

Accountability After Failure

The Agranat Commission 50 Years On

Robin Moss, Limmud Festival 2024



L to R: Yigael Yadin; Moshe Landau; Shimon Agranat; Yitzchak Nebenzahl; Chaim Laskov

In the post-October Israeli reality, things are illuminated many times more brightly
(Aharon Amir, "Toward the Second Republic", April 1974)

Some of the Key Players (those who made aliyah in italics)

Name	Role	Born	Died
<i>Golda Meir</i>	<i>Prime Minister of Israel</i>	<i>1898 in Kiev (moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA in 1903)</i>	<i>1978 in Jerusalem</i>
Moshe Dayan	Defense Minister of Israel, former IDF Chief of Staff 1953-1958	1915 in Degania Aleph, Ottoman Palestine	1981 in Tel Aviv
Eliyahu Zeira	Director of Military Intelligence (AMAN)	1928 in Haifa, British Mandate Palestine	Alive as of December 2024 (age 96)
<i>Arieh Shalev</i>	<i>Assistant to the Director of AMAN responsible for Research</i>	<i>1926 in Poland</i>	<i>2011 in Israel</i>
<i>Yona Bendman</i>	<i>Head of Egypt Section in AMAN Research Department</i>	<i>1933 in Berlin</i>	<i>2007 in Israel</i>
David Gedaliah	Intelligence Officer of IDF Southern Command	1938 in British Mandate Palestine	Alive as of December 2024 (age 86)
<i>David "Dado" Elazar</i>	<i>IDF Chief of Staff 1972-1974</i>	<i>1925 in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia</i>	<i>1976 in Tel Aviv</i>
<i>Shmuel "Gorodish" Gonen</i>	<i>Chief of the IDF Southern Command</i>	<i>1930 in Wilno, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania)</i>	<i>1991 in Milan, Italy</i>
Ashraf Marwan	Aide to Sadat, Mossad asset, alleged double-agent	1944 in Cairo, Egypt	2007 in London (death suspicious)
Anwar Sadat	President of Egypt	1918 in Monufia, Sultanate of Egypt	1981 in Cairo, Egypt (assassinated)
Hafez al-Assad	President of Syria	1930 in Qardaha, French Mandate Syria	2000 in Damascus, Syria
Moti Ashkenazi	Reserve Captain of the IDF, leader of protest movement	1940 in Haifa, British Mandate Palestine	Alive as of December 2024 (age 84)
<i>Shimon Agranat</i>	<i>Head of Agranat Commission, President of the Supreme Court</i>	<i>1906 in Louisville, Kentucky, USA</i>	<i>1992 in Jerusalem</i>
<i>Moshe Landau</i>	<i>Member of Agranat Commission, Supreme Court Justice</i>	<i>1912, Danzig, Prussia (now Gdansk, Poland)</i>	<i>2011 in Jerusalem</i>
Yigael Yadin	Member of Agranat Commission, former IDF Chief of Staff 1949-1952	1917 in Jerusalem, Ottoman Palestine	1984 in Hadera
<i>Chaim Laskov</i>	<i>Member of Agranat Commission, former IDF Chief of Staff 1958-1961</i>	<i>1919 in Barysaw, USSR</i>	<i>1982 in Israel</i>
<i>Yitzchak Nebenzahl</i>	<i>Member of Agranat Commission, State Comptroller</i>	<i>1907 in Frankfurt, German Empire</i>	<i>1993 in Israel</i>

Some Key Dates

1948 – Shimon Agranat becomes a Supreme Court Justice

1958 – Agranat and four other Supreme Court Justices overturn the Kastner guilty verdict, nine months after Kastner had been assassinated

1961 – Moshe Landau successfully prosecutes the case against Eichmann

1962 – Agranat and four other Supreme Court Justices deny Eichmann's appeal

1962 – Agranat leads inquiry into the division of powers between the Attorney General and the Justice Minister, introducing American-style "separation of powers" concept

1965 – Agranat is appointed to be President of the Supreme Court

1968 – State Commission of Inquiry (*Va'adat Chakira Mamlachtit*) Law passed by the Knesset

March 1969 – Golda Meir becomes Prime Minister after death of Levi Eshkol. In October 1969 elections, the Alignment wins 56 seats, the highest number ever in an Israeli election

1969 – Ashraf Marwan walks into Israeli Embassy in London and offers to relay information

May 1973 – Marwan (inaccurately) warns that Egypt will attack Israel imminently

25 September 1973 – King Hussein of Jordan secretly flies to Tel Aviv to warn Meir of imminent Egyptian attack

27-30 September 1973 – Egyptian Army calls up large numbers of reserves

4 October 1973 – aerial photos show major build-up of Egyptian and Syrian forces at the border

5 October 1973 – Marwan phones Mossad and tells them war is about to start

8am on 6 October 1973 – David Elazar proposes full mobilisation, Moshe Dayan partial. At 9.5am Meir agrees with Elazar but refuses his request to authorise a pre-emptive strike

10.15am on 6 October 1973 – Meir informs the Americans that there will be no pre-emptive strike. At 12pm the Cabinet unanimously agreed that with this decision

2pm on 6 October 1973 – Egyptian Army crosses the Suez Canal; Syrian air and artillery strikes begin in the Golan Heights. Start of the Yom Kippur War

By 9 October 1973 – both Egyptian and Syrian fronts stabilised; IDF begins to counter-assault

25 October 1973 – ceasefire agreed on both fronts. End of the Yom Kippur War

28 October 1973 – Israeli-Egyptian-American talks on army disengagement in Sinai begin

18 November 1973 – Meir responds to public outcry and appoints Agranat to lead a commission of inquiry to investigate run-up to and first days of the war

1 December 1973 – David Ben-Gurion dies

31 December 1973 – elections, postponed because of the war, are held. Alignment receives 51 seats (-5); second-most in Israeli history. Likud (newly-formed faction) wins 39 (+7)

3 February 1974 – Moti Ashkenazi begins his protest against Meir and Dayan

1 April 1974 (submitted), 2 April 1974 (published) – Agranat Commission Interim Report (the only part of the Agranat Commission that has been officially translated into English)

11 April 1974 – Meir resigns as Prime Minister; leaves office on 3 June

31 May 1974 – disengagement agreement with Syria agreed

3 June 1974 – Dayan resigns as Defense Minister as Yitzchak Rabin becomes Prime Minister and forms a new government. Shimon Peres becomes Defense Minister

10 July 1974 – Agranat Commission Interim Report (supplement) released

30 January 1975 – Agranat Commission Final Report released; Commission disbands

31 March 1976 – Basic Law: The Army is passed by the Knesset

5 September 1976 – Agarant turns 70 and by law retires from the Supreme Court

17 May 1977 – elections are held. Alignment receives 32 seats (-19); Likud wins 43 (+4). Menachem Begin becomes Prime Minister

17 September 1978 – Camp David Accords signed by Anwar Sadat and Begin

8 December 1978 – Meir dies

6 October 1981 – Sadat assassinated at military event marking anniversary of the war

16 October 1981 – Dayan dies

10 August 1992 – Agranat dies

1 January 1995 – after a petition in 1993 by Ma'ariv newspaper, the full 1,500 page Agranat Commission report (except for 48 pages of classified information) is released to the public

21 December 2002 – press stories circulate that Marwan is an Israeli spy

27 June 2007 – Marwan found dead on pavement below fifth-floor balcony of his London home. Police are unable to say whether it was an accident, suicide or murder

20 February 2023 – “Golda” has its premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival. Helena Mirren portrays Meir, Agranat is played by Henry Goodman

6 October 2023 – fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Yom Kippur War

7 October 2023 – unprecedented invasion and horrific massacres by Hamas. Israel is unprepared and it is immediately clear that there has been a massive intelligence failure

Key Conclusions of the Agranat Commission Interim Report

- “The public is entitled to learn as soon as possible of the findings and recommendations on those subject”, hence the swift publication of an interim report
- Primary responsibility for the intelligence failings rest with AMAN
- Official warnings were too late and, when they were finally given, incomplete
- There were many warning signs in the months, weeks and days before 6 October
- Three reasons for the intelligence failings:
 1. AMAN was captured by “*HaConceptzia*” (“The Concept”):
 - Egypt would not attack Israel without an air force that could destroy the IAF
 - Syria would not attack Israel alone – only in partnership with Egypt
 2. AMAN falsely assured the IDF that it would be able to provide advanced warning
 3. Because of *HaConceptzia*, in the days before the Yom Kippur War, enemy troop build-ups and mobilisations were explained away rather than causing alarm
- Having only a single military intelligence agency created a “single point of failure”. At the very least a separate intelligence capacity should exist within the Foreign Ministry
- The Prime Minister requires an independent adviser on intelligence, who could question, challenge and evaluate information received from the intelligence agencies
- Even given the intelligence failings, the IDF should still have mobilised earlier
- The IDF had no plans for a war where regular forces (without reserves) had to fight a two-front war if caught by surprise without time for mass-mobilisation
- Deployment of forces on the Egyptian front on 6 October 1973 was not optimal
- There is lack of clarity on a practical, legal and even constitutional level of the division of authority between the Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff around security matters
- At a political level, war cannot be run by the whole Cabinet, but that had in effect become the status quo. This also meant that some matters were not discussed at Cabinet in order to prevent leaks. Future wars/security matters should be coordinated by a much smaller Cabinet Committee (effectively making official and formal Meir’s “Kitchen Cabinet”-style of governing)
- Six specific individuals – Zeira, Shalev, Bendman, Gedaliah, Elazar and Gonen – should resign from their posts. They bear personal responsibility for the failures
- Dayan and Meir do not bear personal responsibility for the failures, and neither were they influenced by the prospect of elections due to be held at the end of October

Evaluating the Intelligence Failures 50 Years On – Shapira (July 2023)

The power of *HaConcepzia* – probably better translated/understood as “The Paradigm” along the lines of Kuhn’s understanding from philosophy of science* – cannot be understated. It ultimately led to seven separate but interlinked failures:

1. Overlooking a shift in Egyptian strategy a year prior to the war

If not trapped within HaConcepzia, it should have been obvious that Sadat changed military strategy in 1972 away from an all-out war of destruction to a limited war of reconquest

2. Lack of methodology for analytical processes, over-reliance on intuitive and inductive reasoning

There was too much focus/belief in “gut”, “experience”, and “intuition”, and not enough on analysis, data/evidence-led decisions and questioning of tacit assumptions

3. Confusion regarding early warning (intentions or capabilities?)

Intelligence-gathering is stronger at assessing capabilities (what does the enemy have?) than intentions (what is the enemy thinking?). Assessing intentions gives false certainty

4. Over-confident strategic analysis at the military general staff level

High-level, strategic command (such as the IDF General Staff or Southern Command) ignored or minimised warnings from tactical, on-the-ground, lower-ranking soldiers/sources

5. Over-reliance on high-quality raw information

Once you have strong human intelligence (Marwan) or signal intelligence (the so-called “Extraordinary Measures”) that is rated as credible, this can create a fatal dependency

6. Misinterpretation of Arab culture

The extent to which Egypt felt required to reverse the humiliation of 1967 and restore national pride and dignity was underestimated or ignored. Culture drives policy

7. The ‘human factor’ – groupthink, cognitive closures, over-confidence, arrogance, lack of moral courage in the face of hierarchy

A range of psychological phenomena inevitably play out in military/intelligence settings and affect decision-making. Specific structures and culture need to be embedded to counter this

* Thomas Kuhn, “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (1962)

The Controversies of the Agranat Commission

- Meir got off too lightly
- Meir's subsequent resignation and trashing of her reputation are deeply unfair
- Dayan got off too lightly
- The Commission's approach of setting aside Dayan's experience as a former Chief of Staff of the IDF was illogical, illegitimate and possibly the result of irregularities
- Elazar's treatment was harsh and unreasonable, especially compared to Dayan
- The true *HaConceptzia* was not a military/intelligence one about military capacity and intentions but a political/cultural one about the whole basis of the Arab-Israeli conflict
- The Agranat Commission fuelled and now permanently sustains the narrative that the Yom Kippur War was an Israeli defeat and an Arab victory
- Fundamentally, the Agranat Commission still operated within *HaConceptzia* of its own around the nature of Zionism, leadership, *mamlachtiut* ("statism") and subordination of self/individual to state/collective. This whole construct of what Israeli life and the national project were/are about was fatally wounded by the Yom Kippur War, and the Commission should have recognised that
- State Commissions of Inquiry themselves are just too powerful and can go "rogue"



Jerusalem Post front pages from 3 April 1974, 11 April 1974 and 12 April 1974



Eylon Levy 
@EylonALevy

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