

OTHER NATIONS

MISSING SIGNAL

THE SOURCE: “The ‘Special Means of Collection’” by Uri Bar-Joseph, in *The Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2013.

ON OCTOBER 6, 1973—YOM KIPPUR, THE Jewish “Day of Atonement”—Egyptian and Syrian forces launched surprise attacks on Israeli positions in the Sinai Peninsula and along the Golan Heights, on Israel’s contested border with Syria. With many Israeli soldiers observing the holy day away from their posts, the invaders made quick gains. The vaunted

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were sent reeling. Though they eventually beat back the offensive, success came at the cost of more than 8,000 Israeli casualties, as well as the confident assumption that the still-young country was prepared for anything.

Since its victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel had been waiting for such an attack, and military and political leaders, including Prime Minister Golda Meir, were sure they could anticipate such a strike at least 48 hours ahead of time. After the war, citizens and politicians alike were left wondering, *what happened?*



MANUEL LITRAN / PARIS MATCH VIA GETTY IMAGES

A battle-smudged Syrian soldier pauses during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Syria and Egypt made great gains at first because Israeli leaders ignored warnings that an attack was imminent.

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The military intelligence chief never informed his superiors that he failed to activate “the special means.”

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“Forty years after it was first asked, the question still haunts the Israeli public,” says Uri Bar-Joseph, a professor of international relations at Haifa University, Israel. Writing in *The Middle East Journal*, he argues that Israel’s leaders were betrayed by their faith in technology, in the form of a still-secret tool called the “special means of collection.”

The Agranat Commission, convened after the war to investigate the failure, placed most of the blame at the feet of Aman, Israel’s military intelligence department, which was then the nation’s only source of intelligence analysis. According to the commission, Aman analysts and higher-ups clung with a “persistent adherence” to their assumption that Egypt wouldn’t go to war until it gained long-range fighter planes capable of destroying the Israeli Air Force, and Scud missiles to deter

an Israeli strike deep into Egypt. The Agranat Commission’s conclusions led to the dismissal of the IDF’s chief of staff, David Elazar, and the head of Aman, Major General Eli Zeira.

In 1993, Zeira published his own account, blaming the Mossad, the Israeli agency in charge of foreign espionage. He claimed the agency was duped by its top spy in Egypt—a close adviser to Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Ashraf Marwan, who was actually a double agent.

But most intelligence officers dismiss this account, saying Marwan *did* warn the Mossad. Bar-Joseph writes that “the wealth of information that has become available in recent years” makes it plain that Prime Minister Meir and other top leaders had “ample warnings” of a strike, but chose to disregard evidence from the Mossad and other sources.

Why? Bar-Joseph contends that they had a false sense of security based on possession of a top-secret technological trump card: the “special means of collection.” According to a source cited by Bar-Joseph, the “special means of collection,” which remains classified, was a “series of battery-operated devices attached to phone and cable connections buried deep in the sand outside Cairo.” They reportedly allowed Israel not only

to eavesdrop on telephone and cable traffic, but to listen in on conversations occurring in rooms “where the telephones and telex consoles were located.” Meir and Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan were certain the “special means of collection” would alert them to any Arab moves.

Unbeknownst to Meir and Dayan, however, the eavesdropping devices were turned off. “A few months before the outbreak of the war,” Bar-Joseph explains, “one of the ‘special means’ accidentally fell into Egypt’s hands.” Worried about exposing the other “means,” officials decided to limit their use and placed the sole authorization to activate them in the hands of military intelligence chief Zeira. When the Egyptian army began a military exercise on October 1, many in the Israeli military and intelligence agencies began to worry—the Egyptians’ Soviet backers had used the same cover to launch their 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Though these officers repeatedly begged Zeira to activate the “special means,” he refused, until the

morning of October 6. But by then it was too late.

Zeira never informed his superiors that he failed to activate “the special means,” and may even have deceived them. Dayan and IDF chief of staff Elazar believed they had been switched on and had merely produced no actionable intelligence. It wasn’t until the Agranat Commission’s investigation that the truth came out, but much of the testimony has only recently been released.

“Why Zeira acted the way he did is a mystery which is not likely to be fully solved,” writes Bar-Joseph. A psychological study suggests that the intelligence head had little tolerance for ambiguity and a very high degree of confidence in Israel’s military superiority, which may have convinced him not to activate the “special means.” But neither the study nor the new material from the Agranat Commission can offer anything but incomplete explanations for Zeira’s remarkable failure to play the ace up Israel’s sleeve—and his failure to prepare a nation for war. ■