

Examining the 1956 Suez Crisis

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ANCA IOANA VOINEA, JUL 27 2011

The 1956 Suez War marked a new chapter in the development of Middle Eastern politics. The conflict was determined by a clash of interests between British imperialism and Egyptian Pan-Arabism which gained a global dimension in the context of the Cold War (Takeyh 2000:49).

The main reason why the rupture between the UK and Egypt emerged in the first place was that each had a different perspective over the role of the Middle East in world politics. Nasser's increasing power within the Middle East was regarded as a threat by both the US and the UK, because it tended to contest the influence of the Western world in the region (Hahn 2004: 150). For the US, the main purpose was to contain the Soviet influence within the Middle East. This is why it disapproved of Nasser's recognition of the People's Republic of China and of his non-alignment policy which culminated with his attendance at the Bandung Afro-Asian conference in 1955 (Ellis 1989: 356).

On the other hand, the UK was not willing to accept that it was no longer able to influence Middle East politics as much as it used to in the 19th century. Moreover, after Egypt's attempt to purchase arms from the UK had failed, Nasser signed another agreement with Syria, purchasing arms from the Soviet satellite Czechoslovakia. Nasser's attack on Iraq for having signed the Baghdad Pact in 1955 along with Britain, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey exacerbated the British anti-Nasser sentiment, particularly because the British troops had just withdrawn from Egypt (Nutting 1967: 21). Nasser was also seen as the main reason why Syria had not joined the Baghdad Pact alliance.

Despite their disapproval of Nasser's policies, Eisenhower and Eden agreed to offer Egypt a substantial loan of 70 million dollars to build a new high dam at Aswan. The two states feared that the Soviets might gain even more influence in the region in case they refused to fund Nasser's hydro-electrical project. The World Bank would have loaned another 200 million dollars providing Egypt complied with its terms (Eden 1969: 420).

However, Nasser's pro-Soviet policy along with the internal pressures exercised on both leaders made them reconsider their initial offer. Nasser's anti-Western propaganda through the 'Voice of the Arabs' added to the British and American discontent. Eisenhower decided not to ask the Congress to approve the loan for Egypt's Aswan Dam because it did not want to risk asking for such a big loan before the elections (Robertson 1964: 63). After the US had announced it could offer financial assistance to Egypt on the 19th of July, Britain backed out of the agreement as well. An important factor in Eden's and Eisenhower's decision was that Nasser hesitated in accepting World Bank's terms, failing to offer any guarantee it would pay back the loan (Eden 1960: 221).

Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal on the 26th of July. He justified his decision by arguing that the UK and the US had refused to fund the building of the Aswan Dam and Egypt had to fund the project itself. By nationalising the Canal Nasser would have increased Egypt's income (Milton Edwards 2001: 13).

The fact that Egypt was entitled to nationalise the Canal was a key factor that influenced the outcome of the Suez crisis. The UK and France claimed that the nationalisation was a violation of international law because the Suez Canal had been granted to the Canal Company in 1858 by the Viceroy of Egypt, which at the time was under Ottoman suzerainty. The company's concession was supposed to expire in 1968. However, it was within Egypt's sovereign rights under international law to end the agreement with the Canal Company. Both Britain and France were aware that the nationalization of the Suez Canal was not enough to justify the military intervention and sought to

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induce the idea that Egypt was not capable of ensuring the free flow of traffic through the canal (Robertson 1964: xvi).

The two states allowed Israel to play its part in the conspiracy by invading the Sinai Peninsula on the 29th of October (Khalidi 1989: 380). Following the Israeli invasion the United Nations Security Council met at the request of the US on the 30th of October but France and the UK vetoed the draft resolution asking for the Israeli withdrawal. The same day the UK and France issued an ultimatum to Israel and Egypt demanding the cease-fire which the former accepted as previously agreed at the Protocol of Sevres. Due to the failure of reaching an agreement the UNSC invoked the 'Uniting for Peace' Resolution of 1950 and scheduled a General Assembly (GA) emergency session on the 1st of November with the aim of passing a resolution that called for the immediate cease-fire (Robertson 1964: 206). On the 31st of October Britain and France began their bombing campaign against Egypt as part of the 'Operation Musketeer'. The operation enjoyed a military success but was doomed to failure on political grounds. Britain and France had acted without having the consent of the UN. The world opinion condemned the intervention and did not support the military action. On the 2nd of November the GA adopted Resolution 997 advanced by the US requesting the immediate cease-fire. None of the sides accepted the resolution because it implied the establishment of a UN police force to maintain peace (Robertson 1964: 206).

Nasser's successful emergence from the Suez was also determined by the fact Eisenhower was not willing to stand in front of Egyptian emerging nationalism (Robertson 1965: 41). His foreign policy with regard to the Middle East was different than the one of Eden. This fundamental difference of approach in Middle East's respect was a key element in shifting the balance towards Egypt. Dulles' official statement clarified that 'the US would not support military action and would act independently' even though it had signed the Tripartite declaration in 1950 (Hahn 2004: 70).

Another key element that determined the final result was that throughout the crisis Nasser knew how to take advantage of the rupture which had emerged between the US and the UK. He also exploited the struggle for influence in the Middle East between the US and the USSR. The two super-powers wanted to enhance their influence within the Middle East by playing a major role in ending the conflict. Nasser asked for the US diplomatic support within the UN knowing that the Soviets would provide the military assistance if necessary (Robertson 1964: 284). Furthermore, Nasser decided not to declare war to England and France because he wanted to generate the idea that Egypt's war was against the Israeli and by doing so securing the support of the Arab states (Heikal 1964: 181).

Britain and France did not occupy the Canal once the ultimatum had expired and their delay in acting allowed the Soviets to move decisively. On the 5th of November the Soviets sent a letter to threaten with the use of nuclear weapons against the UK and France unless the conflict ceased (Hourani 1989: 403). The UK and France were no longer able to argue that their intervention sought to protect shipping because Nasser had blocked the Canal, or that oil supplies had to be safeguarded because the Syria had blown up the pumping stations and the pipelines had been cut as well (Robertson 1964: 207).

As a result, France developed a plan to enable Israel delay the acceptance of the cease-fire by launching the rumour that Jordan was intending to attack Israel. Britain refused to join the conspiracy this time, because it had obligations toward Jordan and was also skeptical about the outcome of the plan (Robertson 1964: 208). By accepting the cease-fire and the establishment of a UN police force, Britain could have partially improved its international reputation (Robertson 1964: 230).

It is also essential to mention that the Soviet Invasion of Hungary was being associated to the Suez crisis in the UN. Even if it wanted to, the US could not have supported the French and British intervention because it had to condemn the Soviet invasion of Budapest. On the other hand, the USSR wanted to diverge from its invasion of Hungary. However, once it had re-established control over Hungary, the Soviets were able to focus on the Middle East crisis more (Hourani 1989: 403).

Eden sought Eisenhower's reassurance it would retaliate in case the Soviets attacked London and Paris, but the US President urged the British PM to accept the cease-fire instead. Without the support of the US, the UK could not face the Soviet nuclear threat. The wide spread opposition against the war in the UK along with the risk of endangering

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the Commonwealth and alienating the US made Eden concede to the cease-fire. The UK was also facing a run in the sterling pound caused by the fact that the United States Federal Reserve Bank was offloading the sterling pound at a discount (Robertson 1964: 254-258). The Chinese balances had been withdrawn and the Indian ones reduced. Had the measures continued they could have had a great impact on the British economy (Eden 1960: 557). France was not able to continue without the UK and gave up its plans to take control over Suez. The cease-fire was announced one day later on the 6th of November.

The Suez crisis had implications on both global and regional levels. Having secured the international recognition of its sovereignty rights over the Canal, as well as the humiliation of Britain and France, Egypt emerged victorious after the Suez War. On short term, the war had affected the Egyptian economy. Egypt's foreign currency assets from Britain, France and the US had been frozen after the nationalisation of the Canal. Furthermore, trade relations with the UK ceased and the ones with France and the US deteriorated as well. The blocking of the Canal from November until April 1956, along with the costs of mobilizing the troops seriously affected the Egyptian economy (Owen 1989: 365).

However, with the 100 million dollars loan received from Saudi Arabia and the support of Soviet Union and its allies, Egypt managed not only to survive the crisis, but also to experience growth in its national income. The Soviet Union and the Eastern block became the main market for Egyptian goods and the main source of imports as well (Owen 1989: 365). Moreover, after the Canal reopened in April 1957, Egypt's revenues from the administration of the Suez Canal increased from 2.3 million Egyptian 24.5 million. Thus with Soviet help the construction of the High Dam had now become certitude (Hourani 1989: 408).

For Nasser, the Suez Crisis was a great success. Instead of eliminating Nasser as Britain, France and Israel intended, the Suez War consolidated his position and increased Egypt's influence within the Middle East as well as the spread of radicalism along the region particularly in states with an unstable situation such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq (Khalidi 1989: 381).

In Syria the coup planned by Britain, Iraq and the US with the aim of removing the country's pro-Egyptian government led to the establishment of a military regime. The Iraqi monarchy was also affected by the Suez crisis, mainly because Iraq, as one of the signatories of the Baghdad Pact alliance, was regarded as Britain's protégé. Furthermore, Iraq was also blamed for the Syrian plot which had emerged while the Israeli were attacking Egypt. King Faisal, his family and PM al Sa'id were all killed during the July 1958 revolution and a new a pro-Egyptian government was established instead.

After the Suez War Egyptian policy gained an external dimension. The Suez crisis gave an impetus to the spread of pan-Arabic ideology leading to the unification of Syria and Egypt and creating the United Arab Republic in 1958 (Hourani 1989: 409). It also accelerated the revival of the Palestinian nationalist movement, which had lost its strength after the 1948 defeat. Another consequence of the Suez crisis was that it made the Arab states get involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict mainly for their regional interests, rather than for the question of Palestine (Khalidi 1989: 389).

The Suez War improved the Egyptian-Soviet relations and indirectly influenced the policy of the other Arab states with regard to the USSR. The cease-fire was mainly attributed to the Soviet threat, despite the fact that the US had exercised diplomatic and economic pressures on Britain. The Suez crisis marked not only the end of the British and French influence in the Middle East, but also the decline of the two European powers. Prime Minister Eden resigned, though his resignation was attributed to his health issues. Instead, the US gradually became the new guardian of Israel's interests. On the other hand, Suez made Britain and France realise they could not depend upon the US aid and needed to develop their own nuclear capabilities (Robertson 1964: 338).

After Suez President Eisenhower presented the Eisenhower Doctrine aimed at containing the Soviet spheres of influence including its ambitions within the Middle East. The US was to offer 200 million dollars to help Middle Eastern states build their economy and protect the states that were willing to receive assistance against the Soviet threat (Heikal 1986: 216).

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On the other hand, the Baghdad Pact froze after the Suez crisis. On November 6th before the ceasefire had been announced, a meeting between the signatories took place but Britain was not represented (Heikal 1986: 217). King Hussein also abrogated the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty (Heikal 1986: 211).

Despite its involvement in the War, Israel did not suffer the same consequences as the UK or France. The Suez had proved to all Middle Eastern states that Israel will continue to play a key role in the politics of the region. Ben Gurion's government continued to enjoy the full support of the people and maintained its policy of building a strong army able to face a possible attack from Egypt (Hourani 1989: 408). The Suez Crisis also boosted Algeria's confidence and encouraged it to continue the liberation movements whilst other Middle Eastern states were now openly supporting the rebellion (Hourani 1989: 406).

However, Egypt did not possess enough military force to sustain its newly acquired political status which is why it was defeated in the Six Day War of 1967. Furthermore, there was a tension between the Pan-Arabic ideology and Egypt's desire to dominate Middle Eastern politics. This tension was the main reason why the union with Syria collapsed in 1961 and why further negotiations to create a union between Egypt, Syria and Iraq did not end with a concrete agreement (Hourani 1989: 408).

To conclude, the emergence of Nasserism in the Middle East after the Suez crisis sustains the idea that Egypt was the sole winner of Suez. Furthermore, Nasser's victory generated the feeling that the Third World non-alignment movement strategy was a viable alternative even though the later defeat in the 1967 Six Day War points out towards the over ambitious aspects of Nasserism. Most importantly, the Suez War managed to bring into question the significant role of the Middle East in world politics, particularly in the Cold War context.

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