

FROM GROUPTHINK TO POLYTHINK IN THE YOM KIPPUR WAR DECISIONS OF 1973¹

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Abstract: Numerous studies on decision making in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 claim that a groupthink syndrome led to the faulty assessment and processing of information prior to the Yom Kippur War.

In this paper, based on official transcripts of the meetings held on the morning of October 6, 1973 in the office of then Defence Minister Moshe Dayan and in the office of then Prime Minister Golda Meir, and based on the Agranat Report (the inquiry into the circumstances leading to the 1973 war), we show that the well-known groupthink syndrome which characterised decision-making until the evening of October 5, 1973 changed in the early morning of October 6, 1973 to a polythink syndrome – a polarised and divided decision-making dynamic among members of the decision unit. Important theoretical insights and policy implications are derived from this case study.

Keywords: Groupthink, Polythink, Yom Kippur War, Moshe Dayan, Israel

Introduction

Shortly before 4am on October 6, 1973, Brigadier General Israel Lior, the Military Secretary to the Prime Minister of Israel called then Prime Minister Golda Meir and reported that a message he received from the Mossad read, “Today a war will break out.” Prime Minister Golda replied, “I knew it would happen. What do we do?”²

The decision unit on the morning of October 6, 1973 consisted of: Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defence Minister Moshe Dayan, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. David (Dado) Elazar, Military Intelligence Chief Major General Eli Zeira, Assistant Minister of Defence and former Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. (res.) Zvi Tzur, Cabinet Ministers Israel Galili and Yigal Allon.³

Two major meetings were attended that morning by members of this decision making group. The first took place at 05:45am in the office of Moshe Dayan, attended by the chief of staff, chief of intelligence and other senior military officials.⁴ The

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the ISA, February 22, 2017

2 Haber, 1987, p. 13

3 State Archives, 1973, p. 1

4 IDF Archives, 1973, p. 1

second meeting, held in the office of Golda Meir at 08:05am, was attended by the prime minister, defence minister, the chief of staff, assistant defence minister, and ministers Galili and Alon.⁵

Following “solid intelligence” from Mossad agent Ashraf Marwan, who was a senior Egyptian official and a close associate of then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, war would break later that day.

In light of this information, five alternatives were examined: a pre-emptive strike against Egypt and Syria; a pre-emptive strike against the Syrian air force and its missiles solely; the mobilisation of reserves for the purposes of both defence and attack; the mobilisation of reserves for defence purposes alone; and finding a diplomatic solution along with the mobilisation of reserves.⁶

In this paper, we examine the views of members of the aforementioned decision making group and its intra-group dynamic regarding: a pre-emptive strike; the mobilisation of reserves; and the likelihood of the outbreak of war on that day.

We shall first briefly discuss the polythink syndrome along with the groupthink concept. We then examine the positions of the various decision makers regarding the possibility of launching a pre-emptive strike on the morning of October 6, 1973. Then we analyse the issues of calling up reserves, and the assessment of the likelihood of war breaking

Groupthink and Polythink

Groupthink, as introduced by Irving Janis,⁷ is a well-known concept recognised by scholars of group decision making and behavioural decision making. At the core of groupthink is the claim that members of a decision making group often make homogenised, uniform decisions due to social pressure, a leader’s influential position, self-censorship, etc.

Studies thus far on decisions of the 1973 Yom Kippur War indicate that groupthink was the main reason for the so-called “concept” which prevailed in the decision making forum and led to the strategic surprise of the Yom Kippur War.⁸ According to Bar-Joseph and Levy⁹ the underlying assumptions of the “concept” were: 1) the Egyptians would not attack Israel before they could disable or successfully meet

5 State Archives, 1973, p. 1

6 IDF Archives, 1973, p 3; Archive state, 1973, p. 5

7 Janis, I. L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (2nd ed). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

8 These papers, although debating the scope of the groupthink dynamic’s prevalence in decision making forums during the critical days preceding the outbreak of war nevertheless maintain it had played a significant role throughout the events preceding October 6th, 1973, and up until the outbreak of war; see for example Bar-Joseph’s (2001, p. 243) assertion that groupthink was evident in the forum comprised of the military intelligence directorate’s heads of the research department branches, or Chorev’s (1996, pp. 16–17) and Johnson and Tierney’s (2006, p. 186) claims that this dynamic existed in the senior forum headed by then-Prime Minister Golda Meir and membered by (among others) Chief of Staff David Elazar, Minister of Defence Moshe Dayan, Minister of Economy Haim Bar-Lev, and Head of Intelligence Eli Zeira. This contention is supported by Former Mossad director Zvi Zamir’s account of the decision making faults prior to the war (Opall-Rome, 2013) and is challenged only at the margins (see for example Brecher’s (2017, p. 358) mention of diverging advocacies among senior forum members in the early days of war).

9 Bar-Joseph, U. and J. Levy (2009). Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure. *Political Science Quarterly*, 124: 3: 461–488