

The Yom Kippur War

The Yom Kippur War, also known as the 1973 Arab Israeli War, was fought from 6 to 25 October 1973. It was a coordinated assault launched by Egypt, Syria and their allies against Israel on the holiest day of the Jewish Calendar.

Narrowly avoiding defeat, Israel overcame its adversaries but its future military doctrines would be changed for good.

This article will give details about the Yom Kippur War within the context of the IAS Exam.

Background of the Yom Kippur War

Following the lightning victory of Israel during the Six-Day War of 1967, the three Arab nations who attacked it lost a significant portion of their territories to the Jewish nation. Egypt lost most of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. Jordan lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while Syria lost the Golan Heights.

When Anwar el-Sadat succeeded Gamal Abdel Nasser as the president of Egypt in 1970, he had inherited a country on the brink of an economic collapse which could barely afford to wage a future, if not, a costly war against Israel.

For Sadat peace and stability of Egypt was a far more pressing concern than the destruction of Israel. For this, he sought to recover the Sinai as its economic value was beyond dispute, but he was aware that Israel's victory in the 1967 war would make any peace terms offered by them unfavourable to Egypt.

To this end, Sadat decided to initiate action to which he sought to avoid in the first place - another war with Israel. He knew that even if the war was lost, it would make the Israeli's realise the benefits of peace with Egypt.

In 1972, Sadat opened diplomatic relations with the United States. To prove his commitment to the new relationship he expelled 20,000 Soviet advisors from Egypt. In any case, the Americans were only too happy to gain an erstwhile ally of the Soviets with unfettered access to the Suez Canal. Sadat knew that the U.S.A, which was a key ally of the Israelis, would be a crucial mediator for any future peace talks between Egypt and Israel.

This move did little to deteriorate Soviet-Egypt relations as the Soviet Union would supply arms and ammunition to Egypt when the war began

Sadat formed a new alliance with Syria and a new attack plan was formulated between the two with the promise of military support from other Arab nations as well.

The outbreak of the Yom Kippur War

The holiest month of the Jewish Calendar, Yom Kippur, coincided with the holiest month of the Muslim Calendar - Ramadan, by the time of October 6 1973.

As such, Israeli intelligence had failed to notice the build-up of Arab forces on its border as they were under the assumption that the Arabs would not launch an offensive against them during the month of Ramadan. As a result, most of the Israeli servicemen were on leave when the war broke out.

The war began with a massive Egyptian push from the Suez Canal which saw them advance into the Sinai Peninsula without any opposition from the Israeli Defence Force (IDF).

The Syrians, on the other hand, launched a coordinated offensive that coincided with the Egyptian push in the Sinai, threatening to overwhelm the Israeli positions in the Golan Heights.

It took three days for Israel to fully mobilise its army by which time both the Egyptians and Syrians had consolidated their gains. But the mobilised Israeli army stopped both from making any further inroads into their territory, even managing to push the Syrian army back to pre-war ceasefire lines.

The Israeli Defence Force launched a massive counteroffensive which brought them within the artillery range of the Syrian capital of Damascus. To relieve pressure off his ally, Sadat ordered the Egyptian army to launch a fresh offensive, which would mean leaving the safety of their anti-air umbrella. Nevertheless, the offensive failed spectacularly and the IDF retaliated with a push of their own which saw them advance towards the Suez Canal itself.

The United Nations-brokered a ceasefire on 22 October but neither side was willing to end the conflict. Israel had surrounded Egypt's Third Army and the city of Suez. As far as the war was concerned, Israel was winning.

Egypt and Syria, on the other hand, were avoiding another defeat at the hands of Israel. This led to the escalation of tensions between the two Cold War rivals - the United States and USSR - and a second ceasefire was imposed on 25th October, ending the Yom Kippur War.

The aftermath of the Yom Kippur War

Although Israel had emerged victorious, it came at the cost of heavy casualties and the realisation that the Arab nations could not be militarily dominated by them all the time. This led to the peace processes between Egypt and Israel subsequently.

Despite Egypt's defeat at Israel's hands, Anwar Sadat had become a new hero to the Arab world in the wake of the initial gains made by Egypt during the opening phase of the war. It gave

him the political mileage needed to seek peace with Israel. In 1974, the first of two Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreements that saw the return of the Sinai to Egypt was signed. In 1979, President Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab nation.

Syria had gained nothing and lost even more of the Golan Heights to Israel. It was outraged at the unexpected peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. They had joined the war with Egypt believing that it was a perfect opportunity to teach a lesson to Israel. What they got instead, as the Syrians believed, was a stab in the back from their ally. In 1979, Syria voted with other Arab states to expel Egypt from the Arab League. Needless to say, the rest of the Arab world was not happy with the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

Anwar Sadat was assassinated in Cairo on October 6, 1981, during a military parade commemorating the crossing of the Suez during the Yom Kippur War. It is widely believed that the perpetrators were extremists who were outraged by the recognition of Israel by Sadat.

Although no large scale conflicts between Israel and its other Arab neighbours have happened since 1973, the conflict has now been limited to proxy wars in the region which continue to this day.