Golda Meir and the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, October 1973

When historians or other writers discuss the reasons for the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, most of them place the blame on Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir (1969-1974). Meir is accused of obstinately and stubbornly preventing any progress on the diplomatic front, thereby paving the way for an inevitable war that cost numerous lives.

Golda Meir’s biographer Goldstein notes that Meir did not believe that returning territory would lead to peace due to the underlying negative attitude of the Arab peoples toward Israel. She argued that the armistice lines could only be replaced by safe, recognized, and agreed borders to be determined in a peace treaty; in any case, however, there would be no return to the borders of June 4, 1967. She had absolutely no faith in the premise that returning the territories would indeed enable Israel to enjoy the desired peace. Accordingly, Meir consistently preferred a diplomatic stalemate after her appointment as prime minister.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Avi Shlaim suggests that Meir’s policy sought to maintain the status quo and to refrain from any diplomatic risks. This was essentially a policy of marching on the sport while adhering to the armistice lines and refusing to budge until the Arabs agreed to make peace on her terms. International initiatives to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict by peaceful means were invariably perceived as undermining Israel’s security.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Bar-Joseph asserts that Sadat’s peace initiative in February 1973 “was probably the most important diplomatic proposal of the 1967-1973 period.” He suggests that the initiative was the first of its kind. Despite this initiative, however, which largely met Israel’s security needs, the Israeli leadership preferred military confrontation, confident in the IDF’s total superiority. The leadership was aware that a comprehensive agreement would require Israel to return to its international border with Egypt – a demand it was unwilling to accept.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Kipnis follows Bar-Joseph’s approach, accusing Meir’s government of running like wildfire from the peace initiative offered over the course of 1973 by Sadat’s envoy Hafez Ismail. He assumes that the decision-makers in Israel mistakenly believed that military superiority, deterrence, and the diplomatic support of the US would prevent a peace initiative they did not desire. In the event, it was only after more than 2,650 Israeli dead that the US came onboard with Sadat’s peace initiative. This initiative was implemented after the war in a similar format to that proposed by Sadat, but on the Israeli side it was signed not by Golda Meir but by Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other writers do not place the blame exclusively on the government of Golda Meir but also on the superpowers, and particularly the US. Lebow and Stein argue that the responsibility for failing to prevent war is shared by Israel and by the superpowers. The Israelis’ confidence in their deterrent capability blinded them to the intense pressure on Sadat and his growing desperation. They failed to use their deterrent potential to promote a peace process, and deterrence effectively became a substitute for diplomacy.

Moreover, both the US and the Soviet Union failed to prevent the crisis due to the policy of détente. Neither set of leaders was willing to forego immediate political loss or sacrifice benefit in the Middle East to reduce the risk of war in the region and a serious crisis between the Soviet Union and the US.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Neff asserts that no-one doubted Meir’s intention to hold on to the territories taken in 1967 to the maximum possible extent. Israel flaunted its might and enjoyed US support, and if it were to return territory, this would be on its own terms. The US viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict as part of the global struggle, rather than as a local issue, and accordingly support for Israel was analogous to support for the anti-Communist effort. While Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, regarded regional conflict as a reflection of superpower competition, the chief objective of the US was to expel the Soviets from the Middle East. This objective could be secured through a policy of sitting and waiting, letting the Arabs stew in their own frustration.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his new and comprehensive study, Meir Boumfeld offers a different analysis, claiming that the proposals placed before Kissinger by Hafez Ismail at their meetings in February and May 1973 were not radical and did not deviate significantly from the Egyptian position of January 1971 as presented to UN Special Envoy Gunnar Jarring. According to the proposal, Egypt was willing to reach a state of peace, including no more than recognition of Israel’s existence and independence and the end of the state of war. Full peace and normalization could come only after the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole, including the Palestinian problem and the question of the refugees.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Mordechai Gazit has examined Sadat’s policy in light of the partial agreement he proposed in February 1971. Gazit suggests that Sadat was unwilling to reach any type of compromise. He adhered to the collective Arab position that any partial agreement with Israel can only be a stage in the process of an Israeli withdrawal from al the territories occupied in the war, according to a set timetable. He does not believe that this position offered any chance of success for diplomatic initiatives by the Israeli government or the US Administration.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The goal of this article is first and foremost to examine Golda Meir’s policy during the years preceding the outbreak of the war, as well as the policy of Egypt under President Anwar Sadat. Accordingly, the obvious question: is it true to suggest that it was Golda Meir’s policy that led to situation where the outbreak of war was inevitable, or is it more accurate to conclude that both Meir and Sadat adhered stubbornly to a policy that could only be resolved through a bloody war?

**Policies**

Golda Meir came to power following the death of Levi Eshkol at the end of February 1969. Before assuming the post of prime minister, Meir had served as minister of labor from 1949-1956, while from 1956-1966 she served as foreign minister. This latter position enabled her to acquire extensive experience in the international arena. Her entry into the position of prime minister coincided with a period of diplomatic stalemate. Since the end of the Six Day War of June 1967, there had been no diplomatic progress between Israel and the Arab states, and particularly Egypt, the leader of the Arab world. On 22 November 1967, in an attempt to break the stalemate, the Security Council had adopted Resolution 247. The resolution called for a just and sustainable peace, including an Israeli withdrawal from territories captured in the war, agreed borders between Israel and its neighbors, the end of the state of war, an international effort to resolve the refugee problem, and freedom of shipping in international waters. In accordance with the resolution, the UN secretary-general appointed a special envoy to head to the region immediately in order to help the sides achieve a peace agreement.[[9]](#footnote-9) Special Envoy Gunnar Jarring was active throughout 1968 but failed in his mission of advancing a diplomatic agreement.

Presenting her government to the Knesset on 17 March 1969, Meir stated that “the establishment of a permanent peace in our region depends on the Arab states. Peace will arise only when the Arab states agree to negotiate with us directly in order to sign peace treaties… We and our neighbors vitally need peace that comes from dialogue in face-to-face meetings. Only in this manner is it possible to secure peace.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The policy Meir announced in the Knesset effectively constituted a continuation of the policy formulated by the Eshkol government following the Six Day War. According to this policy, the territories conquered by Israel constituted a security buffer and a bargaining chip. In the absence of peace, Israel would observe in full the situation created by the armistice agreements, and would strengthen its own standing in accordance with its vital security and development needs. Israel insisted on a signed peace treaty, rather than on mere declarations of the end of its state of war with the Arab countries. Only direct negotiations, possibly with international assistance, could provide a solution to all the components of the conflict.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Unlike Eshkol, however, who was an uninspiring and subdued figure, Meir showed uncompromising determination concerning the need for negotiations to secure a solution to the conflict. She had grave concerns about the Arabs and believed that the conflict between the Arab states and Israel was not about the amount of territory in which Israel should exist, but whether it would exist at all. This also explains her conviction that Israel must not in any circumstances withdraw from territory without an agreement with the Arabs, and the foreign players should not be involved in the negotiations as they had been surrounding the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai in 1957. The Israeli government should be free to negotiate the terms for peace directly with its neighbors, without predetermining the outcome of the negotiations. Meir was convinced that at this point in time there was no need to define the borders that would apply in the event of a peace agreement; however, the aspiration should be to ensure that these borders were far removed from those of 4 June 1967, and that Israel would not relinquish either Jerusalem or the Golan Heights.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Immediately on assuming the position of prime minister, Meir was forced to respond to two developments, one military and the other diplomatic, that powerfully illustrate her approach toward the conflict. On 8 March, the Egyptian president launched the War of Attrition along the Suez Cana front, with the goal of forcing Israel to withdraw from the territory it had captured. By raising the level of hostilities on the Israeli-Egyptian front, Sadat sought to convince the superpowers of the volatility of the situation. Meanwhile, on the diplomatic front, the US and the Soviet Union were about to begin bilateral talks alongside the discussions between the ambassadors of Great Britain, the US, France, and the Soviet Union to the United Nations, in an effort to find a solution to the conflict. The Israelis were capable of coping with a war on the canal front, but were more alarmed at the talks. Meir viewed the diplomatic developments as a trap and an attempt to impose an agreement on Israel.

As she had declared in the Knesset, Meir adhered to her policy that any solution must be the product of negotiations between the sides. She believed that the talks harmed Israeli policy by giving the Arabs a sense of confidence that an agreement could be imposed from the outside.[[13]](#footnote-13) She argued that any agreement must include recognized and secure borders that were not identical to the armistice lines, as well as the cessation of hostilities, the removal of the Arab boycott, and recognition of Israel’s right to exist. The solution would come through face-to-face negotiations, and not in any other manner.[[14]](#footnote-14) In a letter to Nixon, Meir emphasized that Israel must be free to negotiate the terms for peace directly with its neighbors, without the outcome of the talks being determined in advance. She attempted to convince the president that he must not fall into the trap of talks, and asked him to be both patient and determined. Such an approach, she argued, “could help to bring the Arab and Soviet Governments to the realization that the only way out of their dilemma lies in the conclusion…of peace treaties with the relationship normally associated with them.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Meanwhile, she explained to the British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart that the Israeli government did not believe that any of the superpowers could determine Israel’s security interests. The Arabs “had been responsible for war and must be responsible for peace.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The US Administration did not accept Israel’s policy in this regard. It agreed with Meir that the demand for direct negotiations was logical, but explained that it was unrealistic. In the prevailing circumstances, direct talks were completely impossible, and accordingly the insistence on this track proved that the Israeli government was not interested in advancing the peace process. A protracted stalemate was a sure recipe for the erosion of the US position in the region: it heightened the Arabs’ resentment and helped to expand the Soviet sphere of influence. A stalemate could also lead to a further war between Israel and its neighbors, and the superpowers might find themselves dragged into the conflict. Accordingly, an agreement should be advanced that would be formulated by the superpowers, or by the US alone. Nixon clarified to Meir that it was vital to make a further effort to spark the peace process, and that any potential agreement would be secured through the joint action of the US and the Soviet Union.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The discussions between the superpowers, between the US and the Soviet Union, and between the four ambassadors to the United Nations did not produce an agreed formula for solving the conflict. Accordingly, the Americans decided to launch their own initiative – the Rogers Plan. The Secretary of State announced his plan on 9 December 1969, emphasizing that while the US believed that it was vital to determine agreed political borders, it did not support expansionist aspirations and the forces should withdraw from the territory they had occupied. The US Administration supported both Israel’s security and that of the Arab states. It favored a sustainable peace based on universal security. Jerusalem should be united, but the civil, religious, and economic management of the city should be undertaken jointly by Jordan and Israel. There was also a need to solve the refugee problem. As in the case of Israel’s total withdrawal from Egyptian territory, there was a similar need for Israel to withdraw from the West Bank, with the exception of insubstantial border changes.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This was precisely the policy that Meir had feared. The US had failed to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union, and accordingly it was launching an initiative, and in so doing defining Israel’s best interests. This was essentially a type of imposed solution. From Meir’s perspective, the proposals included in the plan would actually damage the prospects of securing peace. They totally ignored the vital need to determine secure and agreed borders through a peace treaty reached by direct negotiations. Accordingly, Israel would not be a victim to any policy imposed by one or more of the superpowers, and would reject any attempt to impose a coercive solution:[[19]](#footnote-19)

The prospect of bringing the Arabs to the path of negotiations have been seriously impaired and Israel's bargaining position has been undermined. The result must be interpreted by the Arabs as an effort to appease them at Israel's expense and will inevitably stiffen their position and aggressiveness and also strengthen the terrorist organization. The Government of Israel therefore feels that all this constitutes a serious blow to Israel's vital interests.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Meir was resolute in her opposition to the plan, even claiming that it was a disaster and a threat to Israel’s very existence. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that the government reject the proposal.[[21]](#footnote-21) Meir’s government adhered to the policy of direct negotiations to resolve all the issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Meanwhile, Egypt – the leader of the Arab world- also opposed any negotiations with Israel as long as it held on to the territories it had occupied during the war. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser remained faithful to the “three noes” determined by the conference of Arab leaders that met in late August and early September 1967 in Khartoum: no recognition of Israel, no negotiations, and no peace.[[22]](#footnote-22)

From Meir’s perspective, unlike that of the Americans, there was no rush. Like her predecessor, she was convinced that she would able to maintain the status quo, despite the fierce war raging along the canal. The Arabs must be prevented from believing in the illusion of an imposed solution, or more accurately – they must be denied any access to a solution other than through direct negotiations. In the absence of any prospects for a coercive solution, or for a military one such as that Nasser hoped to achieve when he launched the War of Attrition, the Arabs would be bound to come to the negotiating table in the end.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In the absence of a peace process, or if the process reached a stalemate, the Israelis were convinced that the use of military might would force the Egyptians to accept a ceasefire, and would even lead them to the negotiating table.[[24]](#footnote-24) The Israeli military bombed hard targets deep inside Egyptian territory, but this failed to deter the Egyptians from continuing their War of Attrition. Moreover, the Israeli bombardments motivated the Soviets to become involved in the conflict. In the circumstances that had been created, Meir was willing at best to agree to a ceasefire along the Suez Canal, as the Americans had proposed, in order to prevent a military conflagration and motivate the peace process. She agreed to the ceasefire after protracted consideration, and after President Nixon promised that not a single Israeli soldier would withdraw from the occupied territories until a stable and lasting peace meeting Israel’s desires had been secured.[[25]](#footnote-25) The ceasefire came into effect on 7 August for a period of three months, but it was violated by the Egyptians the very next day. Nixon notes in his diary that the Egyptian military began to violate the ceasefire agreement before the ink had dried on the page.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Egyptian violation reinforced Meir’s conviction that Israel’s neighbor was not interested in peace and was seeking to provoke a further conflict with Israel. As a result, she became extremely suspicious of Egypt’s future moves.[[27]](#footnote-27)

However, before any peace process could begin, a change occurred that would have a far-reaching impact on the entire Middle East. Nasser died toward the end of September 1970 and was replaced by Anwar Sadat, who adopted a different policy that changed the future of the region.

**Sadat and the Willingness to Sign a Peace Treaty with Israel**

The traditional Egyptian position toward Israel did not change following Sadat’s rise to power. He viewed Israel as an imperialist bridgehead in the region and as an expansionist state. He rejected any possibility of direct negotiations with Israel as long as it occupied Arab lands. Like Nasser, Sadat argued that to sit around the table with Israelis would not be peace, but capitulation. Instead, he called for the implementation of Resolution 242 within a set timeframe.[[28]](#footnote-28) His assumption was that a peace process could only proceed under US mediation. Nasser had managed to secure American intervention during the discussions surround the ceasefire on the Suze Canal front, but Sadat sought to ensure that the US would play a central role in helping Egypt to regain its occupied territory. After all, the Americans had the strength to apply pressure on Israel, as without their aid the country would be unable to survive. Sadat informed the US that Egypt was interested in a genuine peace that would end the bloodshed in the region, but that it would not relinquish even an inch of its land.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In a surprising move that was diametrically opposed to the decisions adopted at the Khartoum Conference, Sadat informed UN Special Envoy Gunnar Jarring that if Israel undertook to withdraw completely not only from Sinai, but from all the occupied territories, promised to resolve the refugee problem in accordance with the UN resolutions, and agreed to demilitarize areas on both sides of the border with the same size and to accept the formation of a UN force with troops from the four superpowers to keep the peace in Sinai – then Egypt would be prepared to sign a peace treaty. Egypt added that “the United Arab Republic considers that the just and lasting peace cannot be realized without the full and scrupulous implementation of the Security Council resolution 242 and the withdrawal of the Israeli armed forces from all the territories occupied since June 1967.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

In an interview for Newsweek, Sadat explained that if Israel returned the Arab land in accordance with the Security Council resolution, all the nations of the region – including Israel – would enjoy security and independence.[[31]](#footnote-31) The peace he envisioned was a formalistic one that did not imply the introduction of open borders, a flow of tourists, and economic or cultural ties. In essence, Egypt had not changed its position regarding the occupied territories or regarding its refusal to negotiate directly with Israel toward a peace treaty Nevertheless, the willingness to sign an agreement constituted a dramatic change in Egyptian policy. For the first time, an Egyptian president had declared in writing that he was willing to sign a peace treaty with Israel. The Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmud Rial emphasized to the Americans that his country had taken a bold step and was ready to sign a peace agreement with Israel. Egypt had done everything it could, and from its perspective it had broken the vicious cycle of conflict.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The Israelis were completely taken aback by the Egyptian move. No-one in the policy-making circles in Israel had imagined that Sadat might deviate from his predecessor’s policy. His announcement undermined the popular assumption that Egypt would not agree to sign a peace treaty with Israel under any circumstances. This undoubtedly constituted a change, since for the first time an Arab state had explicitly noted its willingness to reach an agreement, even if this was conditioned on an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of 4 June 1967 and the resolution of the refugee problem.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Meir welcomed Egypt’s willingness to sign a treaty, but did not believe that there had been any dramatic change in Egypt’s position. From her perspective, a true peace agreement could only be reached through negotiations between the two sides, without any prior demands or conditions. The Egyptian president was effectively imposing conditions without any discussion.[[34]](#footnote-34) Meir clarified to the special envoy that Israel accepted the principle of withdrawal as formulated in Resolution 242, along with the other principles in the resolution. However, any withdrawal would be to secure and recognized borders.[[35]](#footnote-35) While she noted that Israel would not withdraw to the lines of 4 June 1967, she emphasized to US Ambassador Walworth Barbour that this position did not constitute a precondition.[[36]](#footnote-36) In the Israeli government’s reply to Gunnar Jarring, it announced that it welcomed Egypt’s willingness to sign a peace treaty with Israel, but reiterated that it was willing to enter into substantive negotiations between the two countries to discuss all the relevant issues for such a treaty. The Israeli government believed that “both parties should now pursue their negotiations in a detailed and concrete manner without prior conditions so as to cover all the points listed in their respective documents with a view to concluding a peace agreement.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

The Americans reacted furiously to the Israeli response, which prevented any possibility of progress. The Egyptian proposal was serious and met Israel’s concerns, insofar as Egypt categorically undertook to reach a peace agreement.[[38]](#footnote-38) The State Department held that since direct negotiations were impossible, the solution to the conflict lay in peace in return to the territories occupied by the IDF. There would be no Israeli withdrawal other than as part of a peace agreement. Accordingly, as Rabin wrote to Meir, “when Egypt agreed to reach a peace treaty with Israel in return for a comprehensive withdrawal, the US thereby achieved the main points of its declared policy for the solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict: a mutual peace agreement in return for a withdrawal to the international border… The essence of American policy was realized in the Egyptian agreement [to peace].”[[39]](#footnote-39)

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