ANWAR SADAT
AND THE
YOM KIPPUR WAR

COURSE 1: FOUNDATIONS OF
NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

On October 6, 1973, thousands of Egyptian troops massed on the west bank of the Suez canal awaiting the order to cross and retake territory occupied by Israel since the 1967 six-day war. As more than 200 jets roared overhead enroute to Israeli targets in the Sinai, the Egyptians swelled into action, eager to reclaim not only the occupied territory, but their honor. The Yom Kippur War was more than an Arab attempt to evict Israel, it was a calculated move by Anwar Sadat to reverse the humiliation and defeat of the 1967 war, restore Egypt and the Arab world to a position of international strength, and pave the way for peaceful settlement of middle east problems. Sadat had a clear vision of his political objectives for the war, and he achieved those objectives--not by decisive military action, but by opening the door for a U.S.-mediated peace process.

The focus of this paper is statecraft, not generalship. Instead of analyzing how the war was fought, it will address why it was fought, with specific emphasis on the role of Anwar Sadat. Part I deals with the context of world events and circumstances that led Sadat to believe war was an essential element of his grand strategy, part II describes how he used the instruments of statecraft to develop and execute that grand strategy, and part III summarizes the aftermath of the militarily indecisive war as a political victory for Anwar Sadat.

I. GRAND STRATEGY AND WAR

PRE-1967 NASIRISM

When Anwar Sadat came to power in 1970 following the death of his colleague 'Abd al-Nasir, he inherited a world position weakened by the humiliating defeat of the 1967 six-day war with Israel. Since the mid-1950's, his predecessor had pursued an aggressive leadership role among Arab nations, championing the Palestinian cause and representing the Arab world in its rocky relations with Israel. Nasir's objective was to create an Egyptian-controlled Arab bloc that spoke with one voice to the outside world.[1] When the Arab League created the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, it was largely under Egyptian control, with a military arm imbedded within the armies of several Arab nations. This PLO network not only strengthened Nasir's pan-Arab leadership role, it made Egypt a prime target for retaliation by Israel, increasingly enraged by PLO attacks within its borders.

Anticipating an attack by Israel, Nasir asked the United Nations to withdraw its forces from positions in the Sinai and concluded military agreements with Syria and Jordan. Israel, prompted by the Arab sabre-rattling, and confident of military and

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[1] Albert Hourani, <u>A History of the Arab Peoples</u> (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1991) 411.

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political superiority, launched a preemptive strike on June 5, 1967, decimating the Arab forces and expanding her territorial boundaries.

In the world's eyes, Israel had cast off the stigma of the holocaust to emerge as a proud, invincible nation. The balance of power in the middle east changed overnight and the Arab nations, under Egyptian leadership, suffered severe setbacks with no resolution of the Israeli issue. Anwar Sadat Knew what had to be done even before he came to power.

SADAT'S POST-1967 GRAND STRATEGY

For Sadat, the post-1967 status quo was unacceptable. Israeli occupation of Arab territory had expanded, and relative Arab weakness created a stalemate that made resolution of the Palestinian issue of little interest to the superpowers. The Soviet Union had a comfortable foothold and client state in Egypt, and was moving toward detente with the United States. The United States recognized Israel as a strong, desirable ally and did not want to reduce her position of strength in the region.

Sadat recognized, however, that Arab-Israeli differences could never be resolved without superpower involvement. The United States would never allow Arab conquest of Israel, and the Soviet Union was not likely to abandon its client states. Yet resolution of those differences on terms agreeable to Egypt and the rest of the Arab world was the very foundation of Egyptian national interest. Sadat knew that he could not force Israeli withdrawal

from occupied territories and return the Palestinian homeland with Egyptian power alone, or with any coalition of Arab nations for that matter. But he could influence the degree of superpower involvement in the process.

Sadat developed a multi-faceted grand strategy to achieve his national security objectives of resolving the Palestinian issue and elevating the Arab-Israeli dispute to the superpower level. First he had to restore Egyptian self-confidence and promote pan-Arab unity under Egyptian leadership. Second, he needed to isolate Israel in world public opinion. Third, he had to retake and hold portions of the Sinai and Golan Heights lost to Israel during the 1967 war. Finally, he had to shock the superpowers into taking the lead in resolving Arab-Israeli disputes. Given the unacceptable pro-Israeli status quo following the 1967 war, Sadat saw no alternative to war as a central element of his grand strategy and came to power promising the Egyptian people a "Battle of Destiny."

II. INSTRUMENTS OF STATECRAFT

COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

Sadat's adroit use of the instruments of statecraft made his battle of destiny a successful reality. One of his first moves in restoring Egyptian self-confidence was dealing with the Soviet Union's heavy-handed involvement in the political and military affairs of Egypt. He felt that the Soviets took their Egyptian

access for granted, and feared world perception as a puppet leader under Soviet guardianship.

As diplomatic relations concerning arms transfers to Egypt became mired in Soviet bureaucracy, Sadat became increasingly annoyed and shifted to coercive diplomacy. In a five-point message to the Soviet leaders he gave them one week to leave Egypt. Although some Soviet advisors remained beyond the deadline, the Egyptians (especially the military) were buoyed by Sadat's aggressive stance and glad to be rid of what they considered a crude, inconsiderate element.

Another effective example of Sadat's coercive diplomacy was his use of an oil embargo to gain world acceptance of Arab demands and to isolate Israel. Japan and Europe wasted no time in seeing the light, but the United States, although shaken by its vulnerability to Arab oil dependence, did not abandon Israel. Sadat did not completely isolate Israel, but he gave the world a very important lesson in unified Arab economic power and definitely got the attention of the United States. Through coercive diplomacy, he advanced three elements of his grand strategy: restoring Egyptian self-confidence, isolating Israel in world public opinion, and shocking the United States into assuming a leadership role in Arab-Israeli affairs.

DIPLOMATIC PERSUASION

Diplomatic persuasion was Anwar Sadat's most effective tool of statecraft in advancing his goal of pan-Arab unity. In the months

before the October war he spent considerable time cultivating the support of the Arab Socialist Union, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the Non-Aligned summit Conference. The Arab Socialist Union was one of Sadat's first contacts after expelling the Soviets, "to inform them that my decision to expel Soviet experts meant we would be going to war, not the other way around."[2] The Arab Socialist Union was a Nasir creation designed to channel information about government intentions to the people, an important contact because Sadat had come under increasing criticism at home for not living up to his promise of a battle of destiny.

Recognizing the importance of African and third world support for his grand strategy, Sadat courted the OAU and the Non-Aligned Summit Conference during the summer and early fall of 1973. This diplomacy paid tremendous dividends when most African states ceased diplomatic relations with Israel in support of Egypt, and most of the non-aligned countries supported his plan for the inevitable war with Israel.

Fortunately, Sadat did not have to use much diplomatic persuasion with the other mainstream Arab countries because he came to power with close personal ties to the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Syria was already a military ally of Egypt and a mutual benefactor of soviet arms. If the other Arab countries such as Jordan and Iraq were not willing combatants they were at least sympathetic supporters of the

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[2]Anwar el-Sadat, <u>In Search of Identity: An Autobiography</u> (Mit Abul-Kum: Harper & Row, 1977, 1978) 233.

Egyptian cause.

That Sadat had the backing of the Arab world for his campaign against Israel is not surprising, for that seems to be the one issue that unites the Arab countries. Had they fully appreciated that Anwar Sadat's purpose was as much to open the door for negotiations as it was for military gain, that support may not have been as unanimous. Nevertheless, Sadat used the instruments of statecraft that were at his disposal to restore Egyptian self-confidence, isolate Israel in world public opinion, and create a sense of pan-Arab unity in support of his grand strategy. He could not, however, reverse the humiliation of the 1967 defeat or hope to regain any lost territory without military action, and mobilized his armed forces for an attack on Israel to coincide with the Yom Kippur holiday.

III. POLITICAL VICTORY

Through a combination of strategic deception, surprise, numerical superiority, and enhanced Soviet weaponry, Egyptian forces achieved notable successes during the first days of fighting. Having established bridgeheads across the Suez Canal, however, they failed to maintain the initiative and exploit early Israeli confusion. The Israelis managed to gain the initiative, counterattack, and cut off the Egyptian Third Army before the United States intervened to influence a cease-fire on October 23.

Although neither side claimed complete victory, momentum was

clearly in favor of the Israelis, especially considering the massive U.S. airlift in progress at the time of the cease-fire. On the other hand the Egyptians achieved honorable successes and were spared another defeat by the cease-fire. Militarily, the war achieved little, but as the culmination of Anwar Sadat's grand strategy, it achieved a great deal. In 1977, Anwar Sadat paid a historic visit to Jerusalem to offer Israel an opening for peace by direct negotiations.[3] By 1978 both he and Menahem Begin signed the Camp David Agreement in the United States with President Carter's mediation. Sadat would never have initiated or agreed to those meetings if he had to go with his hat in hand, haunted by the 1967 defeat.

The best way to put the Yom Kippur War into perspective is to imagine a spectrum of Arab-Israeli relations. On the far left of the spectrum is the humiliating Arab defeat of 1967. On the far right is the Camp David Agreement, with Egypt and Israel negotiating from mutual positions of strength. The Yom Kippur War was the essential element of Anwar Sadat's grand strategy to get from one end of the spectrum to the other. Statecraft played an important role in galvanizing Egyptian and Arab support, and in restoring Egypt to the Egyptians by evicting the Soviets, but Sadat could not have achieved his goal of bargaining strength or superpower involvement without the October war.

Future strategists should use caution in applying the Sadat

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[3] Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard UP, 1991) 420.

spectrum of war in conflict resolution, because during the "battle of destiny," the United States and Soviet Union reached the brink of nuclear mobilization. This was not in Sadat's plans and underscores Clausewitz' theory of the fog and friction of war. The most important point is that Anwar Sadat pulled it off; he was a world-class statesman who had a clear vision of his political objectives and achieved them with an ingenious grand strategy of statecraft and war. It's hard to argue with success.