

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

Chief editor: Prof. Shaul Chorev

Edited and produced by: Ehud Gonen



  
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جامعة حيفا

  
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## The Egyptian Sea Mining Surprise during the Yom Kippur War (October War 1973)

*Shlomo Guetta*

### **preface**

in the context of the wars between Israel and the Arab armies, offensive sea mines were first used during the Yom Kippur War (1973). At that time, the Egyptian navy made use of this weapon by mining the important chokepoint in the Straits of Jubal at the southern opening of the Gulf of Suez.

The decision to use this weapon in that region, which is an international shipping route, was ideal from the Egyptian perspective who did not want to violate international law. In this context, it is worthwhile quoting Admiral Fouad Mohamed Abou Zikry in a lecture he gave in 1975 in Cairo on the second anniversary of the Yom Kippur War: "The regions near to the enemy defenses and which can be exploited to intercept sea routes such as the entrance of the Gulf of Suez are suitable for the use of sea mines which are a dangerous and effective weapon particularly if accurately used against an enemy that does not have the means of disposing of them."<sup>1</sup>

The free traffic of ships to and from the Gulf of Suez was essential to Israel for both the passage of military vessels and the transport of crude oil. Due to the blockage of the Suez Canal at the time, the Gulf itself was a kind of internal sea that served only Israel and Egypt (namely, without a threat to a third party or a neutral party). This characterization was evident to the planners in the Egyptian navy and served as a convenient opportunity to make the first use of offensive sea mines, which were highly significant on the naval battlefield and which had a large number of advantages:

- The ability to conceal the existence of the mines and to cause damage to vessels unexpectedly.<sup>2</sup>

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1 From a lecture by the commander of the Egyptian navy, page 113 in the symposium's collection of lectures.

<https://archive.kippur-center.org/arab-sources/lecture-admiral-abu-zikri-1975-new-eng.pdf>

2 Indeed, Israel did not know about the mining activity and was taken completely by surprise by its existence.

- Sea mines are placed where enemy ships are used to passing though or must pass through, such as the main shipping routes, rivers<sup>3</sup> or straits, in a way that disrupts the enemy's shipping traffic.
- In addition to the damage caused, the mines also have an important psychological effect: one mine located on a civilian shipping route is liable to halt traffic until the area has been swept and the mines removed.<sup>4</sup>
- Sea mines are a very efficient weapon in terms of cost-benefit and thus are particularly attractive to the weaker side in a conflict. The cost of producing and laying a sea mine is negligible in comparison to the cost of removing it and disarming it.
- The time needed to neutralize and dispose of a field of sea mines can be 200-fold the time needed to lay it.<sup>5</sup>

It can be assumed that the Egyptian strategy to use offensive mines was primarily based on naval warfare doctrine developed during the Second World War, as well as the inspiration of Soviet doctrine and the massive supply of Soviet weapons provided to Egypt, which included a variety of sea mines produced in the Eastern Bloc.

The goal of this chapter is to shed light on the actions of the Egyptians, which achieved complete surprise, as part of their naval strategy. This pattern is liable to be repeated by other enemies in future warfare scenarios, since offensive sea mines are intended to achieve naval control of the enemy's ports and at essential chokepoints.

## Introduction

On the morning of October 26, 1973, about two days after the ceasefire that ended the Yom Kippur War went into effect, two large explosions broke the quiet of the peaceful waters in the southern Gulf of Suez. These occurred under the hull of an oil tanker named 'Siris', which was sailing through the 'Straits of Jubal' on the eastern side of the strait, on its way from the port of Eilat, with the goal of filling up with oil from Israel's oil fields on the eastern side of the Gulf of Suez.

The Siris was a tanker of about 50 thousand tons in Israel's service and together with other tankers operated during the period that preceded the war on the route

- 3 In the years prior to the Yom Kippur War, the Gulf of Suez had the characteristics of an internal sea that served the two enemy nations – Israel and Egypt.
- 4 Israel was lucky that it was able to quickly prepare an alternative route near the Straits of Jubal.
- 5 To illustrate, the mining of the Straits of Jubal took only a few hours on each of 3 or 4 nights during the war. In contrast, the clearing of the mine field by the Soviet navy took a number of months during the second half of 1974.

between the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Eilat. It transported crude oil from the area of Abu Rodes/Abu Zanima to the oil terminal belonging to the Europe Asia Pipeline Company (AEPC) in Eilat.

The huge explosions below the tanker were caused by two powerful mines containing between 350 and 500 kg of explosive material (depending on the type of mine). The tanker sustained heavy damage and it was necessary to evacuate the crew by means of air force helicopters. As a result of the explosions, 27 crew members were injured, three of them seriously. Following the rescue, the tanker sank a short time later into the waters of the Straits of Jubal.



Figure 1: The sinking Siris tanker



Figure 2: The evacuation of the crew of the Siris by Israeli air force helicopters



Figure 3 and 4: Closure – After the war, Dan Nakdimon, the captain of the Siris, sailed through the Suez Canal, which was opened to ships in June 1975. In one of the voyages, he met an Egyptian pilot in the canal who was wearing a war decoration on his jacket. Nakdimon asked him what it is for and he answered that he had been with the forces that mined the canal, among other locations, and had caused the sinking of the Israeli tanker in the Straits of Jubal. For that, he was invited to receive the decoration from President Sadat. Of course this was a surprising and emotional encounter between the "victim" of the mines and one of their layers. The two shaking hands. (Photos generously provided by Captain Dan Nakdimon).

This event was the first indication for Israel, that the Egyptian navy had mined the Straits of Jubal at the entrance to the Gulf of Suez at the beginning of the war.

The laying of sea mines by the Egyptian navy was a complete surprise to the Israeli navy and its intelligence department.<sup>6</sup> This type of operation was not foreseen, unlike most of the other tactics used by the Egyptian navy during the war and which naval intelligence had correctly predicted. The surprise was so complete that during the day following the explosion there were still doubts as to whether it had been caused by a sea mine.<sup>7</sup>

The Straits of Jubal are an international sea passage, which is about 7 miles (about 13 km) wide and which have a relatively shallow depth (between 30 and 80 meters). East of the Straits of Jubal and near the western shore of the Sinai Peninsula, is an internal passage called the 'Milan Passage', which is about 2 miles (about 3.7 km) wide and about 14 meters deep at its center.

Although the mine incident was a surprise, within a short time the Israel navy responded by issuing special procedures and an emergency format of operations, which were meant to facilitate and improve maritime traffic and navigation in the Milan internal passage, so that large ships like oil tankers would be able to sail through it. In this way, the mine field that had been laid in the Straits of Jubal was bypassed and the transport of crude oil from the oil fields in the Gulf of Suez to the Port of Eilat was renewed.<sup>8</sup>

The Egyptians knew that Israel had no capability to dispose of sea mines; however, they quickly realized that traffic was flowing through the Milan Passage and starting at the end of October, they tried unsuccessfully to extend the mine field to include the Milan Passage.

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6 In an article written after the war by Colonel Luntz (later a brigadier general), the head of the Naval Intelligence Department, he admitted that the sea mining operation by the Egyptian navy was a surprise. Article in the book "War Today", *Maarachot*, p. 395. See also the book "A Furrow in the Sea" by General Benny Telem who was commander of the navy during the Yom Kippur War, page 221.

7 In the morning following the sinking of the tanker, Captain Nakdimon was brought for a debriefing to a forum of senior officer at naval headquarters. The forum was led by General Telem, the commander of the navy. According to Nakdimon's testimony, there were doubts among the forum that indeed this was a case of sea mines. However, he managed to persuade General Telem to halt the voyage of the *Petria*, the sister tanker, which was at that time about to cross the Straits of Jubal on its way to the Gulf of Suez. <https://bit.ly/396VJGe>

8 For further discussion of the emergency format put in place by the Israeli navy in the Red Sea theater, see "Voyages of my Life", by Zeev Almog, Volume II, pp. 900–901.

Two weeks after the sinking of the *Siris*, on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1973, another tanker, named the '*Sirenia*' which was under Israeli service, was damaged southwest of 'el-Tor' while on its way with a load of oil from the Gulf of Suez to the Port of Eilat. The tanker was only slightly damaged and after an inspection of the damage and a short delay in the el Tor marina it continued on its way to the Port of Eilat.<sup>9</sup>

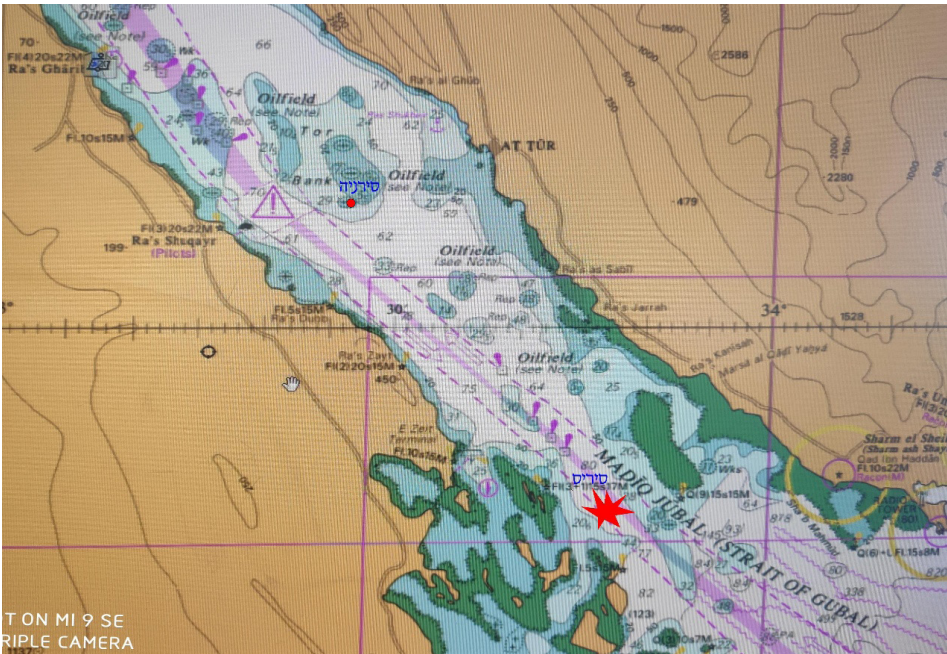


Figure 4: Schematic description of the location of the mine explosions in the two incidents (one in the Straits of Jubal and the other southwest of the el Tor marina)

## The intention and the plan

Based on an analysis of the available information, some of it retrospective, it appears that the Egyptian navy in the Red Sea theater had been planning to lay sea mines in the southern Gulf of Suez for a long time. From the Egyptian navy's perspective, the mission was operationally and tactically well within their capabilities, considering the size of its force and the weapons it had possessed since the 1960s, including in the Red Sea theater.

From the perspective of the Chief of Staff and the senior political echelons in Egypt, the mission was strategically important and was assigned to the Egyptian navy. This

9 The testimony of Captain Yaakov Herzog. <https://bit.ly/2Klfakb>

mission complemented the naval blockade in the central and southern Red Sea and therefore was important in carrying out the strategy of the senior political and military echelons.<sup>10</sup>

Since the Six Day War (1967), Israel had been in control of the "oil corridor" on the east bank of the Gulf of Suez, in an area known as 'Ras Sedr' and 'Abu Rodes'. To the chagrin of the Egyptians, Israel was producing crude oil there and transporting it in tankers to the oil terminal in Eilat.

This mission, like others assigned to the Egyptian navy prior to the war, was planned in the naval headquarter. The planning was led by Fouad Mohamed Abou Zikry, the commander of the navy, and his head of operations, Ashraf Raafat. The latter was the commander of the Red Sea theater in the 1960s and he was familiar with the area. He formulated an operational plan that included both a naval blockade in the central and southern Red Sea and the mining of the Straits of Jubal.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned, the Egyptians knew that Israel had no capability of neutralizing or disposing of sea mines. The Egyptian navy on the other hand had been equipped since the 1960s with a variety of sea mines produced in the Eastern Bloc: seabed mines and anchored mines, induction mines (with acoustic/magnetic mechanisms) and contact mines. In addition, Egypt had a variety of minelayers and minesweepers, which they had used extensively in training for the laying and removal of mines. Therefore, it was only logical for the Egyptians to make use of offensive sea mines for the first time in a war against Israel.

With respect to choosing the location for the mines, in retrospect it can be said that the choice of the southern Gulf of Suez was indeed the result of sensible operational considerations from the perspective of the Egyptians. Although the Straits of Jubal are, as mentioned, an international waterway, in those days, when the Suez Canal was blocked to traffic of any kind, the Gulf of Suez was essentially an internal sea used only by Israel and Egypt, without any fear that mines in the Straits of Jubal would harm ships other than those in the service of Israel or of Egypt itself.<sup>12</sup> This is

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10 In this context, see the book by el Gamasy, who was the head of operations in the Egyptian army prior to and during the war; page 188 (translated into Hebrew).

11 In an interview with Ashraf Raafat in October 2012, he explained the considerations that guided him in planning the naval blockade of the Red Sea. For readers of Arabic. <https://www.elbalad.news/287297>.

12 In reality, and despite the tracking and supervision by the Egyptians in the case of ships in their service, a Greek tanker named the Maripela was damaged by a sea mine in that same minefield. Zeev Almagor, *My Life's Voyages*, p. 900.

in contrast to the Straits of Tiran, which were also used by Jordan on the way to and from the Port of Aqaba, and the Bab el Mandeb Strait, which was an international waterway used by many countries and first and foremost the countries on both sides of the Red Sea and many third-party countries, including navies of the superpowers.

Another advantage of mining this area is that the waters of the Gulf of Suez, including the Straits of Jubal, are shallow (30 to 80 meters) relative to the deep waters of the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba. This had operational significance since it was possible to also make use of KMD-500 Soviet-made seabed mines which the Egyptians possessed, which had a maximal depth of 55 meters, and also the KB-KRAB anchored mines whose maximal depth is about 300 meters.

From an operational standpoint, it is clear that the Egyptian planner, Ashraf Raafat, the head of naval operations, and Commander Fouad Abou Zikry, viewed sea mines as a complementary component to the naval blockade in the central and southern Red Sea. From their perspective, the mines were meant to prevent the transport of crude oil from the "oil corridor" in the Gulf of Suez to Eilat, while the naval blockade in the southern and central Red Sea (using submarines and destroyers) was meant to block the shipping of crude oil to Eilat from the Persian Gulf.

In an article in 1998, the head of operations of the Egyptian navy wrote that although the goal of the sea mines was primarily to disrupt the transport of oil from the Gulf of Suez to the Gulf of Eilat, it appears that in retrospect it added another important argument, in his opinion, in support of the mission, namely that it would prevent the Israeli navy from carrying out tactical landings, as part of a limited operation, on the western side of the Gulf of Suez, as indeed occurred in Operation Raviv (September 1969 during the War of Attrition). Therefore, according to him, "It was decided mainly to depend on sea mines to block the entrance to the Gulf of Suez."<sup>13</sup>

### **Preparations for the mining laying operation**

Once the decision had been made at naval headquarter to lay the mines and the planning had been completed, the operation was assigned to the Red Sea headquarters at 'Safaga' and the forward 'Hurghada' base. It is unclear when exactly the preparations for the mission began, but it can be assumed that it was during the first quarter of 1973.

It is worth mentioning that during the period prior to the war, the Egyptians had two types of vessels in the Red Sea theater that had the technical ability to lay sea

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13 Article by Ashraf Raafat in 1998: p. 80, at the following site. <https://bit.ly/395EViT>



mines. One of them was the T-43 minelayer (named 'el Dakhilya') and a number of P-183 torpedo boats. The minelayer could carry 20 KB-class anchored mines and the torpedo boats could carry about 6 KMD-class mines.

During the preparation stage, preliminary patrols were carried out, apparently in order to get to know the area and to practice the operation in the vicinity of the Jubal Islands, an area that is not easy to navigate. It appears that during the period prior to the war, the Egyptian naval vessels carried out at least three exercises/patrols of an operational nature in the southern sector of the Straits of Jubal (in the 'Shadwan Passage' and the 'Tawila Passage'). It certainly appears, and perhaps only in retrospect, that the patrols and activity were dry runs for the minelaying mission (in order to become familiar with the area and as training for the ships' commanders and crew).

Participating in this preliminary activity was a T-43 minelayer and a pair of P-183 torpedo boats accompanied by one or two Komar-class missile boats. As mentioned, at least three exercises/patrols were carried out – the first in April 1973, the second in July 1973 and the last on the night of October 4–5 1973, namely a day and a half prior to the outbreak of fighting!<sup>14</sup>

Another step taken prior to the outbreak of fighting occurred on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, when the Egyptians started to reduce the presence of commercial ships operating in their service in the Gulf of Suez. Their activity in the Gulf was permitted only with the approval of naval headquarters starting from sunrise on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1973.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the activity to become familiar with the area and the operational dry runs, there was intensive logistic activity in the summer months of 1973 in order to transport sea missiles and sea mines from the navy's warehouses in Alexandria by truck to Safanga (by way of Wadi Kina). Of course, in retrospect, it can be said that this massive transfer was intended to, among other things, ensure that the southern theater would have enough sea mines in order to carry out its minelaying mission.

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14 Bar Yosef, *The Watchman that Fell Asleep*, p. 322.

15 Ibid. In reality, it appears that a number of days after the start of the war the Egyptians successfully evacuated ships in their service from the Gulf of Suez. See footnote 5 above regarding the damage to the Maripela tanker, apparently done by a sea mine while sailing southward through the Straits of Jubal.

## Execution of the minelaying mission

On the first night of the war (between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1973), preparations were made in the port of Hurghada by a pair of Komar-class missile boats, a pair of P-183 torpedo boats and a T-43 minelayer, which as mentioned had participated in the action carried out on the night between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of October.

It is believed that on that night the missile boats fired a round of sea-to-sea missiles toward 'Ras Mohamed', apparently as a distraction intended to prevent any interference with the activity of the minelayer and the pair of torpedo boats that were laying anchored KA-KRAB-class mines in the Straits of Jubal (laid by the minelayer) and KMD-500 bottom mines (laid by the torpedo boats).

It is worth mentioning that on that night, the Egyptian air force launched 'Kelet' air-to-ground missiles which destroyed a coastal aerial radar station on 'Mount Hatsafra' near the Port of 'Sharm el Sheikh'. It is possible that the bombing was also meant to disrupt and neutralize the radar ability to detect ship traffic from the Port of Hurghada to the Straits of Jubal sector.<sup>16</sup>

In a number of testimonies by senior officers of the Egyptian navy, it is claimed that the mining began a day or two before the war broke out.<sup>17</sup> This seems unusual since laying sea mines with an induction mechanism is irreversible and is evidence of an act of war committed even before the war actually broke out. This issue is not completely clear. Although on the night of October 4–5<sup>th</sup>, there was unusual activity in the vicinity of the Strait of Jubal islands and it is possible that this activity, which occurred very close to the outbreak of the war, was perceived by the force as an operational activity to actually lay mines, rather than just as a practice run. It is also possible that the mining itself was carried out for the first time on the night between October 6–7, 1973.

## Alleged minelaying activity in the Straits of Jubal

Apart from the first day of the war, there were additional actions to complete the sea minefield in the Straits of Jubal on other nights during the course of the war. The commander of the Egyptian navy in his lecture on the war at a symposium held in Cairo in October 1975 mentioned that he managed to carry out the minelaying

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16 This possibility is only presented as a hypothesis and has no support at this stage.

17 Egyptian propaganda file, minute 12:10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P169--6AXAU> and also the testimony provided in October of 2018 by the commander of an Egyptian torpedo boat, which according to him was involved in the mining operation. For readers of Arabic, following is the link to his testimony. <https://bit.ly/2IOBr9V>

mission without any interference from the Israeli navy, except an incident of the night of the 19-20<sup>th</sup> of October when they were prevented from carrying out a remaining mission,<sup>18</sup> implying that this was because of the activity of the Israeli navy. It unclears which Israeli activity he is referring to; perhaps the ambush by a pair of Israeli 'Dabur' class boats that was discovered by them near Shadwan Island.



Figure 5: Stills from an Egyptian navy propaganda film on the Yom Kippur War

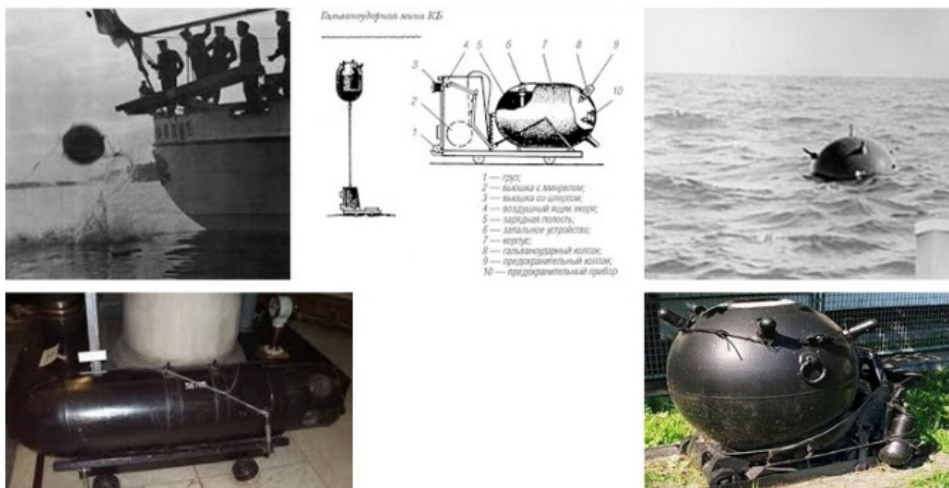


Figure 6: In the center and on the upper left is a KB-series anchored mine; on the lower left is a KMD bottom mine; on the right a M-YAM-type anchored contact mine

According to publications in Russian,<sup>19</sup> whose source is the minesweeping activity carried out by the Soviet naval squadron after the war during the second half of 1974, it appears that in total the Egyptians laid of 72 mines in 5 rows, of which about

18 From a lecture by the Egyptian naval commander. <https://archive.kippur-center.org/arab-sources/lecture-admiral-abu-zikri-1975-new-eng.pdf>. p. 116.

19 Alex Rozin. <http://alerozin.narod.ru/Suez.htm>

40 were AMD-2-500-class seabed mines and about 30 were KRAB-KB-class anchored mines. These are induction mines with an acoustic/magnetic mechanism.



Figure 7: Soviet-made T-43-model minelayer in use by the Egyptian navy (one like "el Dakhiliya" was ready in Hurghada/Safaga)

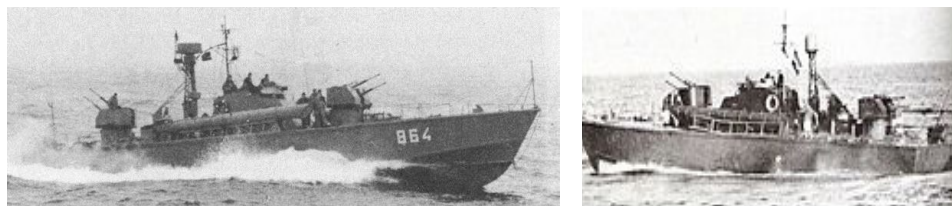


Figure 8: A P-183 torpedo boat that took part in the minelaying mission

That same Russian publication mentions the interesting fact that part of the minelaying activity was carried out by mobilized fishing boats. This possibility cannot be ruled out; however, it is likely that if there was assistance from mobilized fishing boats, then this was for the purpose of laying a sparser mine field southwest of the el Tor harbor, carried out by Egyptian naval commandos.<sup>20</sup> One way or another, the Russian document expresses blunt criticism of the quality of the Egyptian documentation and mapping of the rows of mines that were laid. According to the Russians, they did not receive any documents, drawings, plans or maps with the minefields marked on them.

### Soviet minesweeping after the war

After the war and the separation-of-forces agreement—that was signed between Israel and Egypt and according to which the IDF was deployed along new lines in the Sinai in March 1974—there arose the urgent need for the Egyptian government to reopen the Suez Canal in order to restore traffic through it, which was so important to the Egyptian economy.

20 To the extent that there was minelaying activity by naval commandos in the el Tor sector, it is likely that these were lighter Soviet- or Polish-made M-YAM-class anchored contact mines

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In order to enable the opening of the Canal for secure international shipping, it was necessary to clear the Canal itself of mines, ordinance and various obstacles, as well as clearing the sea mine fields in the southern Gulf of Suez, which were laid during the Yom Kippur War.

Egypt did not have the capability of carrying out this task and therefore it signed agreements with the US, France and Britain for clearing the northern part of the Suez Canal. With respect to the southern Gulf of Suez and particularly the Straits of Jubal, Egypt signed an agreement with the Soviet Union at the end of May 1974, according to which the Soviets would clear this region of the sea mines laid by the Egyptian navy.

In order to carry out this mission, a Soviet naval taskforce was put together that included the 'Leningrad' helicopter carrier, which carried helicopters that had been adapted for mine clearing (Kamov-25 helicopters and a pair of M-8-class helicopters), a destroyer and a tanker, which sailed from the Black sea to the Red Sea in June 1974 by the long way around Africa until arriving at in the area of Hurghada. On the way, they were joined by five minesweepers of the Soviet navy from the Pacific Ocean.

The Soviet taskforce began the mission of mine clearing in August 1974 and it lasted several weeks. Despite specific problems encountered by the Soviet crews with their Egyptian hosts and the Israelis who closely monitored their activity, the mine clearing was accomplished successfully. It included massive helicopter activity which combined mine clearing and exploding of the mines (188 flights which involved 339 flying hours).<sup>21</sup>

It is worth mentioning that during the mission, the Soviets tried to approach the Milan Passage in order to clear it as well, since they claimed that they had been informed by the Egyptians that it had also been mined. Urgent talks were held between Israel's naval command and senior UN officials, in addition to a dialogue on location between the theater's intelligence officer and the Russian commander of one of the minesweepers. The intelligence officer reported to the Russian commander that the Milan Passage is not mined and that the information he was given by the Egyptians is incorrect. Proof of this was the safe flow of traffic through the passage during the preceding months. As a result, the Soviets gave up on the idea of minesweeping in the passage.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Pesach Malovani, *Red Flag over the Middle East*, pp. 322–3. [Hebrew]

22 Personal testimony of T. who was at that time the naval intelligence officer of the theater.

On the conclusion of the mission, at the end of November 1974, the government of the Soviet Union and the government of Egypt thanked the crews for their efforts. The commander of the Soviet naval task force was invited by President Sadat as his personal guest to the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal in June 1975.<sup>23</sup>

### Summary and conclusions

The offensive sea mines laid by Egypt in the southern Gulf of Suez during the Yom Kippur War was a complementary component of the naval blockade of the central and southern Red Sea, with the goal of preventing the flow of oil tankers to the Port of Eilat, both from the Persian Gulf and from the "oil corridor" in the Gulf of Suez. In the planning stage, Egypt made sure that both the maritime blockade and the minelaying operation did not violate international law. In their view, these two components were only aimed against Israeli shipping or shipping headed for Israel.

The Egyptians believed—and on this point they were correct—that the Israeli navy at that time did not have a response to the two threats that were emerging in the Red Sea, namely the maritime blockade and the sea mines.

The laying of sea mines was a complete surprise for the Israeli navy, in contrast to the earlier predictions of Israeli Intelligence regarding the intention to deploy a blockade in the Red Sea. It may be that this option was not taken into account since there was a working assumption that the Gulf of Suez and the Straits of Jubal are also used by the Egyptians for military and civilian vessels traveling to and from the Gulf of Suez.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with another question that is important in its own right: Were the Israeli navy and naval intelligence capable of predicting this operational option? The answer to this question requires an analysis that goes beyond the current study.

In any case, the fact that the planning and the execution of the Egyptian navy was able to carry out the mission in secret, such that the Israeli navy became aware of the sea minefield in the southern Gulf of Suez **only about two days after the ceasefire went into effect** and only as a result of the sinking of the Siris tanker and two weeks later the damage to the Sirena tanker.

Even though the Egyptians succeeded in achieving surprise and they correctly assessed the inability of the Israeli navy to clear sea mines, in the opinion of the author the Egyptian planning was not without flaws. Thus, Israel came up with an

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<sup>23</sup> Malovani, p. 323.

immediate response to the threat. Although this was not a technological response in the form of mine-clearing ability, Israel quickly found another solution by preparing an alternative internal passage (the Milan Passage) to accommodate relatively large ships such as tankers. The author believes that if the Egyptians had carried out a hydrographic analysis, they would have understood the feasibility of using the Milan Passage. Therefore, although the mining mission was successful, it was not perfect. After the war, when the Egyptians noticed that an internal passage was being used, they tried to mine it as well, but were unsuccessful.<sup>24</sup>

With respect to the purpose of the sea mines, a weapon whose first use by the Egyptian navy was during the Yom Kippur War, its main goal from the standpoint of the senior political and military echelons was, on a strategic level, to disrupt the transport of oil from the Egyptian oil fields in the Gulf of Suez to the oil terminal in Eilat.

Nonetheless, it is possible, as claimed (in retrospect) by the head of naval operations of the Egyptian navy, that on the operational level another (and secondary) goal of the sea mines was to prevent an Israeli landing on the western side of the Gulf of Suez, based on a lesson learned from the success of the Israeli armored raid during the War of Attrition in September 1969. At least from the viewpoint of the then Egyptian commander, this was a logical plan since "once burned, twice shy."<sup>25</sup>

After the war, in an article in English by the head of operations of the Egyptian navy in 1998, he praised the achievements of the Egyptian navy in the October War and mentioned, among other things, the inability of Israel to carry out an amphibious landing on the western side of the Gulf of Suez as a result of—according to him—the sea mines in the southern Gulf of Suez.<sup>26</sup>

In the opinion of the author, the boast that the sea mines prevented Israel from carrying out a landing in the Gulf of Suez during the war is not justified. Although

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24 The attempt to lay mines in the Milan Passage is described by the commander of the torpedo ship that was involved in the mission, which took place after the war and was unsuccessful. The readers of Arabic can find the testimony of Mahmud Ottoman Zyad at the following link in footnote 12. <https://bit.ly/3pQ3zdH>

25 The commander of the Egyptian navy, Fouad Abou Zikry, who in a previous round had also been the commander of the navy until September 1969, was dismissed by Nasser after the Israeli armored raid (Operation Raviv).

26 Ashraf Raafat in a 1998 article. The article was published in English in the Naval Forces magazine, volume 5/98 pp. 76-80. For a discussion of the effectiveness of the mines in preventing an Israeli landing, see page 80 in the following link. <https://archive.kippur-center.org/arab-sources/ar-egyptian-navy-1973-october-war-1998.pdf>

during the war, there was an Israeli plan for a large-scale amphibious landing on the western shore of the southern Gulf of Suez, it was cancelled long before it became clear to Israel that the southern Gulf of Suez had been mined. Thus, the fact that there was no landing was not due to the threat of mines at the southern opening of the Gulf of Suez. There were other reasons for the cancellation that have nothing to do with the threat of the sea mines.

One way or another, there may be room to ask the question of what would have happened if the landing operation had not been cancelled and would have taken place in areas where sea mines had been laid. As historians say, one shouldn't ask what would have happened if.

Ironically, after a little more than a decade, the Egyptians themselves fell victim to offensive mines in the Gulf of Suez. This took place in the summer of 1984 when Libya, apparently at the request of the Iranians, laid seabed mines in the Gulf of Suez by means of a Libyan roll-on/roll-off ship named the Ghat. The mines were a source of concern among the Egyptians due to the fear that traffic through the Suez Canal would be interrupted. At the end of the day, the Gulf of Suez was cleared with the assistance of foreign navies. Paradoxically, the first ship to be damaged by one of the (Soviet-made) mines was a Russian merchant vessel. The mines were laid, as mentioned, at the request of the Iranians because Egypt supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and provided large quantities of arms to the Iraqi army sent from the Port of Suez to the ports of Aqaba and Yanbu.

Finally, the Israeli navy was surprised by the sea mines laid by the Egyptian army in the southern Gulf of Suez during the Yom Kippur War. It did not have the technological means to deal with the threat and an operational solution was found by locating an alternative route, thanks to the existence of an internal passage that the Egyptians had ignored during the planning and execution stage.

The current configuration of threats, whether from the Hezbollah in Lebanon, terrorists in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis in the southern Red Sea at the Bab el Mandeb Strait or from Iran and the Revolutionary Guard's naval force, also includes the threat of offensive sea mines that might be used against Israel in order to disrupt traffic to its ports. It can be hoped that since the Yom Kippur War there has been an improvement in the capabilities of the Israeli navy in clearing and neutralizing areas that are suspected of containing mines.