

The 1956 suez crisis politics essay



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In the 1950s, Egypt was keen to emerge as the leader of pan-Arab nationalism and establish a global position. Nasser pursued a strategy of non-alignment, yet at the same time he tried to balance Egypt's dependency on the West and the Soviet Union. At odds with Europe, Nasser was eager to rid the Arab world of colonial domination and actively supported nationalist movements in the Middle East and in Algeria. A major feature of the pan-Arab system during this time was the rivalry between Egypt and Iraq for regional hegemony. The two countries jockeyed to gain relative superiority over each other in respect of military, economic and political capabilities. In order to succeed over Iraq, Nasser had a strategic economic aim to industrialise Egypt through the construction of the Aswan Dam. He secured promises from the US, the World Bank and Britain to fund the project. Although predominately focussed on the economic development of Egypt, in early 1955 Nasser became increasingly concerned by the threat posed by Israel and began to build Egypt's military power. Crucially, in September 1955 Nasser purchased significant amounts of Soviet weaponry from Czechoslovakia. The arms deal was seen by the West as Egypt aligning its foreign policy with the Soviet Union.^[1] This dichotomy of Egyptian policy spiked distrust in Nasser by the West, which for Britain and France, was intensified by Nasser's regular sermons on Cairo Radio of entrenched anti-colonial rhetoric inciting national zeal and Western hatred amongst the Egyptian people. Ultimately, the West withdrew the offer of funds intended to finance the Aswan Dam. In a retaliatory move, on 26th July 1956, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. He argued that Egypt now needed the revenues in order to replace the revoked finances for the Aswan Dam. Nasser simply

did not envisage that this action would trigger conflict '...war itself did not enter his plans as a serious possibility'.[2]

Since his rise to power in 1954, Nasser pursued a number of policies that frustrated British aims in the Middle East; resulting in increased hostilities between the two countries. Nasser viewed Iraq's participation in the Baghdad Pact as a direct signal that the West had sided with Prime Minister Nuri Pasha as-Said; his major rival for the status of leader of the Arab world. Critically, Nasser spoiled British efforts to recruit Jordan into the pact which ultimately led to King Hussein to discharge the British commander of the Arab Legion, Sir John Bagot Glubb, in March 1956. Prime Minister Anthony Eden saw the sacking of Glubb as a serious blow to British influence in the Middle East. From then on, Nasser became Britain's 'Number 1 Enemy' and Eden developed an obsessional hatred for him.[3]

Post WWII, the Suez Canal still had significant strategic military and economic value to Europe. Aside from the substantial revenue from tolls generated for British and French coffers, most of the Middle Eastern oil that went to Britain and France travelled through the Canal. Furthermore, the Canal provided Europe with a crucial military movement corridor to East African military bases, Pacific Commonwealth partners and allies. It was the lifeline to the British and French Empire in the East and as such, keeping control of the Canal was essential.[4] Eden viewed the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Nasser as a declaration of war; the 'last straw' in Anglo-Egyptian hostilities. He was fuming; not least because in 1954, Eden acted against the advice of the Suez Group, led by Julian Amery. Eden, as Foreign Minister, had negotiated the controversial agreement to withdraw British

troops from the Suez Canal Zone in June 1956. He now faced the political consequences of his 1954 policy.

Increasingly Eden likened Nasser to Hitler and Mussolini; a dictator that cannot be placated and must be removed. He viewed a 'do-nothing' policy in respect of the nationalisation of the Canal as tantamount to appeasement. Eden remained haunted by the effects of Britain's policy of appeasement of Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s. He came under increasing pressure from his backbenchers to act decisively and his criticism from the Press intensified; to which he was very sensitive. Eden was notably hurt by disparaging remarks made in the Daily Telegraph regarding his firmness as a leader lacking the "smack of a firm government."^[5] This, together with his ill-health and an addiction to barbiturates and amphetamines, helps understand the unforgiving response from Eden with an immediate disposition to use military force to 'destroy' Nasser. The extent to which his views, behavior and decision-making were influenced by the amphetamines and barbiturates to which he had become addicted remains a fascinating question.^[6] Throughout the Crisis, Eden pursued a dual political objective. The first was to reverse nationalisation of the Suez Canal and to guarantee its 'international' status. The second, although not officially avowed, was regime change.

French involvement in the Suez conflict was primarily due to the desire to expunge Egyptian support for the nationalist rebellion in Algeria. In 1954, the French had been crushed at Dien Bien Phu and lost Indochina as a colony. The battle for Algeria was seen by France as the next colonial attack to stop. Nasser supplied Algerian Arab forces with weapons and allowed the rebels to

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establish headquarters in Cairo.[7] Furthermore, he would broadcast anti-colonial violent rhetoric against France on Cairo Radio, encouraging the Algerian rebellion. Thus, for the French President Guy Mollet, removing Nasser from power had become a political necessity in order for France to achieve victory in Algeria.

Tension and violence between Israel and Egypt remained high after their initial hostilities in 1948-1949. In the 1950s, Israel's overriding strategic aim was to secure her existence in the Middle East. A powerful Egypt presented a significant threat to Israel's security. Following the September 1955 Arms Deal, Egypt became equipped with modern Russian arms, Stalin Tanks, MiGs and Illyussins.[8] Israel became worried that Egypt was preparing to attack especially given the direct emphasis that Egypt placed on the February 1955 raid on Gaza by the Israeli Defence Force as the main motivation for the deal. Israel turned to France for modern arms. Notably, under the provisions of the secret Franco-Israeli arms agreement, France had supplied Israel with arms since the early 1950s. Whilst this was against the 1950 Tripartite Agreement, it was done with US approval.[9] By October 1956, the Egyptian threat to Israel had swollen. Fidayyun raids were soaring and were both increasingly frequent and violent.[10]

Israel began planning a pre-emptive strike. Prime Minister Ben Gurion sought four political objectives from conflict with Egypt. The first was to defeat Egypt by removing Nasser from power. The second was to gain control of the Gaza Strip; occupied by Egypt since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The third objective was to break through the Straits of Tiran and thereby put an end to the Egyptian blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba. The fourth political objective

sought was to remove the threat of the Egyptian Army in the Sinai and maintain a barrier between Egypt proper and the Sinai Desert.[11] One could argue that this final objective was preeminent in ensuring Israel's continued existence.

The US did not support the British or French disposition to use military force against Egypt. Eisenhower saw no illegitimacy with Egypt's move to nationalise the Canal; hence no legal grounds for military intervention. Whilst he did support Britain's aim of removing Nasser, he was not content to achieve it through conventional warfare. Earlier in 1956, the US and Britain had agreed to isolate Nasser through a series of economic and political measures, code-named Operation Omega. The US main aim at this time was to prevent the spread of communism in the Middle East. Throughout, his response was characterised by anti-colonialism and shrewd oil 'tycoonery'. Mindful of the US experience in the Buraïmi Crisis, the Suez Crisis prompted a harder response to Britain's UK unilateralism. The Suez Canal Users Association was set up by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in an attempt to prolong talks in the hope that thoughts of conflict would fade.

Frustrated by fruitless talks, Eden sought a casus belli for initiating military intervention. France offered a 'lifeline' through collusion with Israel; agreed in the Protocol of Sèvres.[12] In retaliation to the 'tripartite invasion', Nasser nationalised all other British and French assets in Egypt and intentionally sunk ships closing the Canal until March 1957. The intervention was immediately internationally condemned and evidence of Britain and France's diplomatic isolation came when the UN Security Council General Assembly passed a majority vote in favour of a ceasefire resolution. At this point, the

Soviet Union, keen to distract global attention from their brutal invasion of Hungary, played a decisive role in the conflict. The Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin sent notes of condemnation to Eden, Mollet and Gurion threatening to use action by the use of 'every kind of modern destructive weapon', bringing the Crisis to the brink of World War III.[13] This unequivocal support for Nasser unlocked the gateway to strategic influence the region for the Soviet Union.

At the end of the conflict, Nasser presented himself as the political victor. He had retained control of the Suez Canal and had apparently succeeded in removing Egypt's former colonial masters. Instead of eradicating Nasser, as the British, French and Israeli governments had intended, the Suez conflict confirmed his position as the leader of the Arab nationalism and Egypt's influence within the Middle East was strengthened. The conflict acted as a catalyst to the spread of radicalism throughout the region, markedly in states with a volatile posture such as Lebanon and Syria. Furthermore, it also reinvigorated the Palestinian nationalist movement, which had waned after the 1948 defeat.[14] Notably, the struggle between Iraq and Egypt over Arab hegemony did not diminish immediately after the conflict. Indeed, the 'Royalist Coalition' founded in 1957 was mainly directed at Nasser's rising prestige. Further, whilst Nasser rejoiced in his victory, he failed to acknowledge that it was not the result of Egypt's military or economic power, rather a by-product of the crisis between the two Superpowers. The uncomfortable truth for Nasser was that at the military level Egypt had been punctured, not only by the West, but also by the 'hated Israelis'.[15]

In the short term, Egypt suffered economically. Foreign currency assets from the US, Britain and France were frozen after the nationalisation of the Canal. Egypt's trade relations with Britain ended and the ones with France and the US failed as well. Additionally, the blocking of the Canal and the cost of mobilizing troops gravely affected the Egyptian economy.[16] However, this downturn was short lived. Egyptian-Soviet relations were improved and the Soviet Union stepped in to help finance the construction of the Aswan Dam. This together with the revenues from the administration of the Canal (once it reopened) ensured that the building of the Dam became a certainty.[17]

Britain was hurt considerably by the Suez fiasco. Throughout, Eden totally misjudged the US position and held the belief that eventually, Eisenhower would recognise the special interests of Britain in the Middle East. This misperception was rooted in the Anglo-American relations between 1945 and 1956 and played a crucial role in Eden's decision making. Eden viewed US policy in the Middle East as complicit with Britain's. The rule he operated was that the US would show deliberate hesitation, but then would eventually follow suit. This is why Britain did not respond immediately to the UN ceasefire. Fundamentally, Eden totally misjudged the role of 'peacemaker' played by Eisenhower. He hoped that the US would support Britain; in his wildest imagination he didn't consider that the US would labour against Britain.[18] Furthermore, by concealing his intent to conduct military action against Egypt and his conspiracy with France and Israel, Eden damaged the special relationship that Britain enjoyed with the US. "Eisenhower felt double-crossed because the British lied about their willingness to negotiate..."[19] Britain's global influence and power diminished and its

moral standing amongst allies plummeted. The Suez conflict was “ a milestone in Great Britain’s slide from world pre-eminence into the ranks of middling countries.”[20]

Britain showed critical vulnerability to the financial pressure exerted by the US to end the conflict. The British financial position weakened significantly and there was a run on sterling. Convinced that the US would eventually support Britain, Harold MacMillan, Britain’s then Chancellor of the Exchequer, took no precautionary measures to protect the pound. Unlike France, that secured an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan before the commencement of military action. Britain turned to the IMF for a loan, but Eisenhower was resolute that the US would not help Britain until all forces had withdrawn from Egypt. Moreover, Eisenhower ordered George M. Humphrey, his Secretary of the Treasury, to arrange to sell part of the US Government’s Sterling Bond holdings. MacMillan advised Eden that the US was determined to see through this threat. Furthermore, that Britain’s foreign exchange reserves could not withstand the devaluation of the pound. This coupled with the closing of the Suez Canal and the Arab oil embargo resulted in Britain facing the prospect of being unable to import basic food and energy supplies needed to sustain the population. This spread a sense of panic through the Cabinet which together with the loss of support from the British public, the risk of compromising the Commonwealth and isolating Britain further from the US forced Eden, unilaterally, to concede to the cease-fire.[21] Speculation that MacMillan deliberately overstated the financial position to Eden remains undecided. These arguments centre on his

allegedly selfish motives to discredit Eden and force him out of Office in order to succeed him as Prime Minister.[22]

Throughout the Suez Crisis, British decision making was concentrated in small groups, limited to the 'Egypt Committee' and Eden's inner war cabinet and operated with extreme secrecy. This political disconnect coupled with Eden's leadership style and his ill health constitute a large part of the domestic crisis that ensued within the government. Eden increasingly came under severe opposition and lost the confidence of his cabinet. Through relentless questions he was severely undermined in parliament over the collusion with France and Israel. Finally, although attributed to declining health, Eden resigned from office in January 1957.

In his memoirs, Eden declared that the Suez conflict was not without success. He maintains that the military intervention served decisively to check Nasser as Mussolini and Hitler had not been checked in the 1930s. [23] Whilst Selwyn Lloyd, in his account of the Suez conflict, recognises that Britain sustained a diplomatic and political defeat, he supports Eden's claim that Nasser had been checked. Principally, Lloyd based his argument on predictive outcomes if no military intervention had taken place. "If the Middle East had seen him [Nasser] successfully defy the Western powers, his prestige would have been enormous." [24]

France gained nothing from the Suez conflict; indeed there were heavy costs. The war in Algeria continued even though France committed some 400,000 men to the force, which should have dominated the ground.

[25] Arab hostility towards France increased. The failed outcome of the Suez

conflict encouraged Algeria to continue the liberation movement and fuelled other Middle Eastern states to openly support the rebellion.[26] Thus, a disastrous outcome for France that endured until they ultimately ceded control of Algeria in 1962.

In the short term, Mollet remained in power and his position as Prime Minister was even strengthened.[27] However, domestic politics were aggravated. The failure in the Suez represented another defeat for the Fourth Republic and the budget deficit increased due to the increased cost of oil imports. Ultimately, the Fourth Republic collapsed and Charles De Gaulle returned to establish the Fifth Republic. This marked the end of Imperial France as the decolonisation programme was accelerated, with France turning its attention to Europe. France signed the Treaty of Rome in March 1957, from then France looked to the Bonn-Paris axis as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.[28] France believed that Britain had betrayed them over the ceasefire, thus the Anglo-Franco relationship became one of bitterness and mistrust. Furthermore, the Franco-American relationship was destroyed which led France to withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. France pursued an independent policy and affirmed its aspiration to become a nuclear power in order to secure itself and return as a global power.[29]

Israel gained quite substantially from her involvement in the Suez conflict. Most notably, it marked the point at which Israel's existence and survival was no longer in question and she proved to the world that she would play a strategic role in Middle East politics. Gurion's government remained strong amongst the people. Israel's forces led a "brilliant" militarily strong campaign and Israel established itself as a highly professional and credible

military power. Egypt's new Soviet weapons were destroyed and its military might was left languishing. Israel had removed Egypt from its borders and as a result, she enjoyed an eleven-year lull with Egypt.^[30] Although Israel was not given freedom to use the Suez Canal, she did regain shipping rights in the Straits of Tiran. Furthermore, UN troops were sent to protect the borders of Israel and its trading ships in the Straits of Tiran. France remained an important supplier of arms to Israel and significantly, through Israel's special relationship with France, she developed a nuclear arsenal.

In conclusion, the Suez Crisis was a dramatic episode on a global, regional and domestic scale. It marked a watershed in the history of Anglo-Franco imperialist power and the simultaneous advent of the Middle East as a significant player in world politics. Britain and France held fervent interests in protecting their colonial prowess. Britain having only just left the Canal Zone after seventy years of occupation and France, struggling with the uprising in Algeria. Hitler and Mussolini became emotional and powerful comparators to Nasser; appeasement was not an option. For Eden, the destruction of Nasser became a personal crusade. The consequences of misjudged political relationships, misaligned policy decisions and strategy resulted in overwhelming failure. Not only did Britain and France fail to achieve their political aims, they both succeeded in damaging their international reputation and relationships, domestic politics and economies. The conflict accelerated the decline of the Anglo-Franco colonial empires and both Eden and Mollett met their demise as political leaders.

Significantly, Israel benefitted substantially from the conflict, achieving the majority of her aims and more. Notably, she entered the global arena as a

strategic actor in Middle East politics and secured her boundaries from Egypt. However, the Suez conflict wasn't a complete victory for Israel, particularly as there was no peace treaty signed to solve the conflict between her and the Arab world permanently. Israel's knowledge of the preemptive strike would be put to good effect again in 1967 in the third of the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

The decisive role played by the Soviet Union created a Cold War crisis, averted only by ruthless and consistent pressure by Eisenhower against his Western allies. The US economic diplomacy was particularly successful against Britain, compelling Eden to agree to a ceasefire and a complete withdrawal from Egypt. Critically, this allowed Egypt to emerge from the conflict victoriously. Having apparently eradicated colonial powers and simultaneously deterred an attack from Israel, Nasser presented himself as the leader of the Arab world promoting pan-Arab nationalism and anti-Western doctrine. The Canal was internationally recognised as the sovereignty of Egypt by the UN and Soviet funding was secured to build the Aswan Dam. Thus Nasser had the means to rise above Iraq as the regional hegemony and Superpower politics in the Middle East were affirmed.