

# The Prophets of War

Peretz Kidron

War may be launched by the Arabs in six, nine, or twelve months' time," warned Israel's Defense Minister, Shimon Peres, just nine months after the end of the October, 1973, war, and only a few weeks after Syrian and Israeli forces disengaged from the Golan Heights cease-fire lines. A couple of days after Peres's statement, commander-in-chief "Motta" Gur was a little more precise: "The Arabs," he stated, "may start a war at the end of 1974."

Jewish tradition holds that ever since the destruction of the Second Temple prophecy has become the province of fools and infants. But after four or five Mideast confrontations in under three decades predictions of war have been too often verified to be lightly shrugged off as either childish or stupid. When their defense chief played Jeremiah, pinpointing specific dates, the highly sensitized Israelis began to prick up their ears.

Some cynics dismissed the warnings as a self-serving ploy. "After all," shrugged one Tel Aviv journalist, "you musn't forget that Peres and Gur hold their present jobs largely due to the fact that their predecessors *didn't* take the likelihood of war seriously." In those far-off, complacent days of September, 1973, when Moshe Dayan was pooh-poohing the possibility of an impending Arab offensive, Peres was only a rather inept Communications Minister, and Gur no higher up in the military hierarchy than the military attaché's office in Washington. But after a discredited Dayan was driven from the Defense Ministry shortly after the forced resignation of commander-in-chief David ("We'll break their bones!") Elazar, the men catapulted into their places could only conclude that cocky self-confidence had gone out of fashion.

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PERETZ KIDRON, a freelance Israeli journalist and translator, is active in the Tel Aviv chapter of SIAH, Israel's New Left organization.

Gloomy warnings were, it seemed, a guarantee of job security. In Israel the "Wolf! Wolf!" legend has been reversed.

War talk, the cynics noted further, has its practical uses. As the Israeli government showered the U.S. with requests for massive military and financial backing, the war alarm could be expected to alert Israel's American sympathizers and engender beneficial Congressional pressure on the Administration on Israel's behalf. On another "practical" plane: The cabinet of which Peres is a leading member is balanced precariously on a slim parliamentary majority. To stress external dangers, with the implied need for closing national ranks, may shield the government from some harassment by the opposition.

Realpolitik aside, gloomy forecasts are tailor-made for the current climate of opinion in Israel. Ever since the Yom Kippur War the popular mood has been somber in the extreme. In the course of this past summer, the 1973 war dead were removed from their temporary graves for reinterment in military cemeteries. Tens of thousands attended the ceremonies, reliving their anguish and bereavement. Many people have yet to recover from the trauma of an attack they had not been led to expect, compounded by their loss of security on discovering that Israeli military superiority was not unquestioned. There are angry memories of the pre-1973 government and its boundless self-confidence. "Our situation has never been better"—a favorite boast of the Golda Meir Administration—has become a bitter jest, part of the wave of macabre humor sweeping the country. ("Follow me!"—renowned as the call of officers leading their men into battle—will, it is said, now be the inscription on military tombstones. . . .) Churchillian promises of blood, sweat, and tears appear most suited to the heightened siege mentality now replacing the doubts and questioning of the post-Yom Kippur months.

While Israel's leaders may have all kinds of extraneous inducements for creating a war scare—like all politicians they are complex beings, and their position is far from easy—it would be foolish to dismiss their predictions as groundless. Enormous quantities of sophisticated weapons are pouring into the Middle East. Syria, Egypt, and Israel have replaced all the weapons they lost in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and, in many ways, their armies are better equipped now. Thus Israeli sources report that Syria, which had 330 warplanes before that war, now possesses 400, including the advanced MIG 23. As they did in 1973, the Syrians can deploy the awesome might of 2,000 Soviet tanks, and they have 40 SAM anti-aircraft missile batteries, five more than they then had. The Egyptians have fared slightly less well, after incurring Soviet displeasure by their flirtations with the Americans. The Russians curtailed their arms deliveries to make Egypt pay for the embraces Sadat showered on Kissinger (approximately one MIG per hug). All the same, Israel reports that Egypt has as many tanks (2,500) as in 1973, and only slightly fewer planes (560, down from 650).

Israel itself has not remained empty-handed. The \$2.2 billion of special aid voted by the U.S. Congress has enabled her to recoup her Yom Kippur losses, and supplies include sophisticated weapons Israel had not previously received. Rabin's visit to Washington in September was rewarded with an American promise of 50 Phantom jets, to be delivered by mid-1975. Israel's defense expenditure is now running at \$4 billion annually, and U.S. intelligence studies consider that Israel is much stronger relative to 1973.

With hands on such quantities of lethal hardware, fingers are itchy on both sides, and each side has a number of persuasive reasons for squeezing the trigger. As a result of the 1973 war the Egyptians are on the East Bank of the Suez Canal, the Syrians are back in Kuneitra, and Golda Meir is a suburban housewife in Ramat Aviv. After witnessing such beneficial results the Arabs may be inclined to apply the prescription as before, especially as Dr. Kissinger's jet-propelled treatment has been slow to cure their ailments.

Israel too has her temptations. The balance was tilting strongly in her favor during the last week of the Yom Kippur fighting, and her commanders are convinced that the cease-fire imposed by Kissinger and Brezhnev robbed them of an overwhelming 1967-type victory. Their feeling of unfinished business has left them frustrated, and at least one high officer has been overheard praying for "forty-eight hours to settle accounts with the Syrians." Aside from their desire to "get their own back" for the early Yom Kippur setbacks, they could have solid strategic reasons for a lightning thrust to smash Syria's army now, before it gets any stronger. Such a campaign could at least temporarily check the war-making

capacity of Israel's stubborn adversary.

Whichever side struck first, whether Israel or the Arabs, it would present its onslaught as a preemptive attack, designed to forestall warlike preparations by its enemies. In either case it would be hard to fault the contention. Each army is preparing for a next round which it considers inevitable, if not downright desirable. On neither side do the military leaders display much faith in a negotiated settlement. Why waste time in the conference chamber when the battlefield beckons?

Fortunately, there are also factors that impede the drift to war, at least temporarily. Both sides have good reason to pause before flinging themselves once more into the fray.

Whatever their nonmilitary achievements in 1973, the Arabs know their armies suffered severe setbacks. Without the advantage of total surprise (and they cannot hope to catch Israel napping a second time), they would be hard put to repeat even the limited gains of the Yom Kippur War. But they have a more fundamental problem: Ironically, the political and diplomatic victories won by united Arab efforts have sown disunity and doubt. Like the hapless Syrian tank commander who reputedly lost his head when his forces gained their objective in eighteen hours instead of the planned thirty, they have been rendered undecided and bewildered by their very successes. As a result they seem inclined to wait and see what can be obtained from political and economic pressure on the United States Government, while retaining the option of reapplying the Yom Kippur formula of war-plus-boycott should diplomatic efforts fail. This is the line advocated by President Sadat, who recently told Western newsmen he was confident of a peaceful solution, but if that did not come about, "the Arab world would take the path of war." However reluctantly, the mistrustful Syrians are likely to follow Egypt's lead and for the time being maintain the present truce.

Nor is Israel as ready for immediate war as her leaders would like to pretend. The heavy casualties of 1973 have left large gaps in her elite units. Skilled tank crews are not created overnight, and training pilots is a long and arduous process. Losses were especially heavy among junior commanders, and the current efforts to persuade reserve officers to reenlist indicate a continuing shortage.

The situation is no less grave in the top military echelons: Some senior officers fell in the war, others were forced to resign in the personal and political upheavals which followed it. Of the brilliant group of commanders who conducted the Six-Day War there is now scarcely a trace. The present commander-in-chief was only a brigade commander in 1967 and all his former superiors have left the service. This swift turnover was once a source of pride for the Israeli army, which sent its senior officers

into early retirement and rapidly promoted their subordinates as a kind of elixir of youth for its high command. But in 1973 the system didn't work: Some young and untried officers blundered severely when placed in senior commands.

Israel's army can overcome these weaknesses, but it may take some time before it becomes once more a superb fighting machine which the political leaders can depend upon. Another time-consuming process was hinted at by Premier Rabin when he said that "if Israel's youth are again called upon to fight, they must be convinced that they are fighting because there is no alternative." In plain words, because the Yom Kippur War eroded public confidence, Israel's leadership is under close scrutiny by its citizens. If it became evident that the Rabin government did not do the utmost to achieve a negotiated settlement and embarked instead on a premature military adventure, it might provoke Israel's war-weary youth to a rebellious backlash, with far-reaching consequences for the country's political future. Over such weighty military and political considerations Israel's leadership will be in no hurry to take large-scale military action; instead, it will give, or at least appear to give, peace negotiations a fair chance.

The coming months will probably see the sides engaged in "jaw not war." But many of the obstacles to renewed fighting are of a temporary nature. Once the military machines are in full working order and the appropriate psychological climate is created, the conflict could explode again, unless the diplomats defuse it in time. The Arabs declare there will be no peace unless Israel withdraws from the territory she occupied in 1967. Above all they are committed to support "the legitimate rights of the Palestine Arab people"—a formula which most interpret as permitting the Palestinians the option of establishing an independent state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israel is now prepared to concede far less, and demands in return clear Arab commitment to a cessation of hostilities. While Israel's government is probably prepared to placate the Egyptians by relinquishing much, though not all, of Sinai, it has repeatedly stated that there will be no further withdrawal from the Golan Heights; in which case, not only is a settlement with Syria out of the question, but Egypt's leaders will scarcely dare to abandon their allies by concluding a separate agreement with Israel.

Likewise, Rabin's position on the Palestinian question is clear and uncompromising. In his first policy statement to the Knesset he rejected the notion of negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Recently he went even further: While his predecessor, Golda Meir, denied the existence of "a so-called Palestinian people," Rabin avoided such ethnic philosophizing. Instead he simply declared

that "an independent Palestinian state in Judaea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip means the beginning of the end for the State of Israel." With such life-and-death views it is no wonder he added: "It is unthinkable that an Israeli government would agree to it."

There seem to be few prospects of the sides reaching agreement on their own. Indirect negotiations will continue for some time, speeding up whenever Dr. Kissinger renews his jet shuttle around the Middle East. But apart from Sadat, none of the region's leaders openly displays much hope that diplomacy will succeed. Each side regards the talks primarily as a public-relations exercise, by which it hopes to prove to its own people, to the world, and above all to the U.S. that it wants a settlement but the other side is making peace impossible. In the immediate future attention will focus on the politicians waging their diplomatic battles and maneuvering for propaganda victors. For the time being the generals are staying out of the limelight, but they are far from idle: They are training their troops and acquiring the weapons for the inevitable confrontation. When negotiations reach an impasse they will be ready to go. It may not be as soon as Peres and Gur predicted, but it may not be much later.

With Arab leaders moving to a grudging acceptance of Israel and a readiness to coexist with her if their territories are returned and the Palestine issue is resolved, conditions may be ripe for a Mideast settlement. But what is needed is a thoroughgoing solution which tackles the basic problems of Israel's security, Palestinian national rights, and the territorial integrity of the Arab states—all insoluble without painful concessions by all parties. Such concessions are unthinkable without powerful pressures from those outside the region who have an interest in preventing a Mideast war, with its attendant dangers for the whole world.

American interests in the region and in Great Power détente could be jeopardized by renewed fighting. At the same time, the U.S. possesses considerable leverage which would permit her to dislodge the adversaries from their entrenched positions. The way is therefore open for American initiative, but past experience of U.S. policies is not encouraging. Henry Kissinger's penchant for short-term diplomatic successes may produce a patched-up "solution" which would do nothing to cut the roots of the conflict. Verbal acrobatics will do no more than postpone war, if that. Unless the basic problems are tackled head-on, backed by the full weight of American power, the armies will move. Only the precise zero hour will remain unknown—and that too, alas, not for long. The prophecies of war may be premature, but not *very* premature.

There is still time. A little.