

Hard Lessons in the Holy Land

Joint Fire Support in the Yom Kippur War

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On October 6th, 1973, a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. This would spark what would become known as the Yom Kippur War, and would threaten Israel's very existence. Although it was a brief conflict, the Yom Kippur War would forever transform the Middle East, and would have lasting global impacts. Its military significance is often overshadowed by the concurrent Vietnam War, and is often not afforded the thorough analysis it deserves. The Yom Kippur War would see the introduction of new tactics and technologies that would change how conflicts are fought, and would provide a number of sobering lessons to all participants. The focus of this essay will be on joint fire support, analysing how each of the participants employed their fire support assets, the impact their fire support assets had on operations, and the lessons learned that can be applied to Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) operations.

Prior to examining the actual conduct of the Yom Kippur War, it is necessary to outline a number of key concepts regarding joint operations. Joint operations involve two or more military environments (army, navy, air force) working together to plan and execute operations, rather than working separately.¹ Joint operations require interoperability and synchronization between the different military environments under the command of a single Joint Task Force (JTF) commander in order to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the force.² The primary focus of this essay will be on joint fires and joint fire support. Fires are the use of weapon systems or other actions to create specific lethal or nonlethal effects on a target.³ Joint fires are fires delivered during the employment of forces from two or more components in coordinated

¹ National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Publication (CFJP) 3.0 Operations*, (Ottawa: Joint Doctrine Branch, 2010), 1-1.

² National Defence, 1-3

³ United States Joint Forces Command, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 Joint Operations*, (2011), I-2

action to produce desired effects in support of a common objective.⁴ Joint fire support is joint fires that assist air, land, maritime, and special operations forces to move, maneuver, and control territory, populations, airspace, and key waters.⁵ The following analysis of the Yom Kippur War will focus on the use of joint fire support by both sides, and their approach to joint operations throughout the conflict.

The causes and events leading up to the Yom Kippur War were directly linked to the 1967 Six Day War, which saw the rapid and stunning Israeli victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Shortly after the conclusion of the Six Day War, the 1967 Arab League summit would issue the Khartoum Resolution famously proclaiming “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it.”⁶ Journalist and historian Abraham Rabinovich notes how “the humiliation of the Six Day War had cast its debilitating shadow over Egyptian president Anwar Sadat ever since he assumed office in October 1970.”⁷ Faced with a weakening economy, and the sense of humiliation and helplessness as a result of the Six Day War, Sadat saw war with Israel as the only option to resurrect the national mood. Sadat hoped that even a minor military victory would provide Egypt with a better position to conduct negotiations in an effort to regain lost territory, and give him the popularity to enact domestic reforms.⁸ This contrasted with the goals of Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad, who saw war as the only option to regain territory lost in

⁴ United States Joint Forces Command, JP 3-0, I-2

⁵ United States Joint Forces Command, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-09 Joint Fire Support*, (2014), I-3

⁶ “Khartoum Resolution,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, http://www.cfr.org/world/khartoum-resolution/p14841?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fpublication_list%3Ftype%3Dessential_document%26page%3D69

⁷ Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 10.

⁸ Rabinovich, 12.

1967. Although Sadat was willing to contemplate peace with Israel, Assad refused to even acknowledge Israel's right to exist.⁹

Having firmly decided to go to war with Israel, Sadat passed direction to the military in October 1972 to begin preparations. Since taking power, Sadat had purged the General Staff of political appointments made by his predecessor. Commanders were now chosen based on their competence, rather than political connections, and the quality of the officer corps was upgraded by the drafting of university graduates.¹⁰ Both Egypt and Syria would receive large quantities of weapons shipments from the Soviet Union during this time, including: MiG-21 jet fighters; SA-2; SA-3; and SA-6 air defence systems; RPG-7 anti-tank weapons; and the AT-3 Sagger anti-tank guided missile (ATGM). These new weapons provided Egypt and Syria with capabilities that they did not have during the Six Day War, and combined with intensive training on Soviet doctrine, would have a dramatic impact on operations throughout the Yom Kippur War.

Sadat and Assad secretly met on September 22nd, agreeing to launch the war on two fronts on October 6th. The Egyptian army stage a week long exercise on their side of the Suez Canal, and both countries mobilized reservists. Israel's military intelligence, Aman, was fully aware of these developments, but viewed them as part of the larger exercise. Many of the reservists would eventually be released in order to lull Aman into a false sense of security. Aman was overconfident in their ability to predict Egyptian and Syrian intentions, and, by viewing any military movements as part of an exercise, effectively shut down Israel's early warning

⁹ Rabinovich, 44.

¹⁰ Rabinovich, 28.

capability.¹¹ This overconfidence was personified by Israeli Chief of Staff, General David Elazar, who proclaimed “the week between October 1st and 6th...is the most normal week...I distinguish nothing out of the ordinary.”¹² However, a key event took place the night before the war began. Zvi Zamir, the head of Israel’s national intelligence agency (Mossad), travelled to London to meet Ashraf Marwan, known as “The Source”. Marwan bluntly informed Zamir that Egypt and Syria would attack the next day.¹³ This message, combined with troop movements, finally shook Israel into action.

General Elazar and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan met with Prime Minister Golda Meir at 8:05am Yom Kippur morning, a mere six hours before Egypt and Syria would launch their assault. It was at this meeting that it was decided to mobilize 100,000 to 120,000 troops, and, unlike in the Six Day War, that there would be no pre-emptive strike launched.¹⁴ The Egyptian military numbered 650,000, with 2,100 tanks and 400 warplanes. The Syrian military numbered 185,000, with 1,650 tanks, 280 warplanes, and an additional 100,000 troops and 650 tanks from other Arab countries. The Israelis numbered 375,000, of which 260,000 were reservists that required mobilization, and possessed 2,100 tanks and 359 warplanes.¹⁵ The 100,000 Egyptian troops and 1,350 tanks just west of the Suez Canal faced 450 Israeli troops and 91 tanks, strung out between a number of forts along the canal, and outnumbered Israel by 40 to 1 in terms of artillery.¹⁶ It was clear that this was not going to be an easy repeat of the Six Day War for Israel.

¹¹ Rabinovich, 56.

¹² Rabinovich, 82.

¹³ Rabinovich, 83.

¹⁴ Rabinovich, 88.

¹⁵ Rabinovich, 54.

¹⁶ Rabinovich, 55.

The Israeli approach to joint fire support prior to the start of the Yom Kippur War was largely ineffective. After their victory during the Six Day War, Israel was filled with a sense of power and invincibility. Then Israeli Chief of Staff, Haim Bar-Lev, declared in 1970 that “the Arab soldier lacks the characteristics necessary for modern war.”¹⁷ The armoured corps was particularly influenced by this sense of power, and a concept was formed known as the “totality of the tank.”¹⁸ Conventional doctrine calls for a combined arms approach to operations, in which tanks, infantry, and artillery all advanced in mutual support of each other. The Israeli doctrine believed that the tank could manage on its own, charging swiftly and breaking through enemy formations. Since the tanks would outpace the artillery and infantry, they would rely on their own tanks and the air force to destroy the enemy. When the infantry corps requested better anti-tank weapons, they were told that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) already had the best anti-tank weapons in the world: the armoured corps.¹⁹ The Israeli hubris involved great risk, but they seemed to completely disregard the importance of joint fire support in operations. This dependence on the air force to provide support, and brazen frontal tank assaults with no infantry or artillery support would lead to near disaster for the IDF.

In contrast, the Egyptians and Syrians had been spared the same smugness induced by victory that had permeated the IDF following the Six Day War. Their tanks remained supported by infantry and artillery, and their doctrine was in line with Soviet doctrine in which overwhelming artillery support was used prior to the assault. Additionally, their introduction of the AT-3 Sagger ATGM completely transformed operations. Operated by a single soldier, this

¹⁷ Rabinovich, 34.

¹⁸ Rabinovich, 34.

¹⁹ Rabinovich, 35.

weapon was able to strike Israeli tanks at a range that matched or exceeded that of the tanks. The IDF was dismissive of the Arab infantrymen withstanding a tank charge head-on, but the new weapons effectively countered the “totality of the tank.”²⁰ The new air defence systems also provided the Arabs with a capability they did not have during the Six Day War, and allowed them to effectively neutralize the Israeli air force’s ability to shape the ground battle. Thousands of officers were sent on advanced military courses in the Soviet Union to develop tactics against Israel’s superiority in air and armoured warfare. As Rabinovich notes, “if Israel’s thinking had been lulled by hubris, Arab thinking was sharpened by desperation.”²¹ Egypt and Syria understood how to employ joint fire support in order to control the airspace and impact the ground battle, a marked difference from Israel.

At 2:00 pm on October 6th, the Egyptians launched their attack in the Sinai. Two thousand Egyptian guns and heavy mortars began the bombardment of Israeli positions along the Suez Canal, while concurrently Egyptian planes attacked command centers, air defence systems, artillery positions, and air bases²². Within two hours, 23,000 infantry would cross the Suez Canal, and by 10:30 pm eight heavy bridges and four light bridges were open. The initial crossing would be carried out by 100,000 troops, and would send the Israelis reeling. The series of Israeli forts along the Suez Canal, known as the Bar-Lev Line, was supposed to serve as a barrier against any Egyptian assault. This line of defence failed entirely. Only 450 troops occupied the sixteen forts, and the Egyptians either overwhelmed or bypassed each fort. By establishing a static defensive line, rather than a mobile defence-in-depth, Israel had once again ignored traditional military thinking. The Egyptians established a strong bridgehead, and their

²⁰ Rabinovich, 36.

²¹ Rabinovich, 37.

²² Rabinovich, 101.

tanks and anti-tank weapons now dominated an area up to two miles from the canal. The Egyptian infantry on the bridgeheads were vulnerable to artillery fire, but the IDF had fewer than 50 artillery pieces on the 100-mile-wide front, and they were all currently under counterbattery fire.²³ Additionally, the air force was unable to provide support due to the overwhelming number of air defence systems. Israel's disregard for joint fire support was beginning to be felt along the Sinai front.

The situation for Israel on the Golan Heights was turning out to be far worse than what they were currently experiencing in the Sinai. The Golan Heights posed a greater worry than the Sinai to the IDF due to its close proximity to Israeli population centers. As in the Sinai, and in line with Soviet military doctrine, the Syrians launched their attack with a massive artillery barrage and air attacks. As in the Sinai, the static Israeli defenses were overwhelmed by the sheer weight of numbers or bypassed entirely. By midnight on the first day, 300 Syrian tanks had broken through in the southern Golan, and there were fewer than 30 Israeli tanks left to oppose them.²⁴ Yitzhak Hafi, the Israeli commander in the Golan Heights, expressed doubts that they could hold, exclaiming "only the air force can stop them."²⁵ However, the Israeli air force was currently in no shape to be stopping anything. Like the Egyptians, the Syrians had understood the importance of joint fire support and employed their air defence systems in such a way that the Israeli air force was unable to shape the ground battle. Equipped with the same AT-3 Sagger ATGMs as the Egyptians, the Syrians were also experiencing similar success against Israeli tanks. Threatened on two fronts, and facing the full effects of new tactics and technology, senior leaders in the IDF and the Israeli government grew increasingly concerned.

²³ Rabinovich, 108.

²⁴ Rabinovich, 168.

²⁵ Rabinovich, 168.

In the unlikely event that the enemy attackers were not destroyed by Israeli tanks, the Israeli air force was thought to be the panacea for any incursions by Egyptian and Syrian tank formations. This confidence in the air force, however, was beginning to wane amongst the soldiers on the front lines, who looked skyward asking “where’s the air force?”²⁶ Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) was one of the objectives of the Israeli air force, who developed Operation TAGAR and Operation DOOGMAN 5 to conduct SEAD against Egypt and Syria respectively. The Israeli air force had just launched the first stage of TAGAR, when the IDF Chief of Staff, General Elazar, ordered it cancelled. Due to the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Golan Heights, he ordered the immediate commencement of DOOGMAN 5²⁷. This rapid change of mission was in direct violation of one of the principles of war: selection and maintenance of the aim. As well, the air force was not prepared to execute DOOGMAN 5, and lacked intelligence on the location of Syrian air defense systems. Nevertheless, DOOGMAN 5 was carried out, but failed. Six of the air force’s prized F-4 Phantoms were shot down, all by ground fire due to the low flying altitude, and several others were damaged. Only one Syrian air defence battery was destroyed, as the rest had already moved. In one swift stroke the Israeli air force’s reputation for invincibility had been shaken, and it negatively affected the self-confidence of the IDF senior leadership.²⁸ The destruction of the F-4 Phantoms by ground fire, and the overall failure of the operation, proved the important role of air defence in joint operations and joint fire support. The air force would later recover and improve its performance, but it would require a number of lessons similar to DOOGMAN 5 before the IDF senior leadership properly employed joint fire support.

²⁶ Rabinovich, 180.

²⁷ Rabinovich, 177.

²⁸ Rabinovich, 179.

Israeli losses in the first four days of the war included 49 planes and 500 tanks, equivalent to one eighth of its air force and a quarter of its armour.²⁹ Egypt and Syria managed to inflict a series of resounding defeats against Israel during the opening days but, despite these major setbacks for the IDF, new countermeasures against Arab tactics were beginning to be employed. Israeli tanks had been humbled by the multitude of ATGMs, and the traditional method of attacking infantry head-on was abandoned. Instead, infantry and artillery were called forward whenever tank units encountered enemy infantry. The “totality of the tank” doctrine was finished. The IDF returned to a combined arms approach, and began to properly integrate joint fire support into their operations. As its reserves became fully mobilized, the IDF was able to stabilize both fronts. In a stunning turn of events, the IDF launched a massive counterattack that would see them cross the Suez Canal and advance on Cairo itself. In the Golan Heights, the IDF would push the Syrians back, and even strike the outskirts of Damascus with artillery. The success of these operations was due to the proper employment of joint fire support in a combined arms setting. A ceasefire brokered by the United Nations (UN) would see these advances halted, and the war came to a close after a mere three weeks. After the war’s conclusion, analysis of Israeli doctrine began in order to develop lessons learned from the conflict. Moshe Bar-Kochba and Binyamin Amidror would fault the lack of a professional staff work, insufficient training of senior commanders, and the ignoring of the lessons of history – such as the need for combined arms and joint fire support – as the reasons for initial Israeli failures³⁰.

²⁹ Rabinovich, 323.

³⁰ Rabinovich, 496.

Despite its short duration, the Yom Kippur War provides a number of key lessons that could be applied to CAF operations. The most prevalent lesson is the importance of joint fire support in a combined arms setting. Infantry and tanks need to advance with artillery support, with the air force providing additional support to the ground battle, and air defence systems providing coverage for the friendly ground forces. It was made clear, especially during the opening days of the war, that combining these individual capabilities was necessary to achieve success. The CAF continues to conduct training in a combined arms context, but lacks key capabilities in joint fire support. Currently the CAF does not possess any air defence systems, which greatly impedes the ability to conduct joint operations and provide joint fire support. The lack of air defence systems leaves ground forces extremely vulnerable to enemy air attacks, especially from modern-day Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) which are becoming even more common in operations. Egypt and Syria proved that, by effectively employing air defence systems, they were able to neutralize Israeli air power, and fundamentally shape the ground battle. Without air defence systems, the CAF is failing to apply the lessons learned from the Yom Kippur War, and will struggle to provide effective joint fire support in future operations.

The combined attacks by Egypt and Syria against Israel in the Yom Kippur War nearly marked the end of Israel. The use of new technologies and tactics, combined with meticulous planning and surprise, allowed for Egypt and Syria to score a number of initial victories. Although Israel would recover and push the invaders back, the conflict would provide new insights into the conduct of joint operations and joint fire support, and prove to be a sobering lesson for the IDF. Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, commented on the war in a poem: "I have

nothing to say about the war. Nothing to add. I'm ashamed."³¹ The CAF would be remiss in not carefully examining the insights to be drawn from the Yom Kippur War if it wishes to avoid having to voice similar sentiments in the future.

³¹ Yehuda Amichai, *A Life of Poetry, 1948-1994*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 237.

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