁵ Hattis Rolef S. (1999), *The domestic fallout of the Yom Kippur War*, Israel Affairs, p.183.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid* 70., p.653.

viability. Many Egyptians felt disillusioned, perceiving no tangible improvement in their living conditions following the agreement. Additionally, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 further fueled this opposition, reducing the relationship between Egypt and Israel to a state of non-belligerency rather than a genuine peace.²⁰⁷ Hence, the disconnect between Sadat's diplomatic ambitions and the realisations of public sentiments highlighted the complex dynamics of Egyptian politics in the post-war era.

Thus, Sadat's diplomatic overture to the US following the war reflected a broader realignment of power within the region but surely came at a cost. As Egypt's pivot towards the US alienated it from many Arab nations, the Camp David Accords strained relations with the Soviet Union and led Egypt to a suspension from the Arab League. In fact, other Arab states denounced Sadat's peace initiative as treachery.²⁰⁸ This shift exacerbated existing tensions in the region, especially giving Egypt's support for certain African leaders, such as Habré in Chad, placing it at odds with leaders like Qaddafi in Libya.²⁰⁹

In summary, the Yom Kippur War marked a turning point in the dynamics of the Middle East, fundamentally reshaping Egypt's military strategy, Arab-Israeli relations, and the influence of superpowers in the region. Sadat's diplomatic manoeuvres, while initially promising, exposed the complexities of achieving lasting peace among entrenched regional divisions and superpower rivalries.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the Yom Kippur War serves as a pivotal case study in understanding the intricate relationship between military strategy and Cold War dynamics, particularly regarding how these elements influenced the balance of power between superpowers. Anwar Sadat's approach marked a sharp departure from the policies of his predecessor, Abdel Nasser, reflecting a nuanced understanding of Egypt's position within a complex geopolitical landscape. Sadat's decision to engage in the war was not solely a military undertaking, it represented a broader vision to restore national pride, reclaim lost territory, and stabilise Egypt's economy. His foreign policy was characterised by a rejection of conventional deterrence principles, stemming from the perception that his capability and capacity were not taken seriously. That was evidenced by Egypt's surprise attack on Israeli forces in October

²⁰⁷ *Ibid* 68., p.73.

²⁰⁸ *Idem.*

²⁰⁹ *Idem.*

1973, which demonstrated a calculated risk that ultimately reshaped the regional balance of power. Moreover, Egypt's military strategy during the war involved significant coordination with Syria and other Arab states, illustrating how local actors could influence the geopolitical framework of the Cold War. This collaborative effort highlighted Egypt's emerging agency in a landscape dominated by superpower rivalry. The successful execution of the surprise attack not only caught Israeli forces off guard but also underscored the limitations of Israeli intelligence capabilities. By asserting its military abilities, Egypt positioned itself as a pivotal actor capable of challenging established power dynamics, thereby compelling both the US and the Soviet Union to reassess their roles in the region.

The aftermath of the war revealed the constraints of Cold War bipolarity in effectively managing regional conflicts. Despite their considerable influence, neither superpower could fully dictate the outcomes of local disputes or guarantee stability among their allies. This period witnessed a notable shift as Egypt gradually pivoted towards the United States, diminishing Soviet influence in the region. The limitations of Soviet power became increasingly evident as Moscow struggled to maintain its position among the evolving dynamics, leading to a reassessment of alliances between other Arab states. Egypt's strategic recalibration signalled a broader realignment within Middle Eastern politics, as nations began to reconsider their affiliations in light of Sadat's diplomatic overtures and the emerging. However, this pivot came with significant costs. Sadat's peace initiatives, culminating in the Camp David Accords, alienated Egypt from many Arab nations, resulting in its suspension from the Arab League and accusations of treachery from other states. The resulting isolation further exacerbated existing regional tensions, particularly as Egypt supported specific leaders, placing it at odds with radical factions. Thus, while Sadat's diplomatic manoeuvres initially held the promise of a new era in Arab-Israeli relations, they also illuminated the complexities of achieving enduring peace among entrenched regional divisions and superpower rivalries.

Consequently, Egypt's military strategy during the Yom Kippur War not only reshaped its own national trajectory but also significantly influenced the balance of power between superpowers in the Cold War context. By navigating the intricate dynamics of military engagement and diplomacy, Sadat emerged as an essential player who altered the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, showcasing Egypt's capacity to assert its agency and redefine its role on the world stage.

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