

Remembering the Yom Kippur War

This October marks the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, when Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel during the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Because of the unexpected nature of the attack, in the first few days of the war the Egyptians and Syrians made prominent gains. But with great force and determination the Israel Defense Forces turned the tables and began to win the war. Israel's sudden upper hand led both Egypt and Syria to accept a cease-fire, setting the course for the relations between each country and Israel that we see today.

The Yom Kippur War was especially important in forming the relationship between Israel and Egypt. For many in the Arab world, Israel's crushing defeat of the attacking Arab nations during the 1967 Six Day War added a sense of hurt pride to an already intense animosity for the tiny Jewish state. At the outset of the Yom Kippur war, that pride was restored. Though they would ultimately lose in the end, Egypt and Syria along with the rest of the Arab world found that the first few days of the Yom Kippur War helped them psychologically recover from the conflict just six years earlier. With their egos restored, even despite the loss, the Egyptians could negotiate with Israel as equals and more readily accept a peace treaty.

By the same token, Israel's ability to defeat the Egyptians and Syrians also helped convince many in the Arab world that Israel's military force could not be defeated, thereby incentivizing peace movements and delaying the Arab ambition of destroying Israel by force. That sentiment has remained in place for the last 40 years. Though relations with Egypt have at times been tense, Egypt has always upheld its end of the Camp David Accords that established peace between Israel and its southern neighbor—a peace that was formed, ultimately, as a result of the Yom Kippur War.

Today, unrest inside Egypt has reached historic levels as the Egyptian military takes the Muslim Brotherhood to task. However, even the uncertainty within Egypt has yet to rock the treaty with Israel. This is no small consideration. Beyond being the symbol of the notion that Israel cannot be defeated by conventional military force, the peace treaty with Israel includes full diplomatic relations, keeping the Sinai a demilitarized zone, permitting the presence in the Sinai of the U.S.-led Multinational Force and Observers, and maintaining freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal even for Israeli warships.

As we commemorate the 40th anniversary of this historic war, we honor the soldiers who gave their lives to make Israel a stronger and safer place. Their memories are a testament to peace, in more ways than they may have ever imagined.