



2015-084

Emanuel Sakal, *Soldier in the Sinai: A General's Account of the Yom Kippur War*. Trans. Moshe Tlamim. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. xi, 547. ISBN 978-0-8131-5080-2.

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The surprise attack launched by Egypt and Syria against Israel on 6 October 1973 was the most significant military disaster in the nation's sixty-eight-year history. Several English-language books and articles have described the Yom Kippur War, but none offers a more detailed account of the early phase of the Sinai campaign than *Soldier in the Sinai*. Its author, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Maj. Gen. (ret.) Emanuel Sakal, commanded a tank battalion in some of the fiercest fighting in the Sinai. He taps many documentary sources (including the working files of the postwar Agranat Commission), as well as firsthand accounts of participants up to senior military officers and political figures. He meticulously details the strategic, doctrinal, intelligence, and command failures that gave Egypt the advantage of complete surprise and a well defended bridgehead in the Sinai. But be forewarned: the book is no "easy read"; the combat narratives are dreadfully convoluted and impaired by a paucity of useful maps.

Highlighting the first seventy-two hours in the Sinai, Sakal marshals copious evidence concerning the IDF's unreadiness for war on 6 October; the first hesitant, poorly coordinated response by Southern Command's only available active-duty armored division; the hasty mobilization of two reserve armored divisions; and the failed counterattack by three divisions on 8 October. The author rightly criticizes Southern Command's failure to implement the only existing contingency plan, codenamed "Dovecote." On the first afternoon of the war, Israel sustained heavy losses in sporadic fighting along the Suez Canal and could not prevent the Egyptian Army's cross-canal attack. Sakal documents the multiple command failures of Maj. Gen. Shmuel Gonen at Southern Command and Lt. Gen. David Elazar, IDF Chief of Staff.¹ Both were relieved of duty after the war and deservedly censured by the Agranat Commission.

Sakal follows Trevor Dupuy² in citing computer-based combat simulations to reinforce some of his arguments about what the IDF might have achieved with better planning and preparation. He also draws on the work of Uri Bar-Joseph³ in arguing that Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) Maj. Gen. Elieu Zeira consistently disregarded and even suppressed a wealth of intelligence indicators of unprecedented Egyptian and Syrian military buildups along the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights in 1973. Such intelligence should have allowed for timely preparation for war, but the DMI's monopoly of what might be termed "national intelligence estimates" in Israel perpetuated the notion that there would be no war right up to the morning of 6 October, only a few hours before the Syrians and Egyptians attacked. The author confirms the paralyzing effect of this "groupthink" in the war's first days.

Sakal notes that Israel refrained from launching a preemptive attack because of clear messages from the Nixon Administration throughout 1973 affirming that the United States would not support Israel if it appeared to be the aggressor in causing another war: "Israel realized that if it attacked first, the United States would respond sternly ('Israel won't see a single nut or bolt,' warned the Nixon administration)" (425).

The IDF's decisive victory in the 1967 Six Day War ushered in what some have called the "imperial era" of Israel's history. For the first time, the nation enjoyed strategic depth on all three fronts, especially in the south, where the Sinai peninsula and the Suez Canal afforded the IDF great operational flexibility—which it failed to capitalize on. Within Israel's pre-1967 borders, IDF doctrine emphasized offensive warfare with an

1. I have not found a good biography of Gonen, but for Elazar there is Hanoach Bartov, *Dado: 48 Years and 20 Days* (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv Book Guild, 1981). Though borderline hagiographic, it is an invaluable scholarly resource on the Yom Kippur War from the IDF General Staff perspective.

2. *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974* (NY: Harper and Row, 1978).

3. *The Watchman Fell Asleep* (Albany: SUNY Pr, 2005).

immediate transfer of action into enemy territory. Israel's territorial gains in the Six Day War should have prompted modification of this doctrine, but the IDF stubbornly resisted any change in its traditional thinking. During the "War of Attrition" (1968–70), Egyptian artillery bombardment against exposed Israeli forces along the Suez Canal were countered by destructive air raids. This remains an under-analyzed episode with implications for a serious reevaluation of IDF planning and doctrine—"The question of who won and who gained the most in the War of Attrition is still debated" (40).

When Israel decided to build the controversial "Bar-Lev Line"—thirty-two fortified positions along the Canal, each housing roughly a platoon of troops in well protected bunkers—a few senior IDF officers expressed serious doubts about the plan, notably Maj. Gen. Israel Tal, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon, in charge of Southern Command (1970–73). Sharon "believed the fortifications under construction ... were useful only to establish a presence and for observation. Their value in wartime, he believed, was zero" (28). Although Sharon closed down nearly half of the fortifications and the IDF never officially considered the Bar-Lev Line a defensive barrier per se, Sakal, like other historians, insists that both IDF and Israeli political leaders came to view it as a de facto frontier. The General Staff's message to Southern Command—"not one step back!"—was "a conceptual absurdity. The unwritten order to allow no territorial gain for Egypt transformed the [Suez] waterline into the rear defensive line and gave the small force of regulars the impossible task of blocking an Egyptian breakthrough along a 160-kilometer front" (32–33).

Tal, Sharon, and a handful of other generals preferred a defense-in-depth allowing for "a flexible defensive maneuver to crush the Egyptian forces entering Sinai once they advanced beyond the range of their artillery and antiaircraft cover ..." (18). But, Sakal stresses, this proposed wholesale reversal of Israel's traditional offensive strategy met with serious resistance within the IDF, for whom the operational-strategic concept for defense of the Sinai front was that "the regulars will hold." That is, the Bar-Lev fortifications, backed by the one armored division in the western Sinai together with the seemingly potent Israeli Air Force (IAF), would defend the Canal line until two reserve armored divisions (called "the Rock") could cross the Canal and carry the war into Egyptian territory.

Another significant consequence of the War of Attrition was the Israeli decision to accept a ceasefire without destroying Egypt's growing, potent air defense system, which was steadily crippling the operational flexibility of the IAF over the Canal. "Israel's decision not to destroy the Egyptian air defense system neutralized its air superiority and rendered the Bar-Lev Line practically indefensible, as events in the Yom Kippur War would prove" (40).

Sakal devotes a long chapter to a damning portrait of an IAF leadership too confident of its ability to destroy the integrated Egyptian and Syrian air defense systems, which featured state-of-the-art Soviet radar, missiles, and antiaircraft artillery (AAA). The IAF had not been standing still: after 1967, the United States supplied Israel lavishly with advanced military equipment and modern aircraft, including the F-4, which powerfully augmented the French Mirage III and its Israeli-built variant. The F-4 had more advanced avionics and a versatile weapons package that included air-to-ground anti-radiation missiles effective against surface-to-air missile sites. The IAF also acquired a large inventory of A-4 attack aircraft, which had performed so well in Vietnam. By 1973, the IAF was far the most capable air force in the Middle East, mustering nearly four hundred combat aircraft.

However, the seesaw balance between offensive and defensive aerial warfare had now reached near equilibrium. Mobile Soviet tracked vehicles like the SA-6 missile launcher and the ZSU-23 quad-AAA platform added a new and lethal dimension to existing static air defense missiles and AAA guns. The IAF could probably, with heavy losses, overcome the sophisticated Egyptian and Syrian air defense systems, but only if given authorization to conduct preemptive attacks against the enemy's "missile umbrella." But neither adequate warning nor permission for preventive air strikes was forthcoming in October 1973. To their discredit, senior IAF leaders conveyed mixed and often contradictory information to the IDF General Staff about the time needed to neutralize the enemy's air defenses and permit unrestricted battlefield close-air support. The IAF also overestimated the sacred need to ensure air defense of Israel's territory. On the outbreak of hostilities, most of the F-4 fleet was reconfigured with air-to-air weapons to defend against Arab strikes that

never came. The IDF's halfhearted attempts to provide battlefield support in the western Sinai and on the northern front proved ineffective and incurred heavy losses. Lacking permission to launch preemptive strikes and with most of the F-4 fleet withheld for air defense, the carefully planned air defense suppression operations—Tagar in the Sinai and Dugman in the Golan Heights—were either aborted or failed at high cost. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan openly expressed his pessimism about the IAF's ability to support Israeli troops on both the Sinai and Golan fronts: "The missiles are an impregnable umbrella that our air force can't overcome" (203).

The Egyptian Army had trained hard after the 1967 debacle and was well prepared to neutralize the combat effectiveness of the IDF's armored forces, among the best trained in the world. Plentifully equipped with Soviet "Sagger" antitank guided missiles and close-quarter RPGs, the Egyptian infantry stood its ground and "swarmed" approaching IDF tanks, which were mostly unsupported by mechanized infantry, artillery, or crew-served weapons (mortars and heavy machine guns). The IDF's critical force structure decisions before the Yom Kippur War were uniformly wrong. "In a General Staff symposium in June 1973 all senior officers (with the exception of General Tal) '... supported terminating the [armored] divisions' organic mechanized infantry units and transforming the division from a multibranching, multipurpose force into a tank division without an infantry brigade and only minimal artillery support'" (100).

Finally, there were serious IDF leadership failures: "General Elazar had not been present during discussions of the Stronghold plan [the Bar-Lev Line] in December 1968. To make matters worse, his involvement in the defense of Sinai was negligible, and his familiarity with the terrain and its unique challenges superficial" (49). The IDF's overconfidence was apparent in a report to the Prime Minister in early May 1973: "We're not looking for brilliant military exercises that lure the enemy into a trap and then destroy him. We plan to stop the enemy in his tracks on the Syrian and Egyptian fronts. For military reasons we believe this is the right solution, and for political reasons we don't want them to achieve even a partial gain" (51).

No one in Israel grasped that Egyptian strategy in 1973 was carefully limited to achieving only what was believed possible. As General Zeira observed after the war, "the Egyptians knew they could not defeat Israel and retake all of Sinai, but they figured that by securing the eastern bank with infantry divisions supported by artillery and antiaircraft missiles and reinforced with tanks, they could hold out for an extended period" (288). Although Dayan once quipped that the Suez Canal was "the world's best anti-tank ditch," Sakal believes "A water obstacle of its size could not serve as an effective barrier against invasion and could not provide the defending force with the time needed to mobilize its reservists" (56).

Southern Command's "Dovecote" operation required deploying the 252nd Armored Division in the western Sinai (with two of its brigades in front, along the Canal, and one further to the rear). Prompt execution of Dovecote might well have yielded favorable results. Generals Sharon and Avraham "Bren" Adan, commanding the two "Rock" divisions, believed that even if the operation could not repulse an Egyptian crossing of the Canal, it would cause heavy losses and limit Egypt's territorial gains on the east bank. In the event, when hostilities began at 1400 hours on 6 October, Southern Command directed only a scaled-back implementation of its defensive plan, referred to by Sakal as "Little Dovecote." Only a single tank brigade moved toward the Canal—eighty-eight tanks expected to cover a line extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez. Swarms of Egyptian infantry stopped the brigade in its tracks with guided and direct-fire antitank weapons. The commitment of the rest of the 252nd's tanks was no more successful: "The 252nd Division's strength was exhausted as it fought a heroic but futile war of individual tanks and platoons" (179).

As darkness fell, the division had lost—through combat and breakdowns—about two-thirds of its starting inventory of more than 280 tanks. The Egyptians had carefully selected their crossing sites between the Bar-Lev strongholds so their troops would be less visible to the IDF. As the deputy commander of the 252nd put it, "If we [had] tried to stop [the Egyptians] on the water line with all the strength that the 252nd Division could muster on Saturday morning, we still wouldn't have been able to stop [them] and would only have incurred more burnt tanks because we had no answer to their infantry or missiles" (156).

The Bar-Lev Line strongholds were manned by reservists from the mediocre Sixteenth (Jerusalem) Infantry Brigade. The IDF had long planned to replace them with elite infantry from one of the regular brigades prior to hostilities, but the surprise attack forestalled this. Troops were evacuated from only a few strongholds; the rest succumbed to follow-on attacks. The circumstances of their loss (many were captured in casual, non-battle attire) dealt a major psychological blow to the Israeli public. Elite infantry might have made a difference. On the Golan Heights, for example, where strongholds were manned by troops of the formidable Golani Brigade, only one fortification fell to the Syrians, despite all of them being surrounded early in the battle. In the Sinai, the author concludes, “The chief of staff did not understand that the strongholds were contributing nothing to the IDF’s efforts and had become an operational liability” (168).

If Southern Command’s botched response to the sudden Egyptian attack on the afternoon of 6 October was disappointing, the subsequent counterattack on the 8th was an unmitigated debacle. As Sakal pointedly notes, in his judgment no clear objectives were assigned, intelligence on the Egyptian forces was sparse, the intended missions of the two reserve divisions were never clarified, unwarranted assumptions were made about the availability of air support, and the principal attack force, General Adan’s 162nd Armored Division, lacked most of its organic artillery and mechanized infantry and was thus unready to take the offensive.

Worse mistakes were made, however, in the IDF’s planning for this attack. Two Egyptian armies held bridgeheads on the Canal’s east bank, north and south of the Great Bitter Lake. The Third Army, south of the lake, was distinctly weaker than the well entrenched Second Army, but IDF and Southern Command senior leaders ignored this and focused on the Second Army. “If a methodical situational assessment had been made, it would have been clear that, based on ground conditions and the enemy’s status, the southern sector was preferable for the counterattack, facing Third Army’s limited bridgeheads and unprotected flanks” (220).

Among many other planning errors, Sakal notes that “The haste with which 162nd Division (a reservist division) was flung into the war left no time to convey the regulars’ hard-won lessons from the first two days of fighting, especially regarding the Egyptian infantry, which was armed to the teeth with antitank weapons” (218). Commanders and staffs above division level were woefully out of touch with simple realities: “The assessment in the Pit [IDF Headquarters] was that between 650 and 700 battle-ready tanks would be amassed on the morning of October 8—nearly one-third more than the actual number” (238).

General Gonen, who was plainly out of his depth, deserves most of the blame for the failed counterattack, in which a mere two unsupported battalions of the 162nd Division attacked masses of Egyptian infantry and took catastrophic losses. At the same time, Sharon’s 143rd “Rock” Division abandoned favorable terrain on one fool’s errand after another, in response to Gonen’s impulsive, contradictory orders—“There was no end to Gonen’s preposterous commands” (250). General Elazar blundered badly by forcing an early counterattack with a seriously flawed battle plan and then exercised poor oversight of his theater commander—General Gonen. The commander of the 162nd Armored Division, General Adan, exhibited relatively poor battlefield leadership, and his counterpart, General Sharon, also did not distinguish himself on 8 October.

In summary, Emanuel Sakal depicts the IDF as a complacent, dysfunctional institution in the face of new military realities in October 1973. With *Soldier in the Sinai* he has made a welcome and incisive addition to the literature on the Yom Kippur War. Rich in operational and tactical detail and firsthand observations, the book is packed with insights and lessons for historians and military professionals. Unfortunately, its readers will need a high tolerance for dense, tortuous prose.