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96-E-1

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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE STATECRAFT OF ANWAR EL-SADAT AND THE OCTOBER WAR

CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY

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| Report Documentation Page                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                    |                                     |                            | Form Approved<br>OMB No. 0704-0188                  |                                 |
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| 1. REPORT DATE<br><b>1996</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                    | 2. REPORT TYPE                      |                            | 3. DATES COVERED<br><b>00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996</b> |                                 |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE<br><b>The Statecraft of Anwar El-Sadat and the October War</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                    |                                     |                            | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER                                 |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5b. GRANT NUMBER                                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER                          |                                 |
| 6. AUTHOR(S)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                            | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER                                  |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5e. TASK NUMBER                                     |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER                                |                                 |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br><b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                    |                                     |                            | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER            |                                 |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                            | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)              |                                 |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT<br><b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 14. ABSTRACT<br><b>see reprot</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES<br><b>11</b>                    | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT<br><b>unclassified</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | b. ABSTRACT<br><b>unclassified</b> | c. THIS PAGE<br><b>unclassified</b> |                            |                                                     |                                 |

Introduction. Despite the controversy over the utility and meaning of the concept of national interest, there is relatively little dispute that preserving the internal security of a country, its people, territory and institutions is a basic and unchanging objective of nation states and their leaders, and one pursued with the highest intensity -- in Nuechterlein's terminology a "survival" or "vital" interest (Nuechterlein, p. 8-9). Thus, the recapturing or restoration of Egyptian and Arab lands lost to Israel in the 1967 war was a fundamental national interest in Anwar El-Sadat's mind. However, given Israel's unquestioned military superiority in 1973, a critical assessment of Sadat's decision to begin the October 1973 war should focus on whether his national security strategy set goals that could be accomplished with the resources available to him, i.e., reflected a rational assessment of ends and means. Secondly, given the high costs associated with the use of coercive power, one must question whether Sadat's direct use of military force was necessary to achieve his goals. The answer to both questions appears to be "yes."

Sadat's Assumptions About the World. By the early 1970's, Sadat saw a world that did not appear to offer the prospect for the early return of Egyptian lands lost in the 1967 war.

Diplomatic efforts since 1967 had foundered over this issue. Arab demands for the return of all lands lost in 1967, as well as their refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist, clashed in an apparently irreconcilable fashion with Israel's perception of its fundamental security interests. Israel's smugness over its military superiority appeared to provide little incentive to negotiate seriously. Sadat was also increasingly skeptical about Soviet and U.S. willingness to move quickly to break the deadlock and bring about a settlement. This skepticism was, in particular, further fueled by the May 1973 U.S.-Soviet Summit that appeared to firmly endorse a continued period of detente. Sadat believed detente would preclude the Soviets from decisively supporting an Arab bid to regain its lands. Thus, he foresaw only continued stalemate at the negotiating table.

Opportunities and Constraints/The Balance of Power. At the same time, Sadat was faced with significant constraints on his freedom of action in both the international and domestic arenas. Sadat had a clear-headed sense of Israel's military superiority. He understood that he lacked the military forces necessary to recapture all of the Egyptian lands lost in 1967. His disgust with Soviet behavior toward Egypt, including the slow delivery of military equipment and the Soviet Union's assumption that it enjoyed a privileged position in Egypt, led him to expel Soviet military experts from Egypt in late 1972, thus potentially further limiting Egyptian military

capabilities through the loss of Soviet expertise and the uncertain consequences for continued Soviet willingness to supply arms.

Sadat also faced an increasingly difficult domestic situation. Soon after the 1967 war, the Arab states had made clear that nothing less than the return of all occupied Arab lands would be acceptable. The war was a profound psychological setback for the Arabs who felt that they had been humiliated and dishonored. Sadat's repeated calls since the beginning of 1971 for a "battle of destiny" had not been acted upon, and this gap between rhetoric and action was increasingly calling into question his credibility with the Egyptian people.

Sadat, however, was not without opportunities and resources. He worked feverishly in the diplomatic arena to broaden political support in the Arab world, among African states, and globally in the non-aligned movement. As O'Neill notes, at the time of the October War almost every state in black Africa severed relations with Israel and the majority of Third World nations supported the Arab position. Sadat's success in bringing about Arab unity also made oil a more potent source of power. As Holsti points out, during two previous Arab-Israeli wars, the Arabs had attempted to use the oil weapon as a vehicle to try to reduce Western support for Israel only to fail, in large part because the Arab states were divided among themselves (Holsti, page 172-173). By 1973,

however, the industrialized countries had become more dependent on Arab oil, and the Arab states were able to present a united front against all governments that supported Israel. The result was a more sympathetic stand toward Arab claims for land lost to Israel. The impact of the oil weapon was particularly felt in Europe and Japan. While the United States continued to provide military aid to Israel throughout the 1973 war, some argue that the oil embargo on the U.S. was quietly effective in leading Kissinger to lean more heavily on the Israelis to make concessions on territorial issues.

Sadat's Objectives and Plan of Action. In the context of his view of the balance of power and the constraints/opportunities presented to him in the international/domestic arenas, Sadat set his objectives and developed a plan of action. Sadat understood that, given the military balance, Arab lands could not be retaken all at once in a military campaign. His territorial objectives were more limited and commensurate with his resources and means. His goals were simply to take and hold even a small part of the Sinai and Golan Heights (in the case of Syria), to impose economic costs on Israel, to call world attention to the region and the Arabs' plight, and to heighten U.S. and Soviet concerns with the Middle East as a potential flash-point for superpower confrontation if outstanding issues were not addressed and resolved satisfactorily. Equally as important, Sadat saw the war as a means of restoring the Arabs' sense of dignity and

honor and as a means of shaking Israel's belief that its long-term security had been improved as a result of the territorial gains made in the 1967 war. Ultimately, Sadat's goal was to create a new psychological situation more conducive to a diplomatic process that would eventually result in Israel's withdrawal from Arab lands. Sadat believed that even small territorial gains in a war could restore Arab self-esteem and shake Israel's sense of invincibility. The shock of war, he believed, would allow both sides to be more flexible in subsequent negotiations.

Sadat's Tools of Statecraft. The tools of statecraft Sadat used to pursue his strategy included diplomacy, the economic sanction of oil, and military force. As noted above, Sadat successfully engaged in a diplomatic effort to rally support for the Arab cause among other Arab states, in Africa and among the non-aligned. In a more coercive fashion, he used the Arab unity he fashioned to make oil a weapon to ensure a more sympathetic position for the Arab cause in Europe, Japan and in the U.S. In both of these cases, the intent was not to decisively affect the outcome of the 1973 war but, rather, shape the outcome of the diplomatic bargaining that would follow the war. The aim, in short, was to try to isolate Israel in world public opinion.

Sadat's immediate objective of retaking at least some small part of the Arab lands lost in the 1967 war relied on military

force. To compensate for Israeli military superiority, Sadat relied heavily on deception and surprise. This was facilitated, inter alia, by the complacency fostered by his frequent calls for a "battle of destiny" which had previously been followed only by inaction; the removal of Soviet military advisors from Egypt, a step that appeared to reduce Egypt's preparedness for war; and by the disbelief among U.S. and Israeli officials that Sadat would undertake military action given the adverse military balance.

Surprise was indeed achieved allowing Egyptian military forces to cross the Suez Canal and hold limited territorial gains in the Sinai. Sadat's success, however, was clearly fragile. Had a cease-fire not been set in place on October 23, Israel was clearly poised to reverse Egyptian territorial gains and possibly put Sadat in a more adverse territorial and political situation than existed at the war's outset

**Was Force Necessary?** One has to raise questions about whether a military solution was necessary for Sadat to achieve his objective of recovering the lands lost to Israel in the 1967 war. As Nye has pointed out, the use of coercive military power has a high price (Nye, page 191). Sadat must have clearly understood that Nixon and Kissinger were prepared to make a new, concerted diplomatic effort to break the Middle East deadlock. The U.S. also was clearly moving toward more of an honest-broker role in the Middle East even before the 1973



oil embargo. Sadat, however, apparently believed that a renewed diplomatic effort could not lead, under existing conditions, to the total withdrawal of Israel from Arab lands. The Egyptians chose, for example, to interpret Kissinger's failure to signal an intention to press Israel on a settlement of the territorial issue in his September 1973 UN speech as indicating an unwillingness on the U.S.' part to take the steps necessary to achieve an outcome acceptable to the Arabs.

Although there was clearly still debate in Israel over the future status of the territories captured in 1967, O'Neill's article on the October War suggests that the Allon plan (although falling short of the total return of all Arab lands) probably had majority support in Israel, suggesting an Israeli preparedness to be flexible in subsequent negotiations. Again, Sadat chose to look at other contrary signals as indicating Israel's intent not to return captured lands, e.g., the Labor Party's support in September 1973 for the Gallili documents which called for additional civilian settlements in Arab territory and the right of the Jewish Development Agency to buy Arab land.

Obstacles to further negotiation would have probably been reduced following fall 1973 elections in Israel, but Sadat may have felt compelled to act prematurely because of a combination of domestic pressure; his concern that, based on past history, Arab unity could soon collapse; and fears that the military

option would disappear once the U.S. launched a new diplomatic initiative that Sadat believed would be unsuccessful unless the psychological context in the Middle East was altered.

Conclusion. Sadat's strategy probably must be judged a success given that it jump started a renewed diplomatic process that ultimately resulted in the Camp David accords. Sadat had a clear view of Egyptian national interests and appears to have rationally developed achievable near-term objectives (i.e., the recapturing of some Arab lands lost in 1967 and the alteration of Middle Eastern psychology) given the resources and means available to Egypt. Had the October war continued, however, Egypt could have easily lost any territorial advantage achieved and emerged in an even more inferior position.

Could Sadat have achieved his objectives short of war? As Holsti points out in his discussion of the negotiating process:

"Where objectives are fundamentally incompatible and both sides maintain strong commitments to their respective positions, the problem of influencing behavior, actions and objectives through diplomatic bargaining becomes much more complex.. First, one party must get the other to want an agreement of some sort; it must somehow make the other realize that any agreement or settlement is preferable to the status quo of incompatible positions or nonagreement or, conversely, that the consequences of nonagreement are more unfavorable to it than the consequences of agreement."  
(Holsti, page 143)

Although a case can be made that Sadat missed (or chose to ignore) clear U.S. and Israeli signals of flexibility, Sadat clearly believed that as long as Israel retained a sense of invincibility it would not want an agreement. Just as

importantly, Sadat believed that his own people needed to restore their self-esteem before an agreement could be reached. This probably made it impossible for Sadat to react positively to any U.S. or Israeli signals, even if he perceived them. Sadat believed that the recapturing of even limited territory was anecessary to allow both sides to show flexibility in further negotiations -- something that would be impossible if Israel remained in an unchallenged position of military superiority and the Arab states retained their sense of inferiority and humiliation. Thus, it was probably not an unreasonable calculus on Sadat's part (given his perception of the situation in the Arab world, as well as in the U.S. and Israel) that war was a necessary precursor to an ultimate diplomatic solution

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