

Suez Crisis / Sinai War / Tripartite Invasion / 1956 War

The Suez Crisis of 1956 was a complex affair with complicated origins and momentous consequences for the international history of the Middle East. The origins of the crisis can be traced to the Arab-Israeli conflict that swept the region during the late 1940s and to the wave of decolonization that swept the globe in the middle 20th century, which caused conflict between imperial powers and emergent nations. Before the Suez Crisis ended, it aggravated the Arab-Israeli conflict, it came close to provoking a showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union, it dealt a mortal blow to British and French imperial pretensions in the Middle East, and it provided a **gateway** for the United States to assume a prominent political position in the region.

Egypt and Israel remained technically in a state of war after an armistice agreement had ended their hostilities of 1948-1949. Efforts by the United Nations and various states to achieve a final peace treaty-most notably the so-called Alpha peace plan promoted by the United States and Britain in 1954-1955-failed to **secure** an accord. In an atmosphere of tension, violent clashes along the Egyptian-Israeli border nearly triggered the resumption of full-scale hostilities.

In February 1955, David Ben-Gurion returned to the Ministry of Defense, and with the malleable Moshe Sharett still as prime minister was able to promote his hard-line defense policy. This position resulted in a number of raids against the Egyptians in response to attacks on Israeli settlements originating from Egyptian-held territory. In February 1955, the Israeli army attacked Egyptian **military** outposts in Gaza. Thirty-nine Egyptians were killed. Until then, this had been Israel's least troublesome frontier.

Since the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Egypt's leaders, from King Faruk to Nasser, had avoided militant attitudes on the ground that Israel should not distract Egypt from domestic problems. Nasser made no serious attempt to narrow Israel's rapidly widening armaments lead. He preferred to spend Egypt's meager hard currency reserves on **development**. Israel's raid on Gaza changed Nasser's mind.

In February 1955 Nasser became convinced that Egypt had to arm to defend itself against Israel. This decision put him on a collision course with the West that ended on the battlefields of Suez a year later. At first he sought Western aid, but he was rebuffed by the United States, France, and Britain. The United States government, especially the passionately anticommunist **Secretary** of State John Foster Dulles, clearly disapproved of Egypt's nonalignment and would make it difficult for Egypt to purchase arms. The French demanded that Egypt cease aiding the Algerian national movement, which was fighting for independence from France. The British warned Nasser that if he accepted Soviet weapons, none would be forthcoming from Britain.

Rejected in this shortsighted way by the West, Nasser negotiated the famous arms agreement with Czechoslovakia in September 1955. This agreement marked the Soviet Union's first great breakthrough in its effort to undermine Western influence in the Middle East. Egypt received no arms from the West and eventually became dependent on arms from the Soviet Union. By October 1955, Nasser had signed an agreement to **buy** arms from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, while President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to supply Israel with weapons. When David Ben-Gurion was restored in November 1955 to leadership of the Mapai government in Israel, his biggest concern was the rising power of Nasser.

Britain and France had tired of the challenges Nasser posed to their imperial interests in the Mediterranean basin. Britain considered Nasser's campaign to expel British **military** forces from Egypt-accomplished by a treaty in 1954-as a blow to its prestige and military capabilities. Nasser's campaign to project his influence into Jordan, Syria, and Iraq convinced the British that he sought to purge their influence from across the region. French officials chafed at evidence that Nasser endorsed the struggle of Algerian rebels for independence from France. By early 1956, American and British officials agreed to a top-secret policy, code-named Omega, to isolate and confine Nasser through a variety of subtle political and economic measures.

While Nasser admitted to doubts about the West's sincerity, the United States became incensed over Egypt's decision to recognize communist China. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was offering aid to Egypt in several forms, including a loan to finance the Aswan High Dam. Then, on 19 July 1956, the United States withdrew its loan offer, and Britain and the **World** Bank followed suit. Nasser was returning to Cairo from a meeting with President Tito and Prime Minister Nehru when he heard the news. He was furious and decided to retaliate with an action that shocked the West and made him the hero of the Arabs.

On July 26, 1956, the fourth anniversary of King Faruk's exile, Nasser appeared in Muhammad Ali Square in Alexandria where twenty months earlier an assassin had attempted to kill him. An immense crowd gathered, and he began a three-hour speech from a few notes jotted on the back of an envelope. When Nasser said the code word, "de Lesseps," it was the signal for engineer Mahmud Yunis to begin the takeover of the Suez **Canal**.

The canal's owner was the Suez Canal Company, an international company with headquarters in Paris. Anthony Eden, then British prime minister, called the nationalization of the canal "theft," and United States secretary of state Dulles said Nasser would have to be made to "disgorge" it. The French and British depended heavily on the canal for transporting oil supplies, and they felt that Nasser had become a threat to their remaining interests in the Middle East and Africa. Eden wanted to launch a military action immediately

but was informed that Britain was not in a position to do so. Both France and Britain froze Egyptian assets in their countries and increased their military preparedness in the eastern Mediterranean.

Egypt promised to compensate the stockholders of the Suez Canal Company and to guarantee right of access to all ships, so it was difficult for the French and British to rally international support to regain the canal by force. The Soviet Union, its East European allies, and Third World countries generally supported Egypt. The United States moved farther away from Britain and stated that while it opposed the nationalization of the canal, it was against the use of force.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower approached the canal crisis on three basic and interrelated premises. First, although he sympathized with Britain's and France's desire to recover the canal company, he did not contest the right of Egypt to seize the company provided that it paid adequate compensation as required by international law. Eisenhower thus sought to avert a military clash and to settle the canal dispute with diplomacy before the Soviet Union exploited the situation for political gain. He directed Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to defuse the crisis on terms acceptable to Britain and France through public statements, negotiations, two international conferences in London, establishment of a Suez Canal Users Association (SCUA), and deliberations at the United Nations. By late October, however, these efforts proved fruitless, and Anglo-French preparations for war continued.

Second, Eisenhower aimed to avoid alienating Arab nationalists and included Arab statesmen in his diplomacy to end the crisis. His refusal to endorse Anglo-French force against Egypt resulted in part from the realization that Nasser's seizure of the canal company was widely popular among his own and other Arab peoples. Indeed, the surge in Nasser's popularity in Arab states short-circuited Eisenhower's efforts to settle the canal crisis in partnership with Arab leaders. Saudi and Iraqi leaders declined U.S. suggestions that they criticize Nasser's action or challenge his prestige.

Third, Eisenhower sought to isolate Israel from the canal controversy on the fear that mixture of the volatile Israeli-Egyptian and Anglo-French-Egyptian conflicts would ignite the Middle East. Accordingly, Dulles denied Israel a voice in the diplomatic conferences summoned to resolve the crisis and prevented discussion of Israel's grievances about Egyptian policy during the proceedings at the United Nations. Sensing a spike in Israeli bellicosity toward Egypt in August and September, Eisenhower arranged limited arms supplies from the United States, France, and Canada in the hope of easing Israeli insecurity and thereby averting an Egyptian-Israeli war.

After President Gamal Abdul Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal in July 1956, the British, French, and Israelis began coordinating an invasion. The plan, which was supposed to enable Britain and France to gain physical control of the canal, called for Israel to attack across the Sinai Desert. When Israel neared the canal, Britain and France would issue an ultimatum for an Egyptian and Israeli withdrawal from both sides of the canal. An Anglo-French force would then occupy the canal to **prevent** further fighting and to keep it open to shipping. Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion agreed to the plan but informed Britain that Israel would not attack unless Britain and France first destroyed the Egyptian air force. Ben-Gurion sought to inflict a mortal blow on the Egyptian regime. Because Nasser threatened Western interests in the Suez Canal, Ben-Gurion entered into secret talks with Britain and France about the possibility of Israel striking at the Sinai Peninsula, while Britain and France moved in on the Suez Canal, ostensibly to help protect Western shipping from combat.

The Conservative government in London denied that it used Israel as an excuse for attacking Egypt. Eden, who had an intense personal dislike for Nasser, concealed the cooperation with Israel from his colleagues, British diplomats, and the United States. American officials failed to anticipate the collusion scheme, in part because they were distracted by a war scare between Israel and Jordan as well as by anti-Soviet unrest in **Hungary**, in part because they were preoccupied by the impending U.S. presidential election, and in part because they believed the denials of friends in the colluding governments who assured them that no attack was imminent.

On 28 October 1956, Israeli troops crossed the frontier into the Sinai Peninsula (also seen as Sinai), allegedly to destroy the bases of Egyptian commandos. The first sign of collusion between Israel and Britain and France came on the same day when the Anglo-French ultimatum was handed to Egypt and Israel before Israel had even reached the canal. On October 29, 1956, the Israelis struck across Sinai toward the canal and southward toward Sharm ash Shaykh to relieve the Egyptian blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba. At the crossroads of Abu Uwayqilah, thirty kilometers from the Israeli border. The IDF routed the Egyptian **army** at Gaza and after a week pushed to the Gidi and Mitla passes. At the Mitla Pass, Egyptian troops resisted fiercely, repelling several attacks by larger Israeli forces.

British bombing destroyed the Egyptian air force, and British and French paratroopers were dropped over Port Said and Port Fuad. British and French forces bombed Egyptian air bases, causing Nasser to withdraw Egyptian troops from Sinai to **protect** the canal. The Egyptians put up fierce resistance. Ships were sunk in the canal to prevent transit. At the heavily fortified complex of Rafah in the northwestern corner of Sinai and at other points, the Egyptians carried out effective delaying actions before retreating. Egypt vigorously defended Sharm ash Shaykh in the extreme south until two advancing Israeli columns took control of the area. At Port Said (Bur Said), at the north end of the canal, Egyptian soldiers

battled the initial British and French airborne assault, but resistance quickly collapsed when allied forces landed on the beach with support from heavy naval gunfire. In the battle for Port Said, about 2,700 Egyptian civilians and soldiers were killed or wounded.

On November 5, 1956, the French and British took over the Suez Canal area.

The Soviet Union, in a ploy to distract attention from its brutal repression of the revolutionary movement in Hungary, threatened to intervene in the hostilities and perhaps even retaliate by attacking London and Paris with atomic weapons. Intelligence reports that Soviet forces were concentrating in Syria for intervention in Egypt alarmed American officials who sensed that the turmoil in Hungary had left Soviet leaders prone to impulsive behavior. Prudently, Eisenhower alerted the Pentagon to prepare for war. The intersection of the Arab-Israeli and decolonization conflicts had triggered a portentous East-West confrontation.

Caught off-guard by the start of hostilities, Eisenhower and Dulles took a series of steps designed to end the war quickly. Angered that his allies in London and Paris had deceived him in the collusion scheme, Eisenhower also worried that the war would drive Arab states into Soviet dependence. To stop the fighting even as British and French warplanes bombed Egyptian targets, he imposed sanctions on the colluding powers, achieved a United Nations ceasefire resolution, and organized a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to disengage the combatants. After intense pressure from the Eisenhower administration, which was worried about the threat of Soviet military involvement, the European powers acceded to a cease-fire. The final evacuation took place on December 22.

The performance of many of the Egyptian units was determined and resourceful in the face of the qualitative and numerical superiority of the invaders. Nasser claimed that Egypt had not been defeated by the Israelis but that it had been forced to abandon Sinai to defend the canal against the Anglo-French attacks. According to foreign military observers, about 1,650 of Egypt's ground forces were killed in the campaign. Another 4,900 were wounded, and more than 6,000 were captured or missing.

In March 1957, Israeli troops were forced to withdraw. The war served to spur Ben-Gurion's drive toward greater militarization. Although Israel was forced to withdraw from Sinai, Ben-Gurion deemed the war a success: the raids from Gaza ceased, UN peacekeeping forces separated Egypt and Israel, greater cooperation with France led to more arms sales to Israel and the building of a nuclear reactor, and, most important, the army's near-perfect performance vindicated his view on the centrality of the IDF.

Nasser had won a significant victory. The immediate effect was that Britain and France were finally out of Egypt. Nasser went on to nationalize all other British and French assets

in Egypt. The Egyptians now had full control of the canal and its revenues. The Suez crisis also made Nasser the hero of the Arab world, a man who had stood up to Western imperialism and had prevailed.

Egypt reopened the canal to shipping in April and ran it smoothly. It was open to all ships except those of Israel, and it remained open until the June 1967 War (Arab-Israeli war, also known as the Six-Day War). Diplomatic relations between Egypt and Britain were not restored until 1969.

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/egypt2.htm>