

For the US, 2024 Isn't 1973

by George Friedman - March 19, 2024

The culture of the Israeli military was shaped in October 1973, when Egypt and Syria attacked without warning. Importantly, the assault represented a direct threat to American interests. Egypt and Syria were both armed by the Soviet Union, so an Israeli defeat might have given Moscow control over the Suez Canal and, through a Syrian occupation, access to Saudi oil. The situation quickly manifested itself with the Arab oil embargo, generating an economic crisis in the U.S. and the rest of the West. Thus, Washington rushed material support to Israel and launched a diplomatic process that benefitted itself and its Middle Eastern ally while blocking the Soviets.

It is easy to draw parallels, even unconscious ones, from moments in which the United States sees itself in profound danger. In looking at the Israeli position now, I think that that is what it has done, albeit mistakenly.

Deep in the Israeli psyche is the notion that the United States will not abandon Israel in extremis. But there is a saying that nations have no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests. In 1973, the Israeli interest was to protect the whole of Israel – and that was absolute. The U.S. had what you might call a sentiment interest in Israel, but building strategy on sentiment is dangerous. What really mattered to Washington was the Soviet Union.

Israel is now engaged in a war with some similarities. There is the incompetence of Israeli intelligence and the belief that only a decisive defeat of the enemy will ensure national security. Its strategy, not to mention its political rhetoric, clearly assumes the United States shares Israel's interest in waging a political and financially expensive operation against Hamas. The war in 1973 lasted a few weeks, not a few months. This operation will incur costs without the obvious benefits of 1973. The theory is that a massive blow will obliterate Hamas and eliminate the threat of radical Islamism. It's a far-fetched idea. Unless dealt with politically, this threat is a permanent reality. In 1973, massive blows shifted Egyptian policy. But this is not 1973, and Egypt's perceptions of reality and Hamas are not the same. Nor are Iran's. Israel dreams of another Battle of the Chinese Farm, where the Israelis crossed the Suez Canal and redefined the war in its favor. This year's war is different, and a decisive battle is hard to imagine.

Most important is that in this war the U.S. does not have an overwhelming interest at stake, and what sentiment there is is marked by bitter division. What the two wars have in common is a massive intelligence failure. Even a defeat of Hamas only sets the stage for the next war, and Israel must deal with the possibility of the next intelligence failure.

War is not an arena of right and wrong. It is the sphere of intelligence and weapons. The Israelis are fighting in highly constrained circumstances with a strategy in which they continue to engage serially Hamas concentrations. This is a very long path and a dangerous one. This is not 1973.

Author: George Friedman

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