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12 May 1975
OCI No. 0668/75

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Factors Affecting Arab and Israeli Politico-Military Decisions

1. The salient aspects of the present stage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which will govern developments through the rest of 1975, are these:

--Israel is following a course which closely resembles Prime Minister Rabin's "seven lean years" strategy, seeking to avoid either another major war or a comprehensive settlement until the political balance in the Middle East and in the world at large can be shifted more decisively in Israel's favor.

--President Sadat, and to a lesser degree President Asad, continue to pin their hopes on US actions which will produce some gains for the Arabs at an acceptable price, with at least the promise of further gains leading to an eventual settlement. If diplomatic efforts fail to produce such gains, the Arab states will again have recourse to military action.

--In the short term, Israel can "win" the current phase of the conflict if it succeeds in avoiding a major war.

--The Arab equivalent of "winning" is less easily definable. It may suffice for a short time if Israel is seen to be on the defensive and, in moral terms, losing ground. Eventually, however, Arab leaders

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will need something more substantial to show as evidence that they are making headway toward the restoration of their occupied territory and a "just" disposition of Palestinian aspirations.

--Israel's primary objectives will be to maintain its military superiority relative to the Arabs as a short-term deterrent to aggression and to regain the moral and material support of the United States which is vital to its long-term existence.

--Arab objectives will be to increase Israel's international isolation while building up the political, military and economic strength of the front line states so that they can challenge Israel directly.

2. A problem for the US is to determine at what point and under what circumstances one or the other side will employ military action to thwart its adversary's objectives or to advance its own. A second problem is to determine under what circumstances significant escalation of hostilities might occur.

3. The most likely result of any significant military provocation by one of the parties to the Middle East cease-fire and disengagement agreements would be immediate general hostilities. Any state that launches an attack will thus be doing so in the expectation that a full-scale war could result. The exception is in the Lebanon-Israel border area, where a recurrence of raids and counter-raids between the fedayeen and the Israel Defense Forces would not necessarily lead to a general Arab-Israeli war.

4. In these circumstances the present threshhold for deliberate military action is fairly high, since a nearly certain result of such action will be severe material and personnel losses for all sides.

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5. Full-scale war initiated or provoked by the Arab side could nevertheless occur whenever one--or more likely all--of the principal Arab leaders had concluded that Washington was either unwilling or unable to elicit negotiating concessions from Israel or arrange a conference at which comprehensive settlement conditions could be discussed.

6. Israel might bring on unprovoked hostilities by miscalculating Arab intentions and launching a pre-emptive strike. In time, Israel could come to the conclusion that its long-term security could best be preserved by dealing one of its opponents a lightning, knockout blow to forestall indefinitely an eventual coalition attack.

Possible Arab Scenarios and Decision Points

7. The Arabs could undertake aggressive acts short of war, but they carry very high risks of provoking a massive reaction by Israel. Low on the scale of provocative actions would be a build-up of foreign Arab forces behind the disengagement zones in Egypt and Syria and in Jordan. Such actions would not violate any agreements with Israel or the United States but they would cause great alarm. A more direct and highly provocative action--which the Israelis believe is under consideration by President Sadat--would be the transfer of additional forces to the east bank of the Suez Canal under the pretext of protecting international shipping. This is an option Sadat could exercise when the canal is formally reopened on June 5, when the UNEF mandate expires in July, or at any time the Egyptians conclude that a sharp increase in Middle East tensions is called for.

8. Abrogating UN forces mandates or letting them expire is an obvious pressure point. When Israeli leaders were insufficiently forthcoming following the "cease-fire / standstill"

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agreement arranged by Secretary Rogers in 1970, Sadat eventually let the truce period expire while pledging not to take immediate military action; this is a pressure tactic he could employ again.

9. There appears to be only one situation in which a limited war of attrition would recommend itself to Egyptian strategists. If Syria initiated military action, of any scale, against Egypt's wishes, the Egyptians might hope to limit their own participation by opening limited fighting on the Sinai front. They would gamble on a harsh Israeli response, but they might hope that low-level action of their own would be enough to show the flag for the Arabs without inducing more than a reply in kind from Israel.

10. We see virtually no circumstances in which it would be advantageous for Egypt itself to initiate a limited war of attrition. The Egyptians had bitter experience with their own war of attrition in 1969-70, and they discovered that fighting on this scale not only produces no results in extracting more acceptable negotiating terms from Israel, but in fact inflicts greater physical and psychological damage on Egypt than on Israel. They should have even more reason to fear the results of such a war in 1975, when the Israelis are far better armed and far less likely than in 1969 to exercise restraint.

11. A more limited war of attrition such as occurred on the Golan Heights early in 1974 is probably no more attractive an alternative for the Egyptians. They would risk the same harsh response by Israel, inflicting minimal damage themselves, and they probably have little confidence that such fighting, even if maintained at a low level, could force the Israelis to make diplomatic concessions. Whatever the Syrians believe, the Egyptians attribute the successful May 1974 Golan disengagement not to Syrian military harassments but to the impact on Israel of the 1973 war and to the efforts of Secretary Kissinger.

12. If the Egyptians again resort to military action, they would thus most likely opt for protracted full-scale hostilities on at least two and possibly three fronts. The purpose, more so

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than in 1973, would be to sap Israel's economic and psychological strength without necessarily attempting to gain a military victory or to regain territory lost in 1967. The Egyptians, less well prepared than in 1973 and facing a better prepared foe, are acutely aware that renewed fighting would risk the military gains they have already made. They would thus be likely to fight a defensive war by provoking an Israeli offensive, perhaps by a limited advance into the Sinai, air raids on Israel's Sinai airbases, or a commando raid on the oil fields, after which they would fall back to fight from well defended positions in their territory on the Canal's east bank. They would hope through this strategy to protect their own positions, thus better enabling them to prolong the fighting while inflicting maximum casualties on the Israelis over an extended period.

13. The point at which the Egyptians might see merit in a strategy such as this is almost impossible to determine, depending as it does on a complex mix of factors: The Egyptians' view of the US attitude; their view, whatever the reality, of the balance of forces and of their ability to sustain prolonged warfare without suffering a conclusive defeat; and the balance, in their minds, between the possible political and military costs of a war that they might lose and the political costs of tolerating a diplomatic stalemate.

14. If President Sadat came to believe that the US was relaxing pressure on Israel, he could very quickly revert to the logic that led to warfare in 1973, in the belief that only a manifest crisis could again spur serious US mediation efforts. He could reach this judgment as early as July, when the UNEF mandate expires on the Sinai front and he is again faced with the choice of renewing the mandate or risking military action by allowing it to lapse.

15. Syrian leaders have exhibited less patience than the Egyptians with the tortuous pace of negotiations, but their Golan front forces have maintained a circumspect defensive

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posture throughout the past year. President Asad probably has less faith than Sadat does in the efficacy of US efforts to achieve further steps toward a settlement by quiet diplomacy, and Syrian expectations of further fighting appear to be more fatalistic. Syria's strength relative to Israel's is not likely to improve very much over the next year and could decline if more and better US equipment is absorbed into Israeli inventories. There is thus some incentive for Syria, particularly if joined by Egypt and Jordan, to return to war this year in the hope of jolting Israel out of its static negotiating positions, regenerating outside political forces into forcing a political solution, or at least contributing to Israel's eventual exhaustion by continuing a series of debilitating wars.

16. Unilateral action b Syria to put military pressure on Israel is fraught with danger for the Damascus government. Syrians are aware that Israeli strategists would like to deal with Syria in isolation from Egypt with the aim of decisively reducing its military potential. Any Syrian provocation thus runs the risk of incurring a lightning and probably overwhelming attack by Israel to knock out Syria before Egypt and other Arab states could intervene.

17. Even the initiation of small-scale artillery bombardments and raids against Israeli lines, such as occurred during the months preceding the Syria-Israel disengagement agreement in 1974, would risk massive retaliation from Israel, either because its leaders would interpret such action as a prelude to an all-out attack or out of a desire to exploit the provocation to destroy Syria's war-making capability.

18. Somewhat more conceivable would be Syrian support for fedayeen attacks out of Lebanon or, less likely, across the disengagement lines. Such attacks would have the desired effect of underlining Arab impatience with Israel's policies and, ideally, inflicting annoying casualties on Israeli soldiers and civilians. If Israel retaliated with massive

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attacks into Lebanon, the resulting crisis could also be seen as having the beneficial effect of focusing world attention on the dangers of a continuing stalemate.

19. Syria would appear to have only two other ways to put military pressure on Israel without courting a swift and destructive defeat. It could conspire with Egypt for a secretly prepared joint attack on Israel with the object, not of gaining substantial territory, but of provoking Israeli forces into costly attacks on a series of prepared defensive lines and seeking to protract the fighting and inflict maximum casualties that might weaken Israel's moral and economic fiber. A more risky and less likely course would be for the Syrians to provoke an Israeli attack by artillery bombardments, raids, or simply aggressive demonstrations in the expectation that Egypt, Jordan and other Arab states, and perhaps the Soviet Union, would join in quickly enough to save Syria from immediate defeat. Damascus might hope that Israel's initiation of all-out hostilities in response to mere harassment would win sympathy and support for Syria from Western states, including the US, leading to early intervention and a cease-fire.

20. Though we find scant evidence to indicate that another grand deception is being prepared by Sadat and Asad, and much that argues to the contrary, it would take just such negative evidence to lull us and the Israelis into discounting the likelihood of another sneak attack. In this case, Sadat's much-advertised pique with Asad, the Syrians' public attack on Sadat's policies, and even Syria's heated dispute with Iraq would have to be seen as artful sideshows intended to divert attention from preparations being made in the main tent. Unlikely as this seems, the Arabs' previous success at deception makes it unwise to rule it out entirely.

Arab Attacks on Cities

21. In a war begun by the Arabs, we do not believe the Egyptians would be the first to launch attacks on cities.

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If the Egyptians renewed the war, they would be concerned to portray it, as they did in 1973, as a "just" war fought to regain territory that is rightfully Arab, and they would therefore avoid any action that could be construed as an atrocity. If, on the other hand, the Israelis initiated a war, the Egyptians would probably not feel so constrained by public relations considerations; neither would they hesitate to respond in kind to Israel-initiated attacks on Egyptian cities, including those towns along the canal that are only partially rebuilt.

22. Syrian leaders might be less restrained in deciding to attack Israeli settlements and urban centers and would not necessarily coordinate their decision with Egypt. They would expect that in any major conflict with Israel Latakia would be struck immediately and that the Syrian capital would come under the threat of attack very early in the proceedings. Given these expectations, a Pearl Harbor-like attack might recommend itself to Syrian planners as an ideal means of opening a war with the objective of inflicting severe economic damage and grave psychological shock. Since the Syrian air force has proved itself ineffective in an air defense role, it could expend itself more usefully in a first-strike attempt to damage Israel's civilian infrastructure and crater its airfields.

23. Our expectations of how and when Syria would use the SCUD missiles believed to be in its possession are highly conjectural. US theoretical projections of the effects of SCUD launches against Israeli cities indicate that only a few hundred casualties would result. Arab strategists, however, may expect that rocket and missile attacks would inflict higher losses and have a more severe effect on civilian morale. They would almost certainly use SCUDs to retaliate for Israeli air attacks on Arab cities, and they might employ them without this excuse as part of an attempt to sap Israeli staying power and add urgency to the great powers' efforts to effect a cease-fire.

Use of NBC Weapons

24. Because Egyptian forces employed chemical weapons against royalist troops during the North Yemen civil war in

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the 1960s, Arab use of chemical or biological warfare is not entirely beyond question. Unlike Yemeni tribesmen, however, the Israelis are capable of an immediate and devastating response in kind against Egyptian troops and cities, and this capability alone would deter Egypt. Moreover, the Egyptians would be concerned to avoid any possibility of atrocity charges. [redacted] 25X6

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ISRAEL

25. Israel's overriding political goal is to gain Arab acceptance of its right to exist in peace as an independent Jewish state in the Middle East. From this standpoint, indefinite preservation of the status quo is as unsatisfactory for Tel Aviv as it is--for other reasons--for the Arabs. Nevertheless, Israel has less incentive to force a change by resuming hostilities than do the Arabs. Even a decisive defeat of the Arab armies would be unlikely to bring the political recognition Israel seeks. Nor would such a victory necessarily result in more defensible borders than Israel now enjoys. Additionally, a major factor tending to inhibit Israeli aggressiveness is that Tel Aviv presumably anticipates that an Israeli-initiated war would seriously damage relations with the US and jeopardize the flow of US military and economic aid.

26. These considerations probably would also serve to restrain Israeli propensities to escalate hostilities, although this would clearly be less true if the war were Arab-initiated. An Israeli-initiated war, moreover, is quite likely if Tel Aviv becomes convinced that the Arabs are on the verge of launching an attack.

War of Attrition

27. Israel has little or no interest in launching or engaging in a war of attrition. Statements by senior political

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and military leaders suggest that Tel Aviv's strategy is to seek a quick victory and to avoid being drawn into a long and costly series of inconclusive battles with the Arabs. Should the Arabs shell Israeli front-line positions or take other military action having all the earmarks of a war of attrition, it is virtually certain that Tel Aviv would decide quickly to escalate the level of hostilities to force the Arabs either to cease hostilities or accept a full-scale war of the sort the Israelis would prefer to fight.

28. On the other hand, the Israelis have made a major effort on the Golan Heights, for instance, to establish defensive positions able to survive heavy shellings or other attacks which might occur if the Syrians try to initiate limited or full-scale hostilities. These fortifications give Tel Aviv the option of riding out local attacks for a time while attempts are made either to arrange a cease-fire or to firm up US support in preparation for an escalation of the fighting.

29. Additionally, two major sets of circumstances would almost certainly cause an Israeli-initiated escalation of a war of attrition, assuming that a decision had not already been made to use such a war as an excuse to launch major attacks. One would occur if the Arabs managed to inflict heavy military casualties on the Israelis, the other if the Arabs began to attack civilian settlements or directed their fire at targets well behind the front lines or within Israel proper. Arab attempts to restrict access to Israel by sea would also be likely to cause Israel to escalate the fighting.

Attacks on Cities and the Economic Infrastructure

30. The main objective of any large-scale Israeli attack would be to destroy the Arab military forces threatening Israel. The Israelis would probably not launch attacks designed solely to cause civilian casualties unless the Arabs did so first or

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if the war threatened to drag on or go badly for Israel. Tel Aviv has even expressed an interest in internationally recognized "safehavens" or open cities for civilians in each belligerent's territory.

31. The Israelis, however, would be likely to include attacks on the economic infrastructure of their opponents, particularly Syria, fairly early in a war. Cities, inasmuch as they either contain or are in the immediate vicinity of many potential targets in this category, would not escape damage. Syrian and Egyptian ports would be high priority targets. Initially, Israel might concentrate on targets which would normally not have large concentrations of civilians, such as road junctions, bridges, airport runways, railroad tracks, or fuel storage areas. [redacted] 25X6

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32. The Israelis could also escalate the fighting by extending the war to more distant Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, or Iraq, whose troops were engaging the Israelis. Tel Aviv has already served public notice that such states should not expect to escape unscathed if they contribute to the fighting, threatening by inference that the Arab oilfields and refineries will be attacked. Tel Aviv might approach this cautiously, however, in view of the anticipated adverse US reaction. It would naturally be less hesitant if the Arabs had already proclaimed an oil embargo against the West.

33. The fighting could also escalate to include Lebanon, particularly if fedayeen operations occurred within Israel. Tel Aviv would not hesitate to launch retaliatory strikes against Palestinian bases in Lebanon under these circumstances. The Israel Defense Forces would in any case be sorely tempted to occupy parts of southern Lebanon along the Israeli frontier to thwart fedayeen attacks before they occurred. The Israelis

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might well go deeper into Lebanon and in greater force to counter Syrian penetration and to protect themselves against a possible Syrian attack through Lebanon. Tel Aviv might also send troops early in the war to secure southern Lebanon as a corridor for secondary attacks on Syria. The Israelis would probably seek to avoid a direct confrontation with Lebanese military forces but would stand and fight if attacked. 25X6

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