

ISRAELI REACTIONS TO THE WAR

ELIAS SHOUFANI *

During the first week after the war, a public opinion poll taken in Israel by the Hebrew University's Institute for Applied Social Studies¹ posed several important questions relating to the war and its aftermath. The results of that poll may well influence Israeli decisions in the political battle to which the war has given rise. The significant points were:

1. 90 per cent of those interviewed believed that another war should be expected in the future, and 50 per cent foresaw it taking place in a short time.

2. 84 per cent believed that: a) the Arab aim in the war was to destroy Israel; b) a cease-fire would not lead to peace in the coming few months; c) withdrawal from the occupied territories would not bring about permanent peace between Israel and the Arabs.

3. Israelis generally viewed the major Arab achievement in the war as improving the Arab fighting image.

4. The tendency in the Israeli public was to emphasize the significance of Israel's international position.

5. It had become clearer to the Israeli public that the protagonists of the present situation in the Middle East were not the Arabs and the Israelis alone.

FIRST REACTIONS TO THE WAR

The Israeli public was surprised by the war, and operated on the early impression that it would be a limited one of short duration.² After making this assumption, however, people reacted with rapidly increasing anxiety

* Elias Shoufani is Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland.

¹ Published in *Haaretz*, November 15, 1973. The observations in this article are based exclusively on the Hebrew press until the middle of November. A poll taken at the end of November, however, showed no significant change in feeling from that quoted in this poll from *Haaretz*.

² Shabtai Teveth, in *Haaretz*, October 9, 1973.

when the lightning victories which they expected from their army did not occur. One newspaper correspondent described some of the scenes in Israel's streets on the first day of the war: people clustered around transistor radios in front of their houses; men who were called to service cried as they parted from their families; soldiers urged their wives to hurry up packing their clothes; others were rushing through the streets seeking a ride to their staging areas; because of the black-out on news of the front, rumours were spreading very fast.³ On the second day, shelters, which had been used as warehouses, were being cleared; despite appeals by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to the contrary, people were "hysterically" hoarding food supplies and other consumer goods; banks were crowded in the early hours of the morning with people who wanted to withdraw their savings; civil defence groups comprising youth organizations were demonstratively active.

Another correspondent conducted interviews with people at random, providing some insight into popular reactions:⁴

1. A. L., lawyer, 52, from Tel Aviv: "Israel was taken by surprise in this war. Much talk has been heard from Arab capitals about war; Arab armies were mobilized and moved to the front but Israel expressed no signs of worry."

2. L. T., secretary in a private concern: "I believe that they surprised us this time The Arabs thought that Israel was preoccupied with the elections; that Israel was politically isolated — Africa has been severing diplomatic ties with it, and the Austrian chancellor curtailed Jewish immigration from Russia — and that the moment was opportune for an attack on Israel since the world would maintain silence."

3. Zohar, 19, a student from Tel Aviv, said that he would vote for Likud (the right-wing coalition) and thought that Maarakh (the labour coalition) would lose many votes because of its failures on Yom Kippur. Rabbi Meir Kahane (leader of the Jewish Defence League) would be elected to the Knesset, and the rightist parties would gain power.

4. Orly, 18, student, from Tel Aviv: "I was scared I feared that the Syrians and Egyptians would advance I did not expect such a thing . . . It did not cross our minds to be surprised in such a way."

5. An old operator of a gas station: "They surprised us." He went on with sarcasm: "Have you heard? They blocked the enemy. Yesterday they blocked; in the morning they blocked; at noontime they blocked; they are forever blocking."

³ A. Koren, in *al-Hamishmar*, October 8, 1973.

⁴ Y. Kotler, in *Haaretz*, October 8, 1973.

A WAR OF LIFE AND DEATH

After its victory in the 1967 war, Israel appeared to have excluded the possibility that the Arabs would dare to challenge her military power again. Hence, when faced with a coordinated and massive Syrian-Egyptian attack, Israel responded with surprise, anger and anxiety. While this war was not expected to be an exception to the victorious rule, expectations did not materialize and the battle dragged on. Frustration and loss of self-confidence now characterized Israeli comment. The adversary was different this time; he was better equipped, trained and motivated; he fought with confidence in himself, his weapons and command, and with determination and zeal.⁵ The Israeli soldier, who was infused with a sense of superiority, and imbued with the idea of Arab cowardice and incompetence, was surprised by the persistence of the enemy; Israeli newspapers even came round to reporting that many nervous breakdowns occurred.⁶ The press, while it reflected the state of fear and anxiety which prevailed in Israel from the very beginning of the war, had been more optimistic than the military analysts and spokesmen in the first few days, when it exuded confidence in the Israeli army, and came out with broad headlines depicting victories on the ground, control of the air, the tide being turned, and an ultimate glorious end of the war effacing an ignominious start. But news from the front began to make its impact on the third day of fighting, and optimism suddenly gave way to gloom and despondency. Comprehension of the dimensions of fighting and the magnitude of losses, in life and material, gave the general impression of a total and protracted war whose results nobody could predict.

The military editor of *Haaretz* wrote on the second day of the war: "The optimism of Mrs. Golda Meir, the Prime Minister, and Mr. Moshe Dayan, the Minister of Defence, has a foundation to stand on. There is no doubting the victory of the Israeli army in this new war which has been imposed on us. At the time of writing these lines, in the second day of the coordinated Syrian-Egyptian attack, signs of victory, which will occur in the second and third stages, are becoming clear. And as always under such circumstances, the problem is the price of the Israeli victory. No less important is the price that the Egyptians and Syrians will have to pay for what they have done. For this is a fundamental matter, which will determine to a large extent whether it will be beneficial for them to try their luck in the future, and repeat such attacks."⁷

⁵ Mattetyahu Peled, in *Maariv*, October 19, 1973.

⁶ N. Tal, in *Haaretz*, November 16, 1973.

⁷ Zeev Shiff, in *Haaretz*, October 8, 1973.

With much bitterness, another editor later blamed the government for not having struck first and pre-empted the Arab assault, thus reducing "the large number of casualties who fell in the first wave, which swept over the poorly-manned positions on the Suez and the Golan Heights."⁸ In his evaluation, the War of Yom Kippur brought back to Israel fear for its very existence, "the feeling which has smouldered since the War of Independence." He criticized the generals of the Six Day War for their denial, expressed in recent months, that Israel was threatened with destruction at the time. "Then came the War of Yom Kippur and brought back with it the feeling of fear; it washed out the statements of the generals, which were imbued with exaggerated self-confidence." He went on to say: "Our back is still against the wall The War of Yom Kippur rendered many political and military concepts which we acquired after the Six Day War false, and brought us back to the critical period. That is to say, we returned to the feeling of fear for the very existence of the state."

General (Res.) Mattetyahu Peled observed that Israel had been spoilt in past wars by not paying the price that such wars usually exact.⁹ In his view Israel was dragged into this war despite her will. Yet the expectations accorded to it were as high as those of previous wars which had been initiated by Israel. The great disappointment occurred when those expectations failed to materialize: "People were called from their houses during a holiday, they were dispatched directly to the front, and they have remained there since The preliminary list of casualties was published before we saw the end of the war. In addition, the enemy seemed different from what we were used to in the past. His way of fighting is different, and there is no comparison between the effort required from our fighters now and what we were used to in the past, even in the War of Independence."

The fact that the Egyptian army was able to cross the Canal in force, that the Syrians succeeded in penetrating the Israeli lines with heavy armour, and that the two Arab armies fought in confidence and coordination, prompted the journalist Shabtai Teveth to say: "These facts give the War of Yom Kippur the characteristics of a war of life or death. For it made it clear that if the Egyptians and the Syrians were not pushed back, at least to their starting points, Israel would be in a very dangerous situation."¹⁰

⁸ Y. Edelstein, in *Hatzofeh*, October 19, 1973.

⁹ *Maariv*, October 19, 1973.

¹⁰ *Haaretz*, October 9, 1973.

DID ISRAEL WIN THE WAR?

During the war, officials of the two sides declared the aims they would seek to achieve. Soon after the Egyptian army crossed the Canal and gained control of the Bar-Lev line, President Sadat spoke of the limited political aims of the war, and declared unequivocally that Egypt's purpose was to force the implementation of UN Resolution 242, i.e., Israeli withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied since 1967. Should Israel commit itself to withdraw to June 4, 1967 borders, Sadat indicated, he would then call for a peace conference, where a peaceful settlement of the Middle East conflict would be negotiated. On the opposite side, however, Moshe Dayan, Israel's Minister of Defence, indicated at a press conference that his country had no political aims in the war. "We want, first of all, to defeat them. We want to deprive them of any gains, make them pay for what they did, and inflict upon them heavy losses."¹¹

As for operative aims of the Arab armies, Zeev Shiff, who has close connections with the Israeli command, excluded the possibility on October 8 that, in planning for the war, Arab commanders believed that they could regain the occupied territories, and hold on to them.¹² Hence, he postulated three possible operative targets for the Arab attack:

1. Optimally, the Egyptian army would occupy the east bank of the Canal, and proceed towards the passes and the crossroads inside Sinai. Commando forces could seize strategically vital targets. The Syrian army would regain the Golan Heights.

2. As a medium target, Egyptian and Syrian forces would partially occupy the east bank of the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights, respectively. The Arabs would then seek a cease-fire through the help of their supporters in the UN, stop the fighting, and claim victory.

3. Minimally, the Arab armies would be driven back after having inflicted heavy losses on the Israeli army. In that case, Arab governments would rally mass support in the Arab world and stir up the international community so as to exert pressure for an Israeli withdrawal. In Shiff's view, this operative target seemed to be the more plausible.

Shiff maintained that for Israel to achieve her declared aims, the army would have to cross the Canal, and there destroy the Egyptian forces. In his view, the Arab world, and particularly Egypt, had a great capacity to sustain a high rate of losses and casualties, provided the ability of the Arabs to fight

¹¹ *Haaretz*, October 8, 1973.

¹² *Ibid.*

had been proved. Egypt's capacity to absorb heavier strikes would increase if its army were to return unscathed to its original lines. Shiff went on to say: "In my evaluation, we cannot achieve a real annihilation of the enemy forces in Sinai alone." His evaluation was based on the assumption that the Egyptian forces which crossed the Canal were relatively small; that Israel's army had the capability to cross to the west side, and that there was no political risk involved in doing so, for Egypt had effected the first crossing. Shiff ended his article saying: "Crossing to the other side of the Canal should not be for further territorial occupation, but rather to make sure that the Egyptians will not test their power in the near future, either on Yom Kippur, or on any other day."

Another Israeli writer suggested that only by destroying the economic infrastructures of both Syria and Egypt would Israel achieve its aim. He mentioned that the two Arab countries initiated the war because "they believed they could afford the price that Israel had placed on it." Hence, Israel must exact a prohibitively high price this time, "one which the Arabs cannot afford." In the writer's view, the Arabs could rebuild their armies and equip them, if Israel were to limit its aims to the destruction of the military forces. Therefore, this war must leave "painful scars for the Arabs, like the loss of territories in June 1967." He went on to say: "One way to achieve such an end is to move in the direction of systematic destruction of the economic base, the means of communication, and natural resources. In Egypt, for instance, it is possible to hit the large industrial complex in Helwan and set fire to the oil fields. In Syria, we must try, in addition, to expand the occupied stretch and pose a permanent threat to Damascus from our artillery."¹³

A retired general of the Israeli army responded to such "hawkish" suggestions by calling them "a witness to loss of senses." He argued that even a great power like the United States was unable to force surrender upon a small nation like North Vietnam by resorting to such methods. Suppose the thirty-five million Egyptians surrendered, he asked, what would a small nation like Israel do with them? He then asked whether it was the Zionist objective to occupy Arab lands, and systematically destroy their economies? And who would supply Israel with the wherewithal to do so? He concluded that the real challenge to Israel at present was to think about achieving peace. When the war was over, "we will open the discussion about the question of peace and whether our earlier abstention from dealing with it was not among the causes of this awesome war."¹⁴

A noted Israeli journalist criticized the government for not directing the

¹³ Dan Shifan in *Haaretz*, October 9, 1973.

¹⁴ Mattetyahu Peled in *Maariv*, October 19, 1973.

war effort towards political ends. He presumed that the Israeli army would inflict a devastating blow on its adversaries, but he doubted that such a blow would deter the Arabs from pursuing their aims by force of arms. He said: "If Israel does not translate its military victory into a political achievement this time, one would not be over-pessimistic in saying that the Arabs will convince themselves that their failure was in fact a success, and that they should, therefore, persist in preparation for the fifth and sixth rounds." He argued that if Arab aims were to end the status quo and prompt international action to implement the UN resolution, it seemed possible and logical for Israel to tie its acceptance of a cease-fire with direct negotiations between the two sides for a peace settlement, without preconditions.¹⁵

In the war, Israel did not achieve even the minimal aims that Dayan postulated. The Arab governments were not forced into submission, their armies were not destroyed, their economic base was not badly damaged, and the political initiative remained in Arab hands after the cease-fire. In spite of this failure to obtain the desired aims, the Israeli press unanimously claimed victory, and some maintained it to be greater than that of 1967. In support of this claim, the press pointed to the new territorial acquisitions, the fact that the Arab side sought a cease-fire, the adverse circumstances under which Israel's army had fought and won, the magnitude of the surprise attack that the small regular army faced and blocked, and, finally, how the tide had turned when mobilization peaked. Yet the tone was apologetic, and in comparison with the 1967 triumph and the clamour which ensued, the writing on 1973 was lacklustre and rang hollow. There were no heroes to worship, and an accusing finger was pointed at the leadership. There was not much talk about credit, but there was a great deal about investigative committees to determine the responsibility for mistakes.

Credit went to anonymous soldiers. Individual commanders, like Ariel Sharon, who tried to capitalize on their accomplishments and the blunders of others, found out soon that, in the eyes of the disgruntled public, all the generals were in the same boat. The ruling establishment as a whole realized that recriminations among its members would only widen the already large credibility gap between it and the public. It became clear to the administration that internal mud-slinging in its upper echelons would only increase the doubt in people's minds about the physical security of the state. A settler society in the midst of large indigenous populations like that of Israel cannot withstand the feeling of vulnerable existence, and hence it experienced an atmosphere of disorientation after the war. The need to hush up the internal feud, which even found its way into the foreign press, encouraged the government to

¹⁵ Eliahu Salpeter in *Haaretz*, October 9, 1973.

relegate the whole matter of errors to an official investigative committee to determine the responsibility for the blunders.

In summing up the results of the war, Zeev Shiff said: "The cease-fire saved the Egyptian army and helped it keep some important achievements, while reducing to a large extent the military success of the Israel Defence Forces on the southern front. We caused heavy losses to the Egyptian army, but we did not succeed in reaching our aim of annihilating its forces and destroying its military base. The destruction of hundreds of Egyptian and Syrian tanks and planes will soon be compensated for by the Soviet Union." He saw no strategic significance in the new territorial acquisitions by Israel; on the contrary, he maintained that they constituted a burden on Israel's army. But he ascribed much importance to the fact that the Egyptian army held on to its gains on the Canal, where its forces were dug in with hundreds of tanks. In his view, this was an "achievement which will remain intact even if we occupied the cities of Suez, Ismailiya or Port Fuad. This military achievement will give the Egyptians political advantages, and will guide the steps of the UN and the great powers in imposing a settlement. . . . And if no settlement is achieved, the Arabs will remain convinced that starting the war was useful, and would be worthwhile to try again in the future. . . . The minimum required of us, on that front, was to drive the Egyptians back from Sinai. . . . That, we did not achieve."¹⁶

Shabtai Teveth, however, held the view that Israel's army should have aimed at the destruction of Arab morale during the war, either by demolishing the Russian equipment or by decimating the armed forces themselves; neither aim was realized. Teveth went on to say: "In fact, even without the cease-fire, it is doubtful whether Israel's army could have succeeded in decimating the Egyptian army. . . . To smash the Arab army in a short period, the Israeli army needed much larger forces than it had. On the other hand, to achieve the aim with the available means, would have needed a protracted and exhausting war." Teveth thought that the new cease-fire lines were not as good for Israel as those of 1967, particularly since the Egyptian soldier had gained more confidence in himself and in his equipment. If this was so, he asked: "What then did we achieve?" and answered: "Our only important gain is the lesson we learnt from the Yom Kippur War. There will be no place for complacency and arrogance among us, nor shall there be talk about our readiness to absorb the first strike. In addition, we now recognize the necessity of developing organizational ability, and better methods of dealing with Soviet equipment, which will enable us to destroy the morale of the Arab army

¹⁶ *Haaretz*, October 23, 1973.

immediately after the renewal of fighting — for it will undoubtedly be renewed, as long as peace is not realized.”¹⁷

General (Res.) Ezer Weizmann emphasized in an interview the magnificence of Israeli youth who, he said, had achieved a great victory. In answer to a question about the closing gap between the Israeli and Arab soldier he said: “The gap between Israel’s defence forces and those of Egypt and Syria, inasmuch as it changed, did so in our favour.” Weizmann noted that the Arab armies had an easy start with “tremendous amounts of arms and manpower,” and had they changed much, then they would be deep inside Israel today. According to Weizmann: “The early achievements of the Egyptians and the Syrians did not come about as a result of improvement in their ability, but because of our mistakes. We were not ready for them. They took advantage of it, until the Israeli army had mobilized and deployed its forces.” He admitted that he was surprised by the courage of Arab soldiers, but he was even more surprised when they failed to proceed towards their goals. “There is nothing corrupt in the state,” he claimed, “only the senses were dull in certain levels of the hierarchy. We must sharpen the senses, and all will be well.”¹⁸

Speaking of Israel’s political troubles after the war, General (Res.) Yehoshafat Harkabi said: “One basic reason that distorts our perspective is the imbalance between our military and political powers.” A clear example of Israel’s dilemma, Harkabi explained, “is when it was within our ability to defeat the Egyptian forces, but we were forced to stop.” He blamed the political leadership and exclaimed: “Indeed, on the battlefield we are strong, but in the international arena, we are weak; and that, to a certain extent, is our fault.”¹⁹

While Dov Bar-Nir saw in the results of the war “a great Arab failure,” and was sure that the Arabs would resort to their diplomatic weapons after the cease-fire,²⁰ Yoel Marcus thought that there was enough room for both sides to think that it would be in their interest to renew the fighting.²¹ Mordechai Oren, however, stated that it was due to the efforts of Israel’s army that the cease-fire came about, and not through the activities of anybody else — a reference to Kissinger.²²

In general, the consensus in the Israeli press was that Israel won the war. The debatable questions were: how big was the victory, what good would it do, and at what cost was it achieved?

¹⁷ *Haaretz*, October 23, 1973.

¹⁸ *Maariv*, November 2, 1973.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 24, 1973.

²¹ *Haaretz*, November 7, 1973.

²² *Al-Hamishmar*, October 24, 1973.

THE BIG SURPRISE IN RETROSPECT

For Israel, the October war was full of surprises, but somehow the stress was shifted from the major elements of surprise to the minor or superficial ones. Timing the attack on Yom Kippur was singled out as the decisive element, and hence gained wide publicity. In fact, the Israeli command knew of Arab military preparations some time before the start. The real surprise seems to have been the magnitude of the thrust and the perseverance of an adversary that had been deemed incapable of mounting an offensive on such a scale. Above all, however, the shocking experience was the discovery that Israel's army was not as good as it thought itself to be. Its performance disappointed its supporters, its country, and chiefly itself.

On October 5, the Israeli mass-circulation daily *Maariv* published an article by its military correspondent, Y. Erez, in which he said: "Israeli defence forces continue to watch carefully what takes place on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal. All measures have been taken to prevent the possibility of an Egyptian surprise. The Egyptian News Agency said this week that a state of full alert was announced in the Canal area." Edith Zartal, of *Davar*, wrote an article about the first thirty hours of the war, in which she emphasized the fact that Israel's army, because of movements it observed behind cease-fire lines on both the Egyptian and Syrian sides, had declared a state of full alert among its forces on Thursday, October 4. Zartal also stated that partial mobilization began two days before the outbreak of fighting, and all leave was cancelled to soldiers on Yom Kippur. Furthermore, the Israeli government held an emergency session on the morning of the holiday, five hours before the attack was launched, while intensified mobilization was well under way.²³

S. Ofer, military correspondent of *Davar*, said that Israeli intelligence had indicated Syrian concentration of forces since September 13, 1973. But the command was not able to determine whether this was for offensive or defensive purposes.²⁴ Cabinet members, such as the Minister of Justice, Shapira, and the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Bar-Lev, acknowledged the responsibility of the government for not taking appropriate measures in the face of Arab preparations, and for misreading war signals. Shapira held Dayan accountable for all the losses in life and material, and demanded his resignation. When Dayan refused, Shapira resigned his position in protest. Opposition parties also publicly accused the government of complacency in doing nothing while having concrete information about the impending attack.²⁵

²³ *Davar*, October 12, 1973.

²⁴ *Davar*, October 7, 1973.

²⁵ *Kol Israel* (Israel Radio), October 22, 1973.

According to *Maariv* the Israeli army knew of the Syrian-Egyptian attack from local, as well as foreign sources, but for political considerations abstained from striking first. Israel even refrained from total mobilization, the paper said, for fear that the Arabs would launch their attack and use Israel's move as an excuse.²⁶ M. Gefen wrote in *al-Hamishmar* that the signs were clear and Israel mobilized, but refrained from striking first while efforts were made to arrest the deteriorating situation. In Gefen's view, a pre-emptive strike would have been militarily advantageous, but politically damaging. Israel's isolation in the world was a major consideration in the decision against a first strike.²⁷ Shabtai Tevet, however, thought that over-confidence in the army's ability to handle the situation swayed the government from a pre-emptive attack.²⁸

Zeev Shiff dismissed the idea of trying to explain away the surprise as resulting from faulty interpretation of data by military intelligence on the eve of the war.²⁹ He maintained that "the mistake began on June 11, 1967, when the Six Day War ended. The surprising change in the balance of forces, in the level of Egyptian infantrymen, and the destructive effectiveness of anti-tank weapons which the infantry possessed, could not have happened suddenly between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur." The mistake, Shiff said, "was on the national level and not only on that of the military intelligence. It is true that every high officer I knew tended to be contemptuous of the enemy and exaggerated in his self-confidence. However, this was not the fault of the military alone, but also of the political leaders." According to Shiff, Israel refrained from striking first, because of "the known Israeli feeling of self-confidence," and in order to win world public opinion.³⁰

Israelis in general, particularly since 1967, had developed a low opinion of Arab soldiers. They forgot that on many occasions in past wars when the Arab soldier had a slight chance, he had stood his ground strongly. Some writers reminded their countrymen of the fact. General (Res.) Mattityahu Peled, for instance, wrote a short time before the cease-fire on October 22: "It is obvious, up to this point, that the Egyptian soldier continues to show a strong fighting spirit, and has not lost his will to carry on in the war, despite the heavy losses and the stunning developments to which he has been exposed on the battlefield. We know this phenomenon, and remember it well from the War of Independence. It is worth mentioning that during the Sinai campaign of

²⁶ *Maariv*, October 7, 1973.

²⁷ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 10, 1973.

²⁸ *Haaretz*, November 2, 1973.

²⁹ *Haaretz*, October 26, 1973.

³⁰ *Haaretz*, October 30, 1973.

1956, instances where the Egyptian soldier fought stubbornly and effectively were not infrequent.”³¹

Partly through experience, but mainly through inculcation, the Israeli soldier acquired the notion that war was not a matter for Arabs to indulge in. Hence, the simple fact that Arab soldiers did not run away this time startled the Israeli soldier and man in the street alike. T. Preuss reminded his readers of the War of Attrition, when “despite the terrible blows of Israel’s army, especially those of the air force,” the Egyptian soldiers displayed an “unbelievable ability” to persevere. Preuss gave other examples where the Egyptian army stood its ground and fought honourably. He mentioned the Faluja pocket in 1948, Abu Ageila in 1956, and Rafah in 1967. The results of all the psychological studies which were conducted on Egyptian prisoners of war in 1967, and which showed clearly that they possessed high capacity to persevere, good physical condition, and high combative spirit, had also disappeared into oblivion. The reason behind this curious phenomenon, Preuss maintained, was the arrogant and vain utterances of military commanders and political leaders.³² M. Gefen, regarding the prevalent attitude towards Arab armies, remarked: “The average Israeli, for one reason or another, believes that it is enough to press a button in order to defeat the Arab armies under any circumstances.”³³

This background of self-confidence and complacency threw the Israelis off balance when the Arabs attacked on October 6. General Yitzhak Hofi, commander of the Northern front, described the Syrian thrust as follows: “The Syrians had numerical superiority. They rushed forward like a flame. That happened at night. I do not remember when, but I think it was on the second night . . . the assault continued for eight hours, and they brought into the battle armoured battalions and reinforcements.” Hofi was talking of the Syrian attack on Mount Hermon.³⁴ M. Gefen remarked that the first two days of the war — two days of fear and doubt before the Israeli army regained the initiative — seemed longer than two months.³⁵ “We were stunned by the early successes of the enemy,” Gefen exclaimed, “and the first week was one of sharp shocks to the morale of our public.” In his view, Israeli morale swung from one extreme to the other; “facts changed fast . . . in accordance with our temperament and psychological situation.”³⁶

³¹ *Maariv*, October 21, 1973.

³² *Davar*, October 25, 1973.

³³ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 10, 1973.

³⁴ *Haaretz*, November 2, 1973.

³⁵ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 10, 1973.

³⁶ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 14, 1973.

In the October war, Zeev Shiff observed a higher motivation to fight among Arab soldiers. He ascribed that to "the feeling of national humiliation ... after the successive military debacles." He added: "We noticed that the Arab fighter improved in several matters: his field tactics gave the impression of being good and coherent, despite the fact that they were doctrinal and inflexible; preparation of the forces was more profound, and the training they went through was apparent. These forces broke through into fields which they had not entered before, such as night combat and effective employment of armour in large numbers in the dark. . . . It was possible to notice improvements over the past in Arab technical command of the arms and weapon systems they possessed Their combative spirit was better, they even displayed a spirit of sacrifice in many instances." Still, Shiff maintained that all these improvements related to standstill warfare. In a mobile war, like the one that raged on the Golan, "the Arab soldier failed in most confrontations."³⁷

On the tactical level, Shiff admitted that the Arab soldier presented the Israelis with several surprises. Among other things was the deployment of infantry, armed with a personal anti-tank gun, against heavy armour. He referred to the RPG-7, which was neither new, nor secret, and said: "What surprised us, in particular, was the quantity of such weapons, especially in the hands of Egyptian infantry." The Israeli army, Shiff added, built its armoured units on the principle of facing similar forces, "but the enemy created a situation in which we were not always successful." He deployed infantry against armour, and although he "exposed many of his soldiers to death, he achieved a tactical surprise." To explain this tactical surprise, Shiff said: "We believed that tanks always overwhelm infantry that stands in their way, and lo and behold, the Egyptians daringly leapt onto the tanks . . . Egyptian infantry succeeded in exhausting Israeli armour in the first stage, and built bridges all along the Canal. . . . It became clear to us, as one Israeli leader put it, that the Egyptian fellahin had turned into tank-hunters. The valour which the settlers of Daganian and Negba displayed in the War of Independence was now performed by Egyptian fellahin."³⁸

In the Israeli press, those who acknowledged a change in the quality of Arab armies and gave them credit for what they achieved were in the minority. The majority, however, and understandably so, searched for external factors in support of their argument that nothing new and worth worrying about had happened. It seemed very difficult for them to extricate themselves from the images of Israelis and Arabs that had engulfed Israeli society as a whole for so many years. This phenomenon is not unique to Israel; it is rather common

³⁷ *Haaretz*, October 30, 1973.

³⁸ *Haaretz*, November 4, 1973.

to all settler societies. They are unable to admit to themselves a radical change in the native society which they displaced or dominated, since the implications of this for their survival would be too shattering. Hence, the bulk of Israeli journalists and commentators sought to explain the October war in terms of accidental and external factors, and concentrated on Russian contributions to the Arab war effort (as if Israel fought the October war and all previous ones single-handed with homemade weapons!). In their view, what happened to Israel was simply a result of Russian planning, training, and arming. The general attitude was that an accidental constellation of objective factors led to the crisis that Israel faced. The subjective factors, however, remained the same; the Arab armies were not seen as constituting a new threat. Such problems as there were could be isolated and solved. The Israeli state and the Jewish people were deemed resourceful enough to withstand the crisis on their own terms. In short, no need was felt to re-examine the validity of the basic assumptions of Israeli society.

M. Gefen, for instance, wrote an article on the military and political problems which faced Israel before the war. In it he mentioned three options that Israel had in the face of Arab preparations: to maintain a high level of mobilization, which would paralyze civilian life in the state; to take the initiative and strike first, which Israel had not done; or to man the cease-fire lines with prepared forces, the option which Israel had in fact chosen. (It did not occur to Gefen that there was the possibility of withdrawal from the occupied territories and avoiding war altogether.)³⁹

The most disturbing surprise, however, was in Israel's discovery of the limitations of its power. Before the October war, Israelis developed the illusion of being a big power in the area, to the extent of seeing themselves as policemen of the Arab world, the power entrusted with the task of standing up to the Soviet Union in the Middle East. They were convinced of their deterrent power against the Arabs, and they felt they would soon be self-sufficient in armament. They believed themselves secure in the occupied territories without having to make peace with the Arabs. These notions of the Israelis were nourished by their previous successes. When they looked back on their achievements during twenty-five years of political independence, they saw only a success story.

Suddenly, the October war destroyed this self-image. Israeli soldiers, symbols of heroism in the society, surrendered to the one man they despised most—the Arab soldier. Israelis recognized their vulnerability and dependence on outside powers for their very existence. The arrogant dismissal of world public opinion before the war turned into a gloomy feeling of isolation.

Shabtai Teveth maintained that Israel, as a whole, was to blame for the

³⁹ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 10, 1973.

mishap. "We are all guilty," he said. Teveth derided the talk about the failure of one intelligence officer being the cause for Israel's shortcomings in the war. If the whole matter depended on how short a notice Israel's army had had, then confidence in it was completely baseless, he argued. As for the deterrent power of Israel's army, Teveth noticed that a look backwards showed that it never exerted a deterrent power on the Arabs. If anything, the contrary was true, he added. In Teveth's view, the more powerful the strikes of Israel's army were, the more determined the Arabs became in their struggle to build their forces and meet the challenge.⁴⁰

Commenting on the October war, Shmuel Mikunis, a Communist member of the Knesset, summed up a number of illusions that had beset Israel:

1. That it was possible to have both peace and territories; i.e., to maintain the status quo.
2. That dismissing world opinion was of no consequence.
3. That the gap between Israel's armed forces and those of the Arabs was eternal.⁴¹

THE CREDIBILITY GAP

On the home front in Israel, the October war left many marks. Civilian life was practically paralyzed during and after the fighting. Israel's economy suffered heavily; the routine of life and feeling of security in a self-confident community were shaken; and a whole range of relationships in a society becoming more and more capitalistic was ruptured. But probably the most important development on the internal front was the loss of confidence by the Israeli public in its political leadership. Political commentators wrote extensively on this subject, and will, most likely, continue to do so for some time to come.

Concerning the impact of the war on Israel's internal front, Moshe Dor wrote: "The war of Yom Kippur smashed, like a giant fist, the fool's paradise in which we spoiled ourselves, until we were struck by lightning. Will our life really return to what it used to be before? Is it possible for it to do so? Are we going to forget? Could we do so?" Dor then turned to Israel's political leadership and accused it of bankruptcy and failure to measure up to its responsibility. The leadership, in Dor's view, was so weakened by intra-party strife that he doubted that it could perform its duties in such difficult days. "Our political superstructure has become bankrupt; the best solution to our present situation, in my opinion, is the formation of a government of experts and thinkers, who would administer the state until the crisis passes."⁴²

⁴⁰ *Haaretz*, November 2, 1973.

⁴¹ *Haaretz*, November 8, 1973.

⁴² *Maariv*, October 30, 1973.

Yoel Marcus commented on the state of affairs inside Israel after the war and said: "There is no doubt today that the public is passing through a crisis of confidence; it has no confidence in the existing constants, in the system, or in the media. Many have the feeling that they were deceived, and were not told the truth . . . Everything began with the first day of the war, when a campaign of distortion, cover-up, misleading, and sheer lies was under way, seemingly, to raise morale. This reached the point where Hebrew programmes from Radio Cairo and Jordan television, during the first days of the war, became more reliable sources of information than those of Israel."⁴³

In a sharp attack on the government, and in response to an article by Haim Herzog, who had called for the appointment of an investigative committee to look into blunders committed during the war, a writer named Bar-Tov accused Herzog of being "a commentator who belonged to the establishment," and went on to say: "Despite everything, the leaders of Maarakh and Likud come and call upon us, without shame or hesitation, to vote for lists which they cooked up for us a million years ago." Bar-Tov criticized the way lists of candidates for elections were prepared and asked: "How could we vote today wholesale for meaningless lists, and for persons of whom it might become obvious tomorrow that they should have resigned from political life yesterday, and to whom we ought not to give our votes anyway?"⁴⁴

Concerning the gap that separated the public from the ruling establishment, Levi Yitzhak Hayerushalemi wrote: "He who mixes with people today . . . who visits military bases and posts, would clearly realize to what extent the public does not care for the 'burning issues' which occupy politicians of all kinds . . . What infuriates one is the fact that this small and narrow group did not learn anything from the awesome shock which affected us; they talk about it as if it had spared them. They continue to talk and write in the same arbitrary way which poisoned us in the period between the last two wars as if nothing had happened. In the past they emphatically said: the deterrent power of Israel's army existed beyond any shadow of a doubt. Today they say: Israel's army lost its deterrent power. Is that not a bitter draft to swallow?"⁴⁵

Haaretz (November 23, 1973) gave a summary of a poll that was conducted after the war and included all parts of the country, about the popularity of the political leadership in Israel. "The Israeli public is engulfed in much confusion with regard to its stand *vis à vis* the political leadership." The poll found that the popularity of Golda Meir and Dayan had declined, but the public was unable to chose replacements to lead Israel in this difficult time.

⁴³ *Haaretz*, November 6, 1973.

⁴⁴ *Maariv*, November 14, 1973.

⁴⁵ *Maariv*, November 7, 1973.

About half the population did not approve of Meir's conduct of state affairs. Dayan was seen as less of a leader after the war, but the majority did not want him to resign. Yigal Allon took the lead in the poll as the most viable replacement for Meir, with 20.5 per cent of the votes. Second came Menachem Begin⁴⁶ with 11.5, and Dayan ran third with 10.5 per cent. The paper pointed out that "the most striking phenomenon with regard to the question of the prime minister was that 39.9 per cent of the public were unable to select a candidate for the position."

The credibility gap was not limited to the political leadership; it extended also to the military command. Shabtai Teveth commented on the matter with grief: "One of the painful lessons of the Yom Kippur War was the lack of credibility in the official spokesman of the Israeli army. What hurt more was the extension of that feeling beyond the particular individual to the institution which he represented." Teveth added: "What became clear in the war is that the leadership at the head of the army, either knew things and did not understand them, or did not know and understand, and even was unable to impose its authority and unity of action at certain stages of the battle."⁴⁷ M. Gefen also spoke of the credibility gap between the public and the military spokesman. But he gave credit to General Yariv, "who in his television appearance brought the Israelis down from the world of victory dreams to the reality of a bitter war." Gefen praised Yariv for his stepping in and setting matters straight without shaking the public's confidence in the ultimate victory of Israel's army.⁴⁸

ISRAEL, THE WAR AND THE WORLD

After 1967, Israel defied the world community by refusing to implement UN resolutions on the conflict. It felt itself capable of disregarding world public opinion, so long as it enjoyed the support of the United States. As for the United States itself, Israel began to see in it an ally that could not afford to be antagonistic. A general attitude of contempt towards the world organization and international public opinion spread in Israel. This was paralleled by a similar tendency, clearly noticeable, to break free of the custodianship of the World Zionist Organization. During the war, however, a feeling of isolation came to dominate Israel; her reaction to the general attitude of most states in the world was one of anger, feeling herself deceived by the Christian world, betrayed by Black Africa, and unjustly persecuted by the socialist bloc. In

⁴⁶ Menachem Begin is leader of the Herut party, allied to the liberals in the Gahal, and more recently, Likud lists.

⁴⁷ *Haaretz*, November 5, 1973.

⁴⁸ *Al-Hamishmar*, October 14, 1973.

view of her political isolation, Israel felt that she was left with only one reliable ally — the United States — and only one faithful friend — the Jewish people.

Elef Shem complained that Israel was unable to use her most effective weapon — the army — because of international intervention to impose a cease-fire. He bitterly protested against the attitude of the world, and wrote: "Jews cannot sit and wait for 'good will' from the conscience of the Free World."⁴⁹ In another article, the same writer regretted the fact that Israel was ruled by an old leadership, which had formed its ideas in a different era. He hoped that the Israeli government realized how the whole world had betrayed the Jews. He went on to say: "It is probably necessary to repeatedly remind Israeli policy-makers that this is the same world which murdered six million Jews. This world is not only Germany, but Christian Europe, with the mute approval of Britain and the United States."⁵⁰

Y. Gothelf remarked that Israel's situation in the world was deteriorating, and the reasons were many. Among other things he mentioned the self-interest of states and ideological differences such as those existing between Zionism and Communism. But the writer dwelt most strongly on anti-Semitism, which he blamed for the current hostility towards Israel. In his view, anti-Semitism which had been dormant for some time had flared up again during the war. He suggested that his government give first priority to combating the centres of anti-Semitism.⁵¹

Shabtai Teveth classified the United States as an ally who had not stood by Israel as the Soviet Union had by the Arabs. He made the observation that the more Israel became isolated in the international arena, the more difficult it became for the United States to continue its support. Teveth maintained that the only friend Israel had was "the Jewish people.... It is Israel's reserve, in every sense of the word... the isolation and alienation that surround Israel emphasize that fact anew."⁵²

Amnon Rubinstein commented that "although Israel won all the wars it fought against the Arabs, yet its victory created a vicious circle of continuous wars." He gave the example of Egypt, which had favoured Jewish struggle against the British during the Mandate, and which had now become Israel's chief adversary. Rubinstein exclaimed, "We became a Rhodesia — with the difference that we are surrounded by enemies." He called for installing a political leader at the head of the military establishment.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Haaretz*, November 13, 1973.

⁵⁰ *Haaretz*, November 15, 1973.

⁵¹ *Davar*, November 2, 1973.

⁵² *Haaretz*, October 16, 1973.

⁵³ *Haaretz*, November 16, 1973.

Venomous attacks were directed by the Israeli press against the Soviet Union who was blamed for many Israeli troubles. H. Yustus claimed that the Soviet Union had succeeded in having the United States execute Russian policy in the Middle East and saw Kissinger as a kind of Chamberlain. Yustus called for an extensive propaganda campaign in the United States and elsewhere, over the heads of the local governments, in the conviction that public opinion in the world supported Israel, while governmental policies were guided purely by self-interest.⁵⁴ Yoel Marcus, however, warned the Israeli government against making a fatal mistake in misreading Soviet intentions.⁵⁵

The Israeli press expressed great disappointment in African behaviour during the war. Israel's reaction to the repeated severance of diplomatic relations was angry and frustrated, and in many cases there were irrational and highly emotional attacks on African states and leaders. *Yediot Aharonot* published an unsigned article about Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, which resorted to sheer name-calling. Others more coolly suggested cooperation with Christian missionaries to improve Israel's image in Africa.⁵⁶

A. Avneri dealt with the matter of Jewish support for Israel, and concluded that material aid was not enough. In his view, world Jewry understood Israel's needs in terms of contributions, but the Jews in the Diaspora "do not understand one thing, and that is: Israel could be saved time and again, but it cannot be safe until its population reaches eight or ten millions." He blamed world Jewry for not giving enough importance to the "fact" that they had no existence without the state of Israel. Hence, Avneri concluded, "It is forbidden for us to allow Jews to set their consciences at rest by financial contributions, irrespective of their generosity. We must push for immigration. Funds are necessary, but immigration is vital."⁵⁷ The war had once again brought Israelis face-to-face with the inherent weakness of their situation as a small population attempting to impose its will upon the surrounding area.

⁵⁴ *Maariv*, November 9, 1973.

⁵⁵ *Haaretz*, November 9, 1973.

⁵⁶ *Yediot Aharonot*, October 24, 1973.

⁵⁷ *Davar*, November 2, 1973.