

At 1700 on 15 October, the tenth day of the war, the IDF kicked off their crossing operation with an artillery barrage all along the Egyptian front.<sup>113</sup> Simultaneously with this display of firepower, Raviv launched his probing attacks toward Televizia and Hamutal. Two hours later, at 1900, Reshef embarked on his critical mission with ninety-seven tanks; his reinforced brigade was composed of four tank and three infantry-paratroop battalions on half-tracks. He managed to avoid any Egyptian resistance until three kilometers north of Deversoir, where he ran into an Egyptian defensive position, sparking alarms throughout the 16th Infantry Division. For the next several days, Reshef's brigade would be engaged in close-quarter combat waged in periods of utter confusion. At 0400 on 16 October, after heavy fighting most of the night, Reshef's tank force had dwindled from ninety-six to forty-one, or a loss of fifty-six tanks in a mere twelve hours—a figure comparable to the losses of the Egyptian 3d Armored Brigade on 14 October. By 1800, Reshef's inventory increased to eighty-one tanks, as Sharon released more tanks to help secure the crossing site.<sup>114</sup> The entire assault force would experience intense fighting and heavy losses in men and equipment for every kilometer of ground gained.

After the war, many Israeli participants found it difficult to describe the horrors of close combat in the Chinese Farms area. But Sharon provided his own poignant account of the carnage present on the battlefield: "It was as if a hand-to-hand battle of armor had taken place. . . . Coming close you could see Egyptian and Jewish dead lying side-by-side, soldiers who had jumped from their burning tanks and died together. No picture could capture the horror of the scene, none could encompass what had happened there. On our side that night [15th/16th] we had lost 300 dead and hundreds more wounded."<sup>115</sup> This battle of attrition served Sadat's purpose, as the Israelis suffered heavy losses on the battlefield, even though, from another perspective, the initiative was passing to the Israelis.

Stiff Egyptian resistance prevented Reshef from accomplishing all his missions, but seizing the crossing site proved no major problem. So at 0135 on 16 October, Matt began crossing over with his 600 paratroopers. At 0643, the first of thirty tanks traversed the Suez Canal aboard rafts. By 0800, Matt had expanded his bridgehead on the west bank some five kilometers in depth. Sharon and Erez would later join him on the African continent. Despite successfully crossing to the west bank, however, the Israelis failed to secure a corridor to support Matt. The Egyptian 16th Infantry Brigade, which had seen little combat until now, repelled Israeli attempts to open up Tirtur or Akavish Road for their bridging equipment. This Egyptian success virtually cut off the Israeli force on the west bank, causing Dayan to recommend an abortion of the operation. For thirty-seven hours after 1130 on 16 October, no more Israeli tanks crossed the canal, as Southern Command concentrated its resources on opening a secure route to Matt.

The unexpected Egyptian resistance forced Southern Command to change its plan.<sup>116</sup> By late morning on 16 October, Bar-Lev, anxious about the fate of the small force on the west bank, ordered Adan to commit his division to help open Akavish and Tirtur Roads. To clear out the Egyptians dug into dikes in the Chinese Farms required more infantry, and Southern Command turned to the paratroop battalion under Colonel Uzi Ya'iri, positioned at Ras Sudar since the first day of the war. Arriving at 2200 by helicopter, Ya'iri felt pressured to go immediately into action even though he lacked adequate intelligence or preparation. For the next two days, the paratroopers would experience intense combat with heavy casualties. Dayan, who met with Ya'iri on 21 October, described his touching encounter with Ya'iri in the midst of war:

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Mid-East Wars: The Israeli Commandos

Israeli paratroopers under heavy fire in the "Chinese Farm" area

I found him worn out. I knew him well, ever since he had headed the chief of staff's bureau under Bar-Lev. He was a first-class fellow, straightforward, sensible, and very responsible. I knew he had lost a lot of men in combat, but I had not expected to find him so downcast. His face bore an expression of ineffable sadness, and his eyes, swollen from lack of sleep, were—what was worse—without luster. We talked about his battle to open the access road to the Canal. Chaim Bar-Lev, who was with me, said, "Uzi, you suffered heavy casualties, but you opened the road!" Uzi held to his own: The road was opened not by me but by the armor. I would like to be able to say that my unit did it, but this was not so. We had suffered seventy casualties because we went into action too hastily, without proper intelligence on the enemy's defenses.<sup>117</sup>

Contrary to Ya'iri's personal assessment, the paratroopers certainly had played an important role in opening the access road, but their accomplishment seemed diminished by so many casualties. After the war's conclusion, the Israeli public would express similar feelings, but this time with political ramifications.

Egyptian soldiers and officers demonstrated unexpected resolve despite the emerging serious threat to their rear. Second Army directed the first major Egyptian response, which occurred on 16 October. Second Army committed the 1st Armored Brigade with thirty-nine tanks and the 18th Mechanized Infantry Brigade with thirty-one tanks to reinforce the southern flank of the 16th Infantry Brigade. Egyptian armored counterattacks pushed Reshef southward up Lexicon Road for several kilometers, while the mechanized infantry helped secure the defensive positions in the Chinese Farms sector. On the west bank, a reinforced battalion from the Egyptian 116th Mechanized Infantry Brigade attacked Matt's small force. The Israelis managed to defeat

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Ungunned Israeli Patton M-48s preparing to cross the Suez Canal on assault rafts

the Egyptian task force quickly, and Colonel Hussein Ridwan, the Egyptian brigade commander, lost his life in the operation.<sup>118</sup>

A major Egyptian effort to defeat Operation Stouthearted Men occurred on 17 October. Center Ten, located far back in Cairo, now attempted to coordinate a three-pronged attack against the crossing sites on both banks. In their decision making, however, senior Egyptian commanders labored under one major restriction: Sadat prohibited the withdrawal of any Egyptian troops from the east to the west bank out of fear of losing any ground gained in the crossing operation. This restriction forced Ahmad Ismail to make his main effort to defeat the Israeli countercrossing on the east bank, rather than on the west bank where the terrain and the air defense umbrella favored the Egyptians. On the east bank, the Egyptian 21st Armored Division, led by its 1st Armored Brigade, launched an attack north to south from the Second Army's sector, while the Egyptian 25th Armored Brigade, from Third Army, advanced south to north. On the west bank, the remainder of the 116th Mechanized Infantry Brigade assaulted Matt's positions. The results proved devastating for the Egyptians. The 1st Armored Brigade lost twenty of its fifty-three tanks, whereas an Israeli ambush destroyed sixty-five of seventy-five T-62s from the 25th Armored Brigade. The 116th Mechanized Infantry Brigade experienced similar destruction.<sup>119</sup>

The five days of intense fighting from 14 to 18 October finally took their toll on the Egyptian Army. The 21st Armored Division was down to forty tanks; the 16th Infantry Division's tank force had dwindled to only twenty from a prewar figure of 124. Among the killed or wounded were two division (23d and 16th) and two brigade (116th and 23d) commanders. Not everything spelled tactical defeat for the Egyptians, however. The commitment of the 23d Armored Brigade,

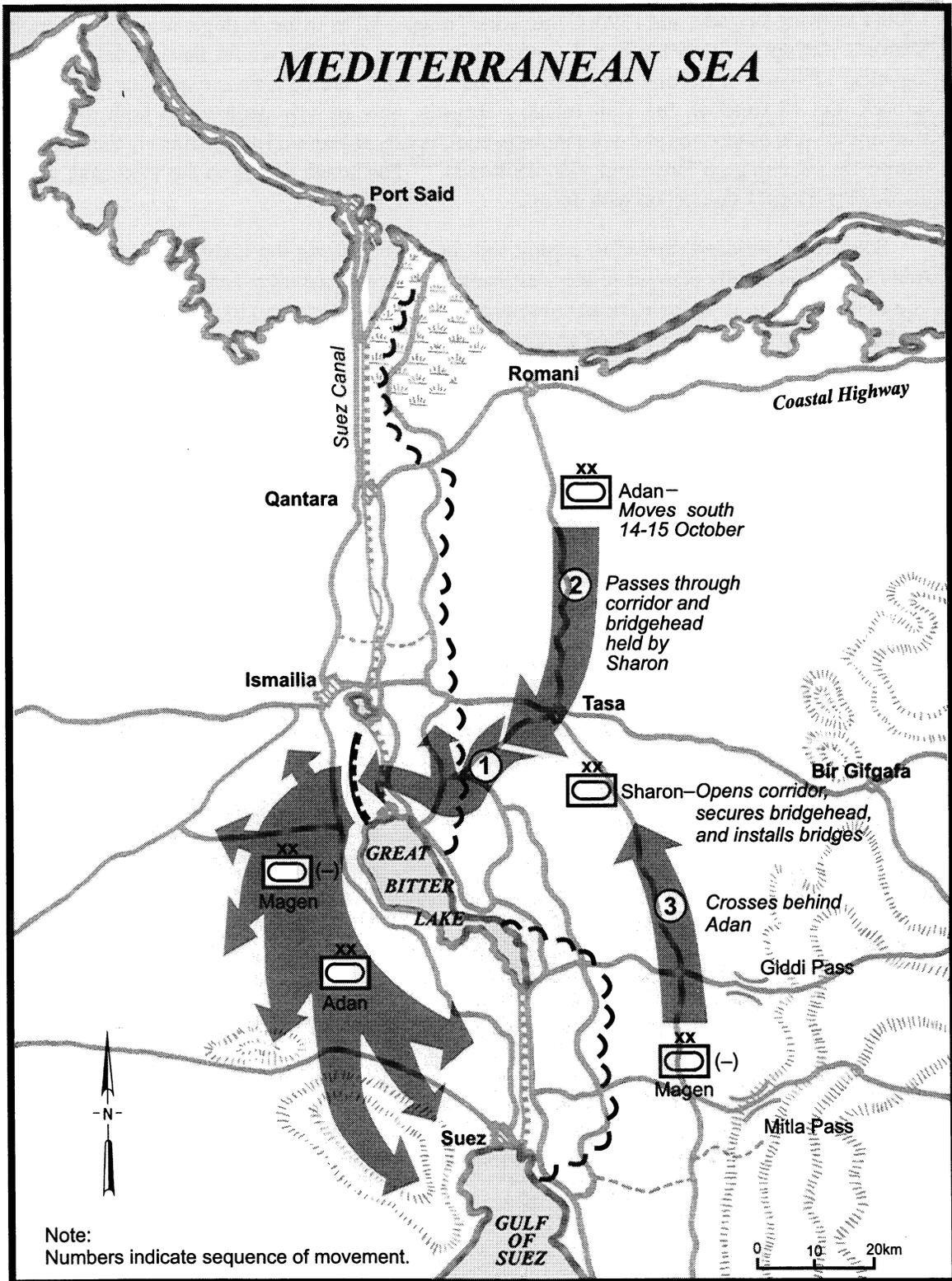
150th Paratroop Brigade, and 139th Commando Group—all from the strategic reserve—stopped Sharon’s attempt to push north and capture Ismailia, a feat that would have threatened the logistical lifblood of Second Army. But on the east bank, the Egyptians experienced a major setback. On 18 October, the 16th Infantry Brigade, now heavily depleted in both men and ammunition and outgunned and outmanned to boot, finally abandoned its positions in the Chinese Farms, thus opening up Tirtur and Akavish Roads.<sup>120</sup> The Israeli forces on the west bank were no longer seriously threatened with defeat.

Southern Command moved to exploit this situation. During the night of 17–18 October, Adan’s division finally crossed to the west bank, three days behind schedule.<sup>121</sup> (See map 7.) The first unit set foot on the African continent at 2330 on 18 October; by 0530, both Amir and Nir had completed the move of their armored brigades to the west bank. At 1305 on 18 October, Southern Command decided to send Keren’s Armored Brigade and half of Magen’s division to the west bank, but with another change in plans. Adan now would spearhead the drive to Suez City, with Magen protecting his right flank instead of Sharon as originally planned. Sharon was now to maintain the bridgehead on the west bank, push north to Ismailia, and attempt to capture Missouri on the east bank. The expectation of a quick and decisive defeat of the Egyptian Armed Forces was nowhere implicit in this plan. After Adan had crossed to the east bank on 18 October, Elazar appeared before the cabinet at 2100 and provided a more sober evaluation of the operation: “a battle is not being conducted according to the more optimistic model—the one that predicts

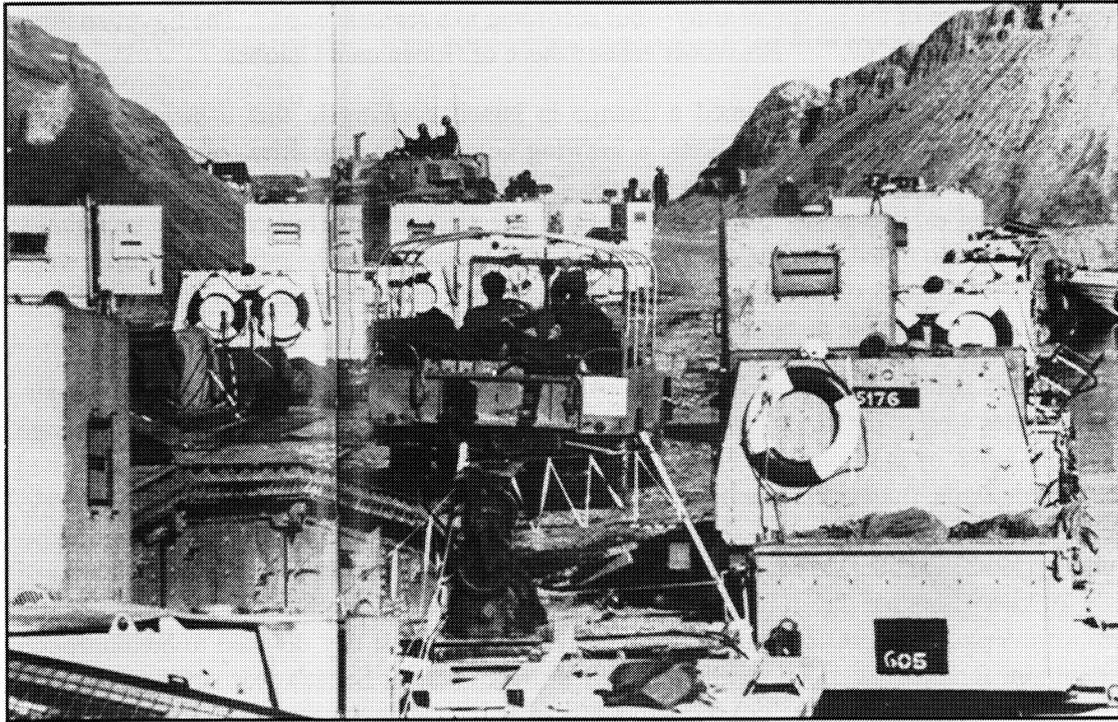


Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

Disabled Egyptian T-54s in the zone west of the Suez Canal



Map 7. Sinai front, Operation Plan Gazelle



Israeli Tank Batties

Israelis moving to cross the canal on 17 October



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

Israeli tanks crossing a pontoon bridge onto the canal's west bank

the total collapse of the Egyptian army—but according to a realistic one . . . The Egyptian army is not what it was in '67.”<sup>122</sup> His words echoed those of Gonen on 8 October.

Egyptian resistance had forced a change in Israeli thinking in that a new factor now influenced the planning of operations: a growing concern for casualties, especially of elite infantry, which was always in short supply. Consequently, commanders found themselves gravitating toward operations that would favor armor tactics without a heavy reliance on infantry support. As Adan noted after the war, “The longer the war went on, the greater our losses were. Now after two weeks of fighting, we considered and reconsidered each step in terms of how many losses it was liable to cause.”<sup>123</sup>

Elazar’s realism proved well-founded. As Israeli ground troops destroyed surface-to-air-missile bases west of the Suez Canal, the gap in the Egyptian air defense system widened enough for exploitation by the Israeli Air Force. To plug the air corridor, Center Ten in Cairo committed its own air force, but Israeli pilots were able to win the dogfights and gain control of the air. Despite the reassertion of Israeli air power, Adan still required five days of virtually continuous fighting (19–23 October) to encircle, but not seize, Suez City. This “dash” to Suez City averaged only 20 kilometers per day, a far cry from the lightning pace of the Six Day War when Israeli armor traversed over 200 kilometers in four days, with the first day devoted to breakthrough assaults on fortified Egyptian positions.<sup>124</sup> Most important for Sadat’s war strategy, the IDF continued to suffer high casualties throughout the countercrossing operation.

Despite their slow progress, the Israelis slowly turned the tide of war in their favor, thereby dulling much of the luster achieved by the Egyptian Armed Forces in the first part of the war. Numerous problems now plagued the Egyptian military. First, Second Army headquarters had failed to take decisive action when the word that the Israelis were on the west bank had first reached it at 0130 on 16 October. Then, based on erroneous intelligence estimates, Second Field Army Command mistakenly sent insufficient forces, in piecemeal fashion, into the Deversoir area. General Command made the same mistake when it tried to take command of the situation from the comfort of Cairo. The Israelis had defeated all Egyptian forces during the first forty-eight hours of the countercrossing operation. Later, over the next week of continuous, heavy fighting, senior Egyptian commands were unable to coordinate sufficient combat power to destroy Israeli forces on the west bank. Piecemeal, uncoordinated, and dilatory counterattacks characterized the Egyptian responses, although the Egyptians fought well on the defensive. The Egyptian Armed Forces clearly suffered from an overly centralized command system that retarded reaction times to the point of being far too slow for maneuver warfare.

The Israeli countercrossing eventually created a serious command crisis in Cairo.<sup>125</sup> On 18 October, Ahmad Ismail dispatched Shazli to the front to assume command of Second Army and defeat the Israeli effort on the west bank. After spending forty-four hours with Second Army, Shazli returned to Center Ten during the evening of 20 October and filed a pessimistic report, evaluating the military situation as critical. He insisted on the withdrawal of four armored brigades from the east bank to the west bank within twenty-four hours to prevent the Israelis from encircling Egyptian forces on the east bank. Ahmad Ismail, however, refused to withdraw any forces, in keeping with Sadat’s insistence on not losing any terrain on the east bank. There was also the fear that withdrawing armored forces from the east bank might spark panic among the troops, as Egyptian soldiers recalled the rout in 1967 when some commanders abandoned



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

An impromptu meeting by General Adan with one of his brigade commanders in the field

their units. Unable to budge Ahmad Ismail, Shazli, out of desperation, appealed for Sadat to come to Center Ten to make the critical decision in person and for the historical record.

At 2230 on 20 October, Sadat arrived at Center Ten to solve the impasse among his senior commanders caused by Shazli's intransigence. He first met privately with Ahmad Ismail for nearly an hour. Then, after listening to the various opinions of his senior commanders in a general meeting (except for those of Shazli, who remained silent throughout), Sadat simply decided: "We will not withdraw a single soldier to the west." With these words, he promptly departed without hinting what would be the next step.

This late meeting on 20—21 October left Sadat a troubled man. Upon his return to Tahra Palace at 0210, Sadat called his senior advisers and informed them of his decision to accept a



Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

Israeli medical teams in life-saving operations

cease-fire in place. Asked for an explanation for his sudden change in strategy, Sadat described how his trip to Center Ten had convinced him that the country and the armed forces were in grave peril, and the only option was to seek a cessation of hostilities with the help of both superpowers.<sup>126</sup> Sadat, now shaken in confidence, clearly placed his hope squarely on the diplomatic front.

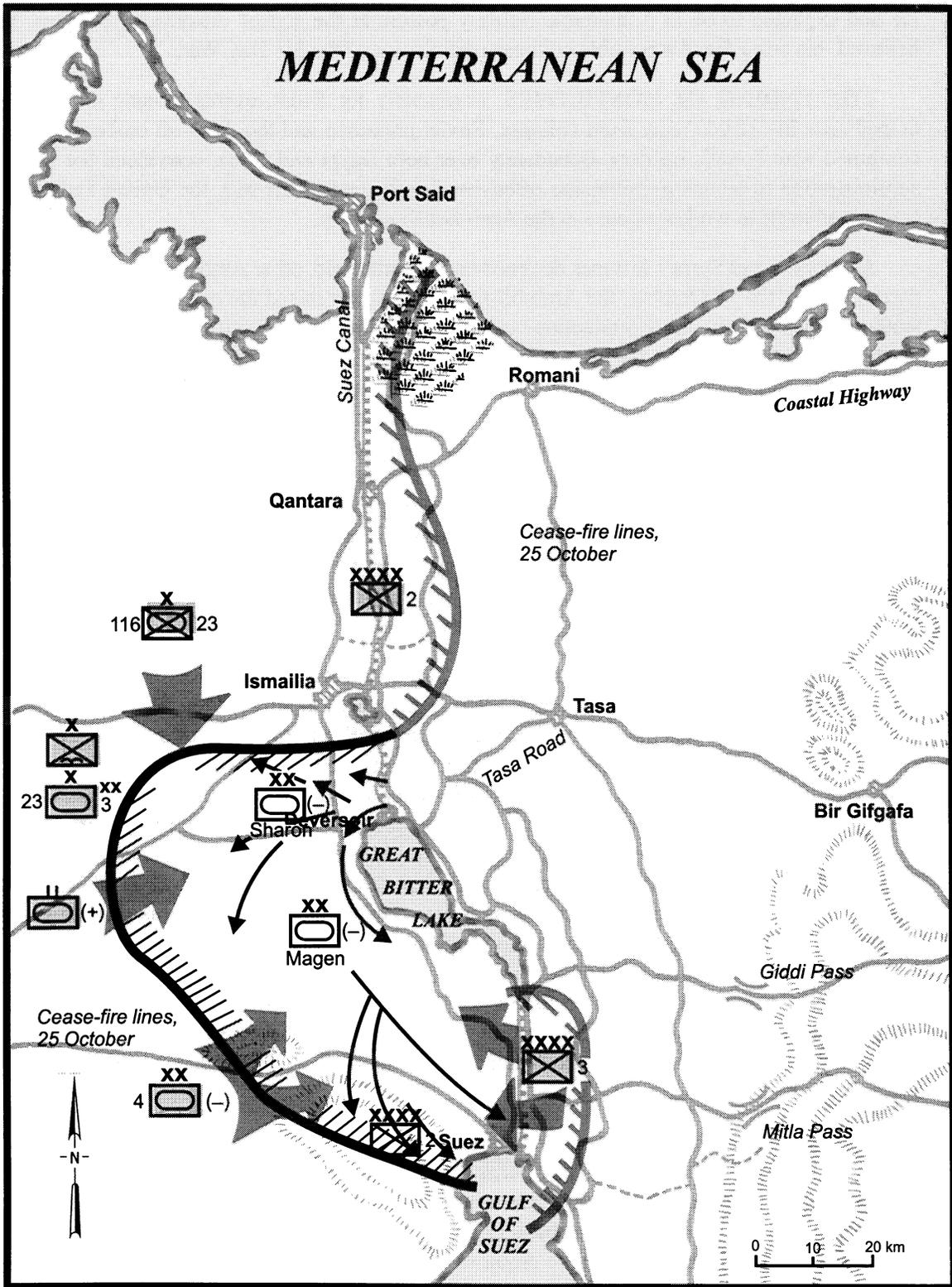
He had expected to be in a favorable military posture at the end of hostilities, but now, he believed, his army faced a possible collapse reminiscent of the Six Day War.

**THE ENDING OF HOSTILITIES.** Fortunately for Sadat, events outside his control helped save his Third Army from collapse. Soviet pressures and the Arab oil embargo, when combined with Israel's military ascendancy over both Egypt and Syria, convinced the Nixon administration to launch a diplomatic offensive. By the end of the war, the United States had committed itself to work for peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As Egypt's and Syria's fortunes declined on the battlefield, other Arab states moved to help their brethren. On 17 October, the Arab oil-producing states raised the price of oil 70 percent, announced a 5 percent cut in production, and threatened to reduce output 5 percent every month until Israel withdrew from territories seized in the Six Day War. On 18 October, the Saudi government announced a 10 percent cut in output. When, on 19 October, Nixon formally requested from Congress a \$2.2 billion emergency aid package for Israel, Saudi Arabia retaliated the next day by placing an oil embargo on the United States; other Arab states quickly followed Riyadh's lead. The military struggle between the Arabs and Israelis now took the added form of economic warfare, which shook stock markets around the world and heightened concerns in western Europe and Japan. The Nixon administration, although besieged by the Watergate scandal, felt pressured to take center stage in an effort to bring a cease-fire to the conflict. Kissinger, who had been waiting for the right moment to intervene with a major diplomatic initiative, began what evolved into a step-by-step process.

While continuing to provide massive military aid to Israel (begun on 13 October), Washington now moved on the diplomatic front to assume the role of honest broker. The United States stood as the only power capable of forcing Israel to cease offensive operations against Egypt. On 19 October, Kissinger accepted a Soviet invitation to visit Moscow to discuss bringing hostilities to an end. He departed the day before the Saudis announced their oil embargo. It was in this context that Sadat went to Center Ten late on 20 October to meet with his senior commanders, knowing that both superpowers were moving to bring about an end to the armed conflict. Hoping for a diplomatic breakthrough, the Egyptian president desperately wanted to keep all his gains on the east bank and thus remained adamant on not withdrawing any forces from the east to the west bank. Meanwhile, in discussions at the Kremlin on 21 October, the Americans and Soviets agreed to sponsor a United Nations resolution for a cease-fire to commence on 22 October at 1820. Before returning to the United States, Kissinger visited Tel Aviv on 22 October to meet personally with Golda Meir and discuss the terms of the cease-fire. Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin meanwhile traveled to Cairo to confer with Sadat. Both Egypt and Israel agreed to a cease-fire in place.<sup>127</sup> (See map 8.)

The commencement of the cease-fire on 22 October at 1820 found Israeli forces north of Suez City, short of surrounding Third Army, though the Egyptian situation was becoming precarious. Israeli artillery fire could interdict the Suez to Cairo road, the main artery supplying the two Egyptian divisions on the east bank in Third Army's sector. But only ground troops could effectively cut off Third Army, which required the surrounding of Suez City. Fortunately for Israel, United Nations Resolution 338, which called for a cease-fire in place (sponsored by both superpowers), failed to provide for a peacekeeping force to supervise its implementation. This omission provided Israel with an opportunity to continue its advance southward.



Map 8. Sinai front, 18-24 October 1973