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The Four Days That Saved Israel: The Battle of the Golan Heights

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The Four Days That Saved Israel: The Battle of the Golan Heights

A Jewish state amid the Muslim Arab World has been a serious point of contention, and the State of Israel has fought many wars before and after its inception in 1948. The 1973 War, also known as the Yom Kippur War, was a war where Israel nearly faced annihilation at the hands of Arab militaries. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were taken by surprise; most IDF personnel were home on leave for the Yom Kippur holiday when the war began.¹ In the opening days of the war, the Syrian Army attacked the heavily-outnumbered Israeli forces defending the Golan Heights. The Israelis fought with great skill and determination against the surprise Syrian attack. The Israeli victory prevented the Syrian Army from breaking through into the Israeli heartland and wreaking havoc on a defenseless civilian population. This paper will be an analysis of the Battle of the Golan Heights and its significance to the Yom Kippur War and the survival of the State of Israel.

The Golan Heights is made up of hilly volcanic rock transected by canyons in the north and grasslands in the south.² Israel advanced far enough into the Golan Heights in the 1967 War to ensure the border was a defensible “string of extinct volcano cones that commands strategic views of Damascus…and of all northern Israel.” This border was known as the “Purple Line.”³ This high ground would give a defender the advantage because it would provide excellent observation and fields of fire for multiple weapons systems. The dense terrain would canalize any attacker into killzones which would hinder movement and leave the attacker vulnerable to

ambushes at short ranges. In the years between the 1967 and 1973 Wars, the IDF built “firing ramps” into the volcanic rock where tanks could fire down onto attacking Syrian forces with “free and often interlocking fields of fire” while staying covered and protected.

The 1973 War spawned from Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s “battle days” against Israel in 1972. “Battle days” were small scale attacks by Syrian Army units against Israeli troops along the Israeli-Syrian border. The attacks improved Syrian prestige in the Arab World, which had been suffering for some time, but it also challenged Egyptian power in the region. Thus, Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat was under pressure to regain Egypt’s status. Sadat attempted a “battle day” of his own in October 1972, but it was an embarrassment and showed deficiencies in Egypt’s military capabilities. A Syrian “battle day” in January 1973 which led to less than fifty casualties was exaggerated by Radio Damascus to have over five hundred civilian casualties inflicted by Israeli forces, as well as homes and livestock destroyed. Armed with this propaganda, Syria and much of the Arab World called for war. Sadat was criticized for his perceived inaction, and in response he called Assad to Cairo in April 1973 to plan an invasion of Israel. Egypt would attack across the Sinai Peninsula and secure it along with the Gaza Strip, while Syria would attack into the Golan Heights in northern Israel. Sadat’s entire war plan hinged on the hope that a political resolution to the war would be reached once Egypt and Syria achieved their goals. The Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur was chosen as the attack date because Egyptian and Syrian planners knew the IDF would be at a reduced state of readiness, and an attack would be more successful.

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The Israeli defensive plan for the Golan Heights was for the troops there to stand fast until the IDF’s substantial reserves could be brought into battle because not much else stood between Syria and Greater Israel.\(^8\) There was also the assumption that Israel would have approximately 72 hours’ notice before war started to fully mobilize its military, so the troops in the Golan Heights could count on reinforcements quickly.\(^9\) On 5 October 1973, the day before the war started, the Golan Heights was defended by two of Israel’s best armored brigades, the 7\(^{th}\) and the 188\(^{th}\) (“Barak”) Armored Brigades, totaling about 170 tanks between them.\(^10\) The Syrian Army knew about the 72-hour rule and that Israel relied on its reservists. As such, Syrian leaders wanted to capture the Golan Heights in under 48 hours, to preempt the arrival of IDF reinforcements and to come “well short of the all-out war the Syrians believed would outrage [the] Israeli leadership.”\(^11\)

Most of the IDF tanks defending the Golan Heights were World War II-vintage British-made Centurion tanks. It was updated by Israel with the long-range L7 105mm gun, which was considered one of the best tank guns in the world.\(^12\) The gun, combined with heavy armor and a powerful engine, gave the Centurion the “ability to destroy more recently manufactured competitors and move more quickly over the Golan’s difficult terrain.”\(^13\) The Israeli Armor Corps prided and continues to pride itself on long-range gunnery skills. Promotion through the ranks for IDF tank gunners and commanders is highly dependent on marksmanship scores at the range and competence in field training exercises. The Armor Corps’ commander at the time, Major General (MG) Israel Tal, relentlessly drilled his tank crews to be among the best in the world and “Tal

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\(^{9}\) Scott, “The Battle for the Golan Heights,” 7; 21.
\(^{11}\) Scott, “The Battle for the Golan Heights,” 5.
\(^{12}\) Young, Jr., “The Heights of Ineptitude,” 852-853.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 853.
ensured that…Israeli armored crewmen shot first, faster, and more accurately than their Arab opponents.” Most professional Armor Corps officers and senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs/Sergeants) were combat veterans of previous wars and their invaluable experience trickled down to conscripts through intensive crew training. It was calculated before the 1973 War that an Israeli platoon of three tanks could engage and destroy at least eight times its number of enemy tanks within several minutes at long range with a constant rate of fire and pinpoint accuracy. In the 1973 War, IDF tankers were making first-shot kills on Syrian tanks at over 4,000 meters with manual gunnery, a feat accomplished today with modern tanks and computerized fire control systems. The emphasis on gunnery skills and intense crew training was deemed critical by IDF leaders if the Israelis were to hold their ground in the face of a numerically superior enemy force, which would almost always be the case in any war Israel fights.

Syrian forces in the Golan Heights consisted of 60,000 infantrymen and over 2,000 tanks and other armored vehicles. Most of the Syrian tanks were Soviet-made T-62 and T-54/55 tanks. The T-62 was armed with a 115mm gun and “was roughly equivalent in tactical terms to the [Israeli] Centurion.” The T-54/55 was armed with a 100mm gun and had thinner armor. It could hit and destroy a Centurion, but it was still an inferior tank. A redeeming quality for both tanks, however, was that they had night-vision equipment, which IDF tanks lacked. It allowed the Syrians to operate at all hours, while Israeli capabilities were significantly diminished at night. The Syrian military relied upon Soviet advisors, which reflected in the origin of its equipment and its

14 Ibid., 856.
16 Young, Jr., “The Heights of Ineptitude,” 859.
17 Ibid., 854.
18 Ibid., 854-855.
reliance on a centralized command structure which discouraged lower-level initiative.\textsuperscript{20} Syrian President Assad invested heavily in the Syrian military since the embarrassing “Six Day War” of 1967; “over twenty percent of Syria’s GDP was devoted to military spending.”\textsuperscript{21} Universal conscription prevented social stratification in the Syrian military and the officer corps was professionalized, a step away from the old system where promotions were based on political connections.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, Syrian troops were considered to have high morale, with “an anti-Zionist fervor that surpassed all others in the Arab World.”\textsuperscript{23} Overall, Syrian troops were considered to be well-trained by Arab standards and while they did not match the skills of their Israeli adversaries, the Syrians held the advantage of constantly training on terrain similar to the Golan Heights,\textsuperscript{24} including the breaching of potential obstacles the Israelis would place.\textsuperscript{25}

Almost simultaneously, Egypt and Syria launched attacks on Israel during Yom Kippur, 6 October 1973, at approximately 2 pm. A Syrian artillery barrage preceded the assaults of the 5\textsuperscript{th}, 7\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Divisions in the Golan Heights. They advanced toward the first line of Israeli defenses, an anti-tank ditch and minefield, but movement discipline disintegrated and units became disorganized. IDF tankers, who survived the barrage practically unscathed, engaged the Syrians at ranges of up to 4,000 meters.\textsuperscript{26} The Israelis specifically targeted command and engineer vehicles, such as bulldozers and bridging vehicles to delay the Syrian advance through the obstacles.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{20} Young, Jr., “The Heights of Ineptitude,” 860.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 3.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 18.  
\textsuperscript{24} Abraham Rabinovich \textit{The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East} (New York: Schocken, 2004), 58  
\textsuperscript{25} Herzog, \textit{The War of Atonement}, 79.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 22.  
\textsuperscript{27} Peter Allen, \textit{The Yom Kippur War} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982), 72.
Soon after the main assault began, Syrian paratroopers of the 82nd Parachute Battalion moved by helicopters to assault the IDF electronic warfare and surveillance station on the top of Mount Hermon. The 500 paratroopers overwhelmed the platoon-size (about 50 men) IDF garrison by assaulting up the station’s high stone walls with ropes and grappling hooks and secured the station within hours, depriving the Israelis of live intelligence updates.28

Syrian casualties were quickly mounting at the hands of the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade and its 100 tanks in the north.29 The 77th Armor Battalion of the 7th Armored Brigade, under the command of 29-year old Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Avigdor Kahalani,30 “held the entire gap between the Hermon and Booster Ridge,”31 a phase-line halfway between El Rom and Kuneitra.32 Kahalani’s battalion of only 27 Centurion tanks “held for thirty-six hours [into the morning of 7 October]…against literally hundreds of Syrian tanks.”33 Kahalani’s actions in the Battle of the Golan Heights earned him the Medal of Valor, Israel’s highest award for valor in combat.34

During the early morning of 7 October, Syrian forces attempted an attack with their superior night vision equipment to overrun the Israeli positions across the Golan Heights. The Syrians managed to advance within 100 meters of the IDF positions, but the IDF’s skill and ambushes sprung by small units from their concealed locations made up for their disadvantages in night vision equipment. The Syrians continued their attacks throughout the day and over 100

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Syrian tanks were left burning on the valley floor by the time the Syrians withdrew. Eventually, attrition wore down the Israeli defenders, and the Syrians attempted to break through a gap in the line to seize the Bnot Yaacov Bridge. The bridge ran across the Jordan River and the Israelis would be cut off if the Syrians captured it. The weary remnants of the “Barak” Brigade, consisting of the brigade commander, his staff and other improvised units, fought a desperate rearguard action that held the bridge long enough for a small number of reinforcements from Brigadier General (BG) Dan Laner’s 679th Reserve Armored Brigade to arrive and close the gap.

The Syrian momentum was broken when BG Omar Abrash, commander of the 7th Infantry Division, was killed late on 7 October when his tank was hit by a well-aimed Israeli shell. The Israelis were on the brink of collapsing, but the Syrians no longer had a central command. Syrian forces sat with “roads wide open to them,” but they did not take advantage of the situation to push into Israel. Instead, they stopped to reorganize and were left at the mercy of still-accurate IDF tank fire.

The IDF positions stayed relatively stable on 8 October as Syrian attacks slowed. Both sides used this time to reorganize and prepare for future action. The Israelis had the advantage when it came to moving reinforcements and supplies. Although overwhelmed at the start of the war, IDF logistics units made use of Israel’s limited strategic depth by quickly rearming and reequipping units in combat, because “supply vehicles had almost no distance…between supply depots and the forward supply points. The Syrians…outran their supply lines.”

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35 Ibid., 40.
36 Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 150.
38 Ibid., 19.
39 Ibid., 25.
40 Ibid., 14.
crews were also excellent and returned tanks to battle multiple times after they were knocked out by enemy fire, often conducting repairs within earshot of the battle.\textsuperscript{41}

Near Kuneitra, the 7\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigade was engaged in the fight of its life on 9 October. The Syrians attacked in division strength with over 400 tanks. The IDF troops put up a staunch defense, but by midday, the 7\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigade “had been fighting for three days and three nights, it had only 45 tanks left…and the ammunition was nearly exhausted.”\textsuperscript{42} Since resupply was impossible, IDF tank crews would dismount their vehicles to go “into the holocaust of…fire to collect ammunition from knocked-out tanks.”\textsuperscript{43} Syrian units began to capture ground in the Golani foothills, and the brigade commander, Colonel (COL) Avigdor Ben-Gal, realized he could no longer hold his position. He radioed his division commander, BG Rafael Eitan to tell him, “this is it.”\textsuperscript{44} Minutes after COL Ben-Gal sent his message, a reserve unit that came into the fight, the 146\textsuperscript{th} Reserve Armored Division, managed to counterattack on the Syrian flank and forced the Syrians to retreat back over the “Purple Line.”\textsuperscript{45} BG Eitan told Ben-Gal the Syrians would soon break in his sector and soon enough, Syrian tanks began to retreat from the 7\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigade’s positions.\textsuperscript{46} The majority of the Israeli reinforcements, holding true to the 72-hour mobilization rule, arrived on the battlefield late on 9 October, signaling a permanent shift in momentum away from Syria. The 7\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigade combined with elements from the 146\textsuperscript{th} Reserve Armored Division and BG Laner’s 679\textsuperscript{th} Reserve Armored Brigade to encircle and nearly destroy the Syrian 1\textsuperscript{st} Armored Division, which was only recently committed into battle and withdrew in a panic.\textsuperscript{47}

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\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 14-15. \\
\textsuperscript{42} Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154. \\
\textsuperscript{43} Allen, \textit{The Yom Kippur War}, 94. \\
\textsuperscript{44} Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154. \\
\textsuperscript{45} Scott, “The Battle for the Golan Heights,” 25. \\
\textsuperscript{46} Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154. \\
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 154; Scott, “The Battle for the Golan Heights,” 24-25. 
\end{flushleft}
After this action, the battle took on “a brief balance of balance,” where no major moves were made.\footnote{Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154.}

The 9\textsuperscript{th}, 17\textsuperscript{th} and 205\textsuperscript{th} Armored Brigades were organized into a division-size taskforce and placed under the control of BG Laner. On the morning of 10 October, this ad-hoc unit continued the push made by the 146\textsuperscript{th} Reserve Armored Division and 679\textsuperscript{th} Reserve Armored Brigade. The forces attacked along the Syrian line and forced the remainder of the Syrians, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Armored Division and 9\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division, across the Purple Line.\footnote{Scott, “The Battle for the Golan Heights,” 25.} The IDF had now pushed all Syrian forces out of the Golan Heights, except for Mount Hermon, which remained a thorn in the Israeli side. The ensuing Israeli counterattack jumped over the border into Syria and destroyed any Syrian unit in its path. IDF leaders wanted to completely take Syria out of the war to prevent it from being resupplied and reinforced by the Soviet Union and Arab allies so Israel could put its focus on Egypt in the west, which was still a viable threat. The goal was to reach Damascus as quickly as possible and hold it within artillery range. It was estimated this would take 24-48 hours. The Israelis faced tough resistance from Syrian units in defensive positions and Moroccan, Jordanian and Iraqi forces that recently arrived, but the Israelis were right on the mark with their estimate, and the high command halted the offensive on 13 October. The IDF could have gone further, but the losses were not deemed worthwhile and American resupply began to slacken, which would put the IDF at a logistical disadvantage so far from its supply bases. All IDF units took up defensive positions 20 miles from Damascus,\footnote{Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154-157.} and paratroopers from the Golani Brigade recaptured Mount Hermon on 22 October. A cease-fire to end the fighting in Syria was called several hours after Mount

\footnote{Safran, “Trial by Ordeal,” 154.}
Hermon fell, and the Yom Kippur War finally ended on 25 October. The Israeli counterattack took Syria out of the war early, and put more pressure on Egypt to attack into Israel. Egyptian units left their protective Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) umbrella on the banks of the Suez and were mauled by Israeli units in the Sinai in the days leading up to the conclusion of hostilities.

Without a doubt, the Battle of the Golan Heights is one of the IDF’s proudest moments; it overcame an overwhelming surprise attack and defended Israeli territory. The Yom Kippur War and the lack of Israeli preparation led to a tumultuous social and political scene in the years that followed, but it does not shroud the deeds of the men who fought and died to defend their homeland. The outnumbered 7th and 188th Armored Brigades held on against impossible odds for three days until reinforcements arrived and launched a devastating counterattack. The defense forced the Egyptian Army to charge through the Sinai and be destroyed by the Israeli Air Force. If those few men retreated or gave in, Israel would have been overwhelmed by the Syrian Army flowing down from the north.

Works Cited


