

Battle for Golan Heights

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Prelude

The Arab-Israel conflict has been festering for centuries. Since the times of the Holy Crusades, Christians and Muslims have been in conflict with each other over the holy land of Jerusalem. The conflict between Israel and the Arab states intensified since the beginning of the Zionist and the Palestine movement. The newly established Jewish state of Israel has been in conflict with many Arab countries ever since its birth in 1948. The Yom Kippur war of 1973 is considered the fourth Arab-Israeli war. A grouping of Arab countries led by Syria and Egypt had launched an invasion of the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights occupied by Israel in the previous conflict of 1967 (Six day war).



The Yom Kippur War (October 1973)

The war was so called because it started on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement (October 6, 1973). It came almost as a complete surprise and warning notice was given too late for an orderly call-up of the reserves before zero hour.

The Egyptians and the Syrians made some significant initial gains: the former crossed the Suez Canal and established themselves along its entire length on the east bank; the latter overran the Golan Heights and came within sight of the Sea of Galilee. However, the wheel turned very quickly. Counterattacking swiftly, sometimes even foolhardily, within a few days the IDF was on the west bank of the Suez Canal, at a distance of 100 kms from the Egyptian capital, Cairo, and within artillery range of the airfields around the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Egypt, which at first had refused a cease-fire, now accepted it avidly, as did Syria. Considering the adverse initial circumstances, the speed and the thoroughness with which the IDF had been able to reverse its fortunes was remarkable. Yet the Yom Kippur War went down in Israel's history as a qualified failure. The surprise rankled; and the cost was heavy: 2,688 soldiers fell.

Intelligence was faulted for failing to sound the alarm in time - the Chief of Staff, David (Dado) Elazar and his Chief of Intelligence had to resign. Too many airplanes were lost to Russian-made SAM-missiles. Some experts reached the sweeping conclusion that the tank had seen its day, in view of its vulnerability to Sagger missiles and infantry-operated RPGs. Of 265 Israeli tanks in the first echelon, only 100 survived.

The branch that distinguished itself during the Yom Kippur War was the Navy, which only now came of age: without a single loss of its own, it had sunk 34 enemy vessels; had secured the coasts of the country; and had succeeded in restricting the enemy to his bases. This was indeed the Navy's War.

Tank Battle for Golan Heights

The Golan Heights

The Golan Heights are made up of a 480-square-mile volcanic (basalt) rock plateau perched above the Hula Valley to the west and Jordan Valley to the south. It rises gently from 600 feet in the south to 3,000 feet in the north, with abrupt escarpments dominating the valleys to the west and south. It is transected in some areas by impassable canyons, limiting the number of routes leading up from the valleys to the heights. Since the heights' geography restricted defensive

mobility, Israel continued its advance against the routed Syrians in 1967 until a defensible line was reached—a string of extinct volcano cones that commands strategic views of Damascus on one side and of all northern Israel on the other.

Launch of hostilities

On October 6, 1973, during Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a Syrian armored force of 1,400 tanks backed by more than 1,000 artillery pieces and supporting air power began a coordinated assault along the 36-mile-long Israeli-Syrian border in the Golan Heights in the north of Israel. That attack coincided with a similar onslaught by Egyptian forces along the Suez Canal, suddenly forcing Israel to fight a two-front war.

Israeli defense doctrine relies on the standing army to hold the line with air support while the reserves are mobilized. Therefore, the two Israeli brigades that stood in the Syrians' way in the Golan had the daunting task of holding off the onslaught long enough for Israel's reserve mobilization to kick in. The 7th Armored Brigade's epic defense of the northern Golan has come to be widely regarded as one of the finest defensive stands in military history. Less publicity has been given to the heroism of the shattered fragments of the 188th (Barak) Brigade in slowing the Syrian advance in the south. In some respects, however, the Barak Brigade's story is more incredible, considering the fact that hundreds of Syrian tanks had overrun its sector and were held off by only a handful of tanks.

Considering the faulty Israeli intelligence assessment that, at most, armed skirmishes with the Syrians would break out, the 170 tanks and 70 artillery pieces in the Golan were thought to be enough to meet any Syrian threats, at least until the reserves would arrive.

Against that comparatively small force, the Syrian army fielded five divisions for its attack: two armored and three mechanized infantry, including some 1,400 tanks. Approximately 400 of those tanks were T-62s, the most modern Soviet-bloc tank at the time, equipped with a 115mm smoothbore gun and infrared night-fighting capability. The balance were T-54s and T-55s armed with 100mm guns. The Syrian plan called for its 5th, 7th and 9th mechanized infantry divisions, in BTR-50 armored personnel carriers (APCs) supported by 900 tanks, to breach the Israeli lines, opening the way for the 1st and 3rd armored divisions to move in with their 500 tanks to capture the entire Golan Heights before Israel had a chance to mobilize

The Fiercest Tank Battle

At 2 p.m. on October 6, Syrian gunners opened up a tremendous barrage along the entire front as a prelude to their two-pronged attack—a northern one in the vicinity of the Kuneitra-Damascus road and one in the south where Rafid bulges into Syria.

Facing Colonel Avigdor Ben-Gal's 7th Armored Brigade in the Golan's northern sector were the Syrian 3rd Armored Division under Brig. Gen. Mustapha Sharba, the 7th Mechanized Infantry Division and the Assad Republican Guard. When the Syrian assault began, mine-clearing tanks and bridge-layers led the way to overcome the Israeli obstacles. Naturally, those engineering vehicles were the 7th's first targets, but Syrian infantrymen, braving intense fire from the heights, rushed forward and used their entrenching tools to build up enough earthen causeways for their tanks to negotiate the Israeli anti-tank ditches.

While the Israelis took out every Syrian vehicle they could get into their sights, the sheer mass of some 500 enemy tanks and 700 APCs advancing toward their lines ensured that the defenses would be overwhelmed. The number of defenders dwindled as Israeli tanks were knocked out, yet the vastly outnumbered Israelis managed to take a heavy toll on Syrian armor. In spite of their heavy losses, the Syrians pressed their attack without letup, yet the overexerted 7th managed to hold its ground, throwing stopgap blocking actions wherever the Syrians were on the verge of breaking through.

When darkness fell, the Israelis had nothing to match the Syrians' night-vision gear and had to allow the enemy armor to advance to ranges effective for night fighting. In the close fighting, the Syrians succeeded in seizing some of the high ground, but a counterattack by the small group of persistent defenders forced them back. When some Syrian tanks did overrun the Israeli lines, the 7th's gunners would rotate their turrets to destroy them and then immediately turn their attention back to other oncoming tanks. It amounted to an armored version of hand-to-hand combat.

The battle raged for two more days as the Syrians, seemingly oblivious to their heavy losses, continued their assault without letup. By the afternoon of October 9, the 7th Brigade was down to six tanks protecting what was for all intents and purposes a clear path into Israel's north.

Those last few tanks fought until they were down to their last rounds. Then, just as the 7th Brigade tanks were finally starting to pull back, they were suddenly augmented by an impromptu force of some 15 tanks. The Syrians believed the clock had run out and that the first of the fresh Israeli reservists had arrived, and

the Syrian offensive ran out of steam. In truth, it was a motley force of repaired tanks crewed by injured and other crewman, which had been mustered by Lt. Col. Yossi Ben-Hanan, a veteran commander who, upon hearing about the outbreak of war, had hurried home from his honeymoon overseas. By virtue of its timing, that force proved to be the 7th Brigade's saving grace. As individual tanks began to augment the Israeli forces, the Syrians, exhausted from three days of continuous fighting and unaware of how close to victory they actually were, turned in retreat. Hundreds of destroyed tanks and APCs littering the valley below the Israeli ramparts were testimony to the horrible destruction that had taken place there, leading an Israeli colonel to dub it the 'Valley of Tears.'

Meanwhile, the Syrians, whose objectives included seizing the bridges spanning the Jordan River (most of which could be easily reached through the southern Golan), concentrated a large part of their attack in that sector. The Syrian advance was initially slowed by an Israeli minefield and by deadly, accurate cannon fire.

When fighter aircraft were called in to help stem the flow of Syrian armor, many of the Douglas A-4 Skyhawks and McDonnell F-4E Phantoms that responded to the plea were shot down or damaged by the Syrians' dense anti-aircraft umbrella. Aware that Israeli doctrine relied on air power to even the score against the Syrian numerical advantage, the Syrians had acquired massive quantities of the latest Soviet missile and anti-aircraft systems. With the help of Soviet advisers, they created an air defense network over the Golan that was thicker than the one protecting Hanoi during the Vietnam War.

With their air support thus limited, the tankers were on their own—and the fate of northern Israel was in their hands. The Israeli tanks stood their ground and were knocked out one by one. Pushed beyond their limits, the defenses in the southern sector broke.

Bypassing the Israeli fortifications and pouring through gaps in the defenses, Syrian tanks pushed through the Israeli lines onto a wide-open plain that was ideal for tanks. The Israelis knew that they had to hold on at all costs to allow time for the reserves to mobilize, and in many cases the tank crews sacrificed themselves rather than give ground. As the hours passed, fewer and fewer Israeli tanks were left to stem the tide of oncoming tanks. The Syrian force split into a two-pronged advance. Colonel Tewfik Jehani's 1st Armored Division moved northward toward the Golan command headquarters of Maj. Gen. Rafael Eitan, situated on the road leading down to the Bnot Yaakov Bridge, over the Jordan River and into the Israeli hinterland. The second prong of the Syrian attack,

spearheaded by the 46th Armored Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division, moved south from Rafid on the southern access road toward El Al, with units breaking off toward the north in the direction of the Arik Bridge at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. Some 600 tanks were now engaged in the southern Golan, against which stood 12 tanks and isolated units that had been cut off near the various fortifications along the line.

Night offered no respite from the Syrian advance as they capitalized on their advantage of sophisticated night-vision equipment. The Israelis small tank units to carry out stopgap blocking actions against the far superior enemy forces—a tactic that may have prevented the Syrians from overrunning the entire Golan.

One of those lethal holding actions that have become legend was led by a young lieutenant named Zvi Gringold, affectionately known as ‘Lieutenant Zvicka,’ whose hit-and-run tactics are credited with single-handedly holding at bay a major thrust by almost 50 tanks. His guerrilla-style tactics on the route leading toward his brigade’s HQ caused the Syrians to believe they were up against a sizable Israeli force. After more than 10 of its tanks were destroyed, the Syrian column withdrew, its commander deciding to hold off and deal with the Israeli force in daylight. Gringold continued to engage the Syrians throughout the night and following day, destroying upward of 30 tanks, until injuries, burns and exhaustion caught up with him and he was evacuated. Gringold recovered and was subsequently awarded Israel’s highest decoration, Ot Hagvura, for his heroic defense of Nafakh.

Another Syrian thrust by two brigades was advancing rapidly on the southern access road in that wide-open sector and inexplicably stopped short in its tracks just before reaching El Al. The Syrian 1st Armored Division was advancing up the route toward the Golan HQ at Nafakh. With the brigade commander dead, no reserves in sight and two Syrian brigades advancing toward the Golan HQ—and with some units having bypassed the base on both flanks—the situation could only be described as grave. Lead elements of the Syrian brigades actually reached Nafakh and broke through the base’s southern perimeter. One Syrian T-55 crashed into General Eitan’s HQ, only to be knocked out by the last operational tank in Gringold’s platoon. The 188th Barak Brigade was no more. The Syrians were poised to overrun the Golan headquarters at Nafakh and, seemingly, the entire Golan. That final stand, however, was enough to buy a few crucial additional minutes. While the Syrians paused to regroup after their final opposition had been neutralized, the first Israeli reserve units began reaching what had become the front lines. Finding Syrian tanks milling

about their command headquarters, the Israelis immediately opened fire and attacked, dispersing the Syrians.

The arrival of the Israeli reservists spelled the beginning of the end for Syria. The fresh Israeli reserve units halted the near—and, in some cases, actual—retreat of what remained of their front-line forces and set about checking the Syrian advance. By midnight on day two of the war, the reserves had managed to stabilize what had been a disintegrating front—with the Syrians having penetrated to areas a mere 10-minute drive from the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee and to less than a kilometer from El Al on the southern access road.

The Israeli Counter-Offensive

While the Syrians dug in to consolidate their gains, the Israelis went on the offensive.

Brigadier General Moshe Peled led a division up the Ein Gev road into the center of the southern sector while Maj. Gen. Dan Laner's division moved up the Yehudia road farther to the north—a parallel advance that boxed in the 1st Syrian Armored Division and effectively brought the Syrians' brief conquest to an end. The Syrians fought viciously to free themselves from that pincer movement. A major confrontation near Hushniya camp, which the Syrians had captured the previous night and turned into a forward supply base, ended with hundreds of wrecked, burning and smoldering Syrian tanks and armored vehicles and other vehicles littering the landscape.

By October 10, the Israelis had forced the Syrians back to the antebellum cease-fire line in the southern sector. Well aware of the strong Syrian defensive preparations in the south, Israel chose the northern Golan, with its more difficult, less-defended terrain, as the launching area for its counterattack into Syria itself. Among the units joining the counterattack was the reincarnated Barak Brigade. Since 90 percent of its original commanders had been killed or wounded, Barak's remnants were joined by replacements, reorganized and returned to fighting strength for the counteroffensive that penetrated deep into Syria—until a United Nations-sanctioned cease-fire came into effect on October 23, officially ending hostilities.

Israeli defenses were based on 17 fortified observation posts. The Purple Line, as the 1967 cease-fire line was known, marked the end of the no man's land separating Syria from the Golan. Lacking a true defensive barrier, the Israelis had dug a 20-mile-long anti-tank ditch along the border from Mount Hermon to Rafid, an obstacle Syrian armor would be forced to cross under fire

from Israeli tanks positioned behind ramparts. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1973, the Golan Heights were defended by two armored brigades: the 7th, which had only been dispatched to the northern sector on October 4, and the 188th (Barak) Brigade, a regular fixture intimately familiar with the area's terrain, in the south. The modified Centurion and M-48 Patton tanks fielded by both brigades were fitted with the 105mm NATO gun and modern diesel engines.

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- Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern+History/Centenary+of+Zionism/The+Arab-Israeli+Wars.htm>

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