

**The Aftermath of the Suez Crisis of 1956: A New Era of Superpower
influence in the Middle East**

Abstract

The essay deals with the Suez Canal crisis and its effects on the imperial status of Britain and France. The essay investigates why the Crisis was a turning point for British and French policy in the Middle East, and how the growing influence of the Soviet Union and the United States penetrated into the Middle East, resulting in a new front in the Cold War. In the first two paragraphs of the essay, background information is given on the British and French status in the Middle East before the crisis began. The importance of the Suez Canal itself is also analyzed. The decisiveness that the United States, the Soviet Union and the UN demonstrated in bringing the crisis to an end is the second portion of the essay. The decisiveness shown by these countries and organization serves to outline the diminishing power and influence of Great Britain and France, and the rise of power and influence of the United States and Soviet Union. The essay then examines the political roles of Britain and France during the crisis, and specifically how they were an indication of military weakness and political turmoil. The weaknesses of Britain and France are further explored through the analysis of the rise of Arab nationalism and Arab socialism after Nasser's victory over the Anglo-French and Israeli forces. An explanation of the United States and Soviet Union's appeal in the Middle East follows. An analysis of Nasser's appeal in Africa and how the Soviet Union desired to enter the Middle East in order to penetrate into Africa. The conclusion is then reached that: The Suez crisis was further evidence that influence in the Middle East, whether by Britain, France, the United States or the Soviet Union, would be important for establishing or maintaining a global superpower status.

Word Count: 299

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, the imperial status of France and Britain was fading. The independence of India, the French Algerian war and the French war in Indochina marked the decadence of the French and British Empires. The Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 was evidence that Britain and France were incapable of upholding their imperial rule. The Suez Canal was the most critical waterway for Britain in its vital trade with Asia and particularly for the transport of oil. The Canal Company responsible for the running of the Canal was a joint Anglo-French venture. The campaign's headquarters were located in Paris and shareholdings were quoted in the British and French stock markets. In 1956 the newly appointed Egyptian leader's decision to nationalize the Canal angered both the French and British and culminated in what is presently known as the Suez Canal Crisis, a crisis that has been judged as embarrassing for both Britain and France. With the start of the war between Egypt and Israel in 1956, Anglo-British forces initiated an amphibious invasion of Egypt, on the grounds that they were protecting the Suez Canal from the warring states. When it became evident that there was military collusion between the Israeli forces and the Anglo French forces, there was international condemnation of the campaign and its imperial nature. What did the conduct of France and Britain during the Crisis outline about France and Britain's Imperial status in the Middle East and did it lead to the rise of superpower hegemony in the Middle East? The Suez Canal crisis of 1956 was further proof that Britain and France had lost their European superpower status consequently marking the advent of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers within the Middle East. The manner in which the UN dealt with the crisis strongly implies that there was sufficient power and international cooperation to resolve world disputes. Nasser's triumph became a source of inspiration for Arab Nationalists and for rebel leaders in "Black" Africa.

The Suez Canal's size and particularly favorable geographic location established it as a valuable waterway for Europe, largely due to the West's dependence on the oil originating from the

Middle East. It was a major target for Rommel's forces during the Second World War and Britain and France were determined to honor the pride and sacrifice associated with the Canal. In 1952 Colonel Gamal Abd-Nasser came to power in a coup d'état that overthrew King Farouk. Nasser's economic policy and Arab nationalism undermined Egypt's relations with the West and attracted the attention of the Soviet Union. His decision to nationalize the Suez Canal was an important step towards the establishing Egyptian independence, the repercussions of which were dramatic on Arab states in the Middle East. Nasser boldly defied France and Britain and his subsequent victory characterized him as an icon in the Arab world so much that Arabs relied heavily upon him during their pursuit for unity and independence from the West. The British position in the Middle East was relatively stable before the crisis largely due to the security pact between Britain and Jordan as well as the Baghdad pact of 1955, both of which were evidence of Britain's "friendly" relationship with Arab States in the Middle East. France's hostile relations with the Arab world, due to the Algerian War, became even more pronounced by the Suez campaign. The campaign destroyed the friendly ties that existed between France and the Arab world and even helped, to an extent, increase Nasser's popularity in the Arab world. The economic and military disadvantages experienced in the region were the primary reasons the Soviet Union was able to successfully reach arms deals with Arab states. The United States' relationship with Israel determined its alignment in the Middle East. The defiance Nasser demonstrated towards the West was of inspiration to both Arabs as well as Africans. The triumph of Egypt over the Anglo-French forces became an influence for other African and Arab developing states who sought to gain independence. It was therefore a crisis, which played an important role in the decolonization of Africa. The Suez crisis thus marked the fall of imperial world rule of Britain and France and the advent of the Superpower era.

There is sufficient evidence suggesting that the Soviet Union and the United States played a decisive role in the crisis. The threats made against the Anglo-French alliance by Soviet foreign minister Nikolai Bulganin and Eisenhower's disapproval, were the main factors that brought an end

to the Anglo-French advance. The Anglo-French alliance with Israel was evidence of their desperate need for an ally as well as their relative military weaknesses. A wave of anti-Western sentiment spread throughout the Middle East, the outcome being a new sphere of influence for the Soviet Union. As a result, the Middle East became a new front for the Cold War. America's withdrawal of funds from the Aswan Dam project, due to an alleged arms deal between Nasser and Czechoslovakia, was considered one of the major causes of the Suez Crisis. The withdrawal of funds from the Aswan Dam project led Nasser into finding new methods of financing his project, one of which was nationalizing the Canal. Nasser's policy of non-alignment proved to be impossible to maintain. He was the victim of much dislike in both France and England because he was the main voice for Arab nationalism and because of suspicions that he had approved the sending of military aid to Algerian rebels. In order to build a strong Egyptian Army, to achieve his Utopian dream of united Arab empire, Nasser needed to make an arms deal. France and Britain were reluctant to assist. The Tripartite Declaration of 1950 and the pro-Israeli lobby determined the United State's refusal to make an arms deal with Egypt.¹ During the International Condemnation which took place during the Anglo-French military campaign, the USSR and the US were instrumental in bringing about an end to the Suez Crisis. On November 5th 1956 the Soviet Premier Bulganin sent notes of condemnation to Eden, Mollet and Ben Gurion (leaders of Britain, France and Israel respectively) threatening to use action by the use of 'every kind of modern destructive weapon'.² Under the NATO alliance, if the Soviet Union, were to attack the Anglo-French forces America would have to intervene. It was unclear, however, if this "accord" also applied to extra-European Conflicts. The British and French both knew that if the US was aware of their plans to invade Egypt America's disapproval would be critical. It is for this reason that Operation Musketeer, the Anglo French invasion plan, was delayed in order to coincide with the American elections. The pro-Israeli vote in America would be against Eisenhower, if he decided to intervene. The role played by the USSR and the US demonstrated their new status in the Middle East and also

¹ Harper, Paul The Suez Crisis p. 47

² Thomas, Hugh Suez p.142

served as the prelude for their alliances in the region. The rather conciliatory role of the United States depicted its sympathy towards Israel and the Soviet Union's strong indignation and use of violent rhetoric was a clear indication of its alliances with Arab states. The Six-Day War which followed soon thereafter portrayed the USSR and the US playing even more important roles.

During the Suez Canal crisis the United Nations had shown its effectiveness in ending international disputes. The UN cease-fire resolution, drafted by UN Secretary General, Hammarskjöld was accepted and made effective in the Security Council. The UN vote during the crisis for the resolution, 64-5 was evidence of Britain and France's diplomatic isolation.³ The UN Peace Corps were deployed for the first time to safeguard the canal zone. It proved its strength in solving international disputes with the first deployment of International Peacekeeping forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Israel retreated back to its "natural" frontiers and the Anglo British forces gave way to the International Peace Corps. The UN gained control of the Canal zone and the gulf of Akaba after the Crisis and initiated oil rationing for Britain. The UN demonstrated that the imperial technique of carrying out campaigns with or without the consensus of the world was impossible. There now appeared an organization able to counter the imperial rule of Britain and France not through the use of force but by the use of international law, majority world opinion and economic sanctions.

The use of secret treaties and the breaching of the Tripartite Declaration were both signals of France and Britain's military weaknesses and the lack of support for the Suez campaign. The initial plan for the invasion of Egypt, Operation Musketeer, was delayed several times primarily because of Britain and France's relative military disadvantages in the region. The Egyptian Army, after the Arms deal with Czechoslovakia in September 1955, had acquired better weaponry than Britain.

³ Harper, Paul The Suez Crisis p.61

Egypt was equipped with new Russian arms, Stalin Tanks, MiGs and Illyussins⁴. Even with Cyprus and Malta as military bases, Britain and France's amphibious invasion of Egypt required more land forces in closer proximity to Egypt. Israel was the only ally upon which Britain and France could count on for that kind of support. Egypt's naval base at Aqaba prevented Israeli ships from sailing out of the Red Sea; this was a major cause of Israeli frustration towards Egypt. France saw this opportunity to ally with Israel. The United States, whilst unaware of the ongoing plans of war, was a strong supporter of national determination, something which the Anglo-French military campaign was determined to suppress in the Middle East. Britain, however, had an important relationship with the Arab states at the time. It had a military obligation to Jordan and sought to maintain and restrain the forces of Arab nationalism through that friendship. The official British alliance with Israel came in the form of the Sevres Agreement, which was signed by Israel, France and Britain when they met secretly in the Parisian suburb of Sevres.⁵ The takeover of the canal was planned as a joint effort. The Israeli army would initiate a conflict with Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula and the Anglo-French forces would then intervene as an intermediary force to safeguard the Canal Zone. The two military operations, Operation Musketeer (The Anglo-French Operation) and Operation Kadesh (the Israeli operation), were coordinated in the Sevres Agreement. Before Sevres the negotiations with Israel were also kept secret⁶ and in Britain the use of force against Egypt was only proposed in Cabinet meetings but never in Parliament.

The Fourth Republic in France under Prime Minister Mollet was already in turmoil because of its failure to deal with the Algerian crisis. One of the reasons the Mollet government entered the campaign was because of its suspicion that Nasser was providing arms to the ALN (Armée de libération nationale). A victory would have been proof that France could maintain its colonies but a defeat would result in the failure of the government. The government's failure to win the campaign

⁴ Thomas, Hugh Suez p.15

⁵ Thomas, Hugh Suez p.112

⁶ Harper, Paul The Suez Crisis p.55

against Nasser only increased their determination to bring an end to the Algerian crisis⁷. The events which followed Mollet's leaderships eventually brought the Fourth Republic to its downfall. The last two leaders of the Fourth Republic, Bourgers-Manry and Gaillard instigated national discontent following conduct on the Algerian and North African crises. During their leadership a force of 350,000 men was sent into Algeria, allegations suggesting that torture was being employed came to surface and the French bombing of the Tunisian city of Sakhiet.⁸ All these incidents effectively led to widespread public disapproval which triggered the fall of the Fourth Republic in June of 1958. The Fourth Republic indicated that France was incapable of maintaining its colonies forcing the Gaullist regime to undertake the process of granting independence to the French North African colonies, a move which established the end of Imperial France.

Similarly, the economic and political repercussions of the Suez crisis on the British government and society led Britain to pursue a different foreign policy geared towards the decolonization of British Africa. The conduct of Britain during the Suez campaign was perceived as imperialist and embarrassing. This was further worsened by the plummeted value of the British pound and the Petrol rationing imposed by the United Nations. During the crisis several ministers resigned in protest of the campaign, there was even greater divide between the opposition and the ruling party. The Suez campaign hindered the close terms which the ruling party and opposition had maintained during times of crisis. In the past both British prime ministers, Baldwin and Macdonald established friendly relations with the leaders of the opposition⁹. As a result of Suez the relationship was strained and both sides grew more suspicious. In fact, the opposition was never entirely aware of the Suez campaign. Britain's future governments recognized the danger of pursuing an imperialistic foreign policy, and Britain's approach towards African decolonization was dictated by the lesson learned from the Suez crisis.

⁷ McMillan F. James. Dreyfus to De Gaulle p. 157

⁸ idem

⁹ Empire to Welfare State p.342

It was largely predictable that in the aftermath of the Suez Canal Crisis British alliances and influence in the Middle East would be negatively affected. France, already unpopular in most Arab nations for its conduct in the Algerian war, had further worsened its image in that state by allying itself with Israel. This enabled Nasser to become even more of an icon in the aftermath of the campaign thereby strengthening Egypt's position as the leader of Arab Nationalism. Nasser had to contend with Iraq and the political ideology of Ba'thism in order to secure his influence. The two revolutionary ideologies which influenced the Arab social revolution were Ba'thism and Nasserism. Both ideologies stressed the need for an Arab socialist revolution that would bring about independence from foreign rule. Nasserism differed from Ba'thism on the issue of who would be the "heart of the Arab world".¹⁰ After the Suez Crisis the success of "Nasserism" was accepted by the Ba'th party members. Syria, the center of the Ba'th movement, united with Egypt in 1958 to form the United Arab Republic. Iraq and Egypt were competing for who would be the center of Arab Nationalism; after the Suez Crisis and Nasser's "victory" over the Anglo-French Israeli forces, Egypt would become the symbol. Following the Suez crisis there were Nationalist uprisings in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. These uprisings gave birth to the United Arab Republic in 1958. On September 14th of the same year a coup d'état in Iraq resulted in the killing of two Iraqi leaders, Nuri and Feisal.¹¹ Nasser also helped establish his dominance over Lebanon, he helped appoint the new president, this further outlined the fact that Nasserism was gaining momentum and accomplishing Arab unity due to the failure of the Suez campaign.¹²

The increased appeal for Socialist ideology and thought in the Middle East was seen by the Soviet Union as an opportunity to further influence the Arab world. The United States could not side with the Arab states largely due to its strong ties with Israel. The Soviet Union was perceived as threatening and vital by Nasser. An increase in its influence in the Middle East could threaten

¹⁰ <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/ArabNationalism.htm>

¹¹ Ovendale, Ritchie. *The Arab-Israeli Wars* p.168-9

¹² Idem

Nasser's ideology of Socialist Pan Arabism. A relationship with the Soviet Union was also necessary for the Arab States in the Middle East as it was a means of acquiring modern weaponry. The Soviet Union viewed the Middle East as a valuable and economically favorable region because of its vital waterway and oil reserves. Due to their geographic proximity, many countries in the Middle East shared ethnic similarities with the Soviet region. It was therefore viewed as a concern to spread its influence over Arab nationalists in order to prevent that same nationalism to manifest itself within the Soviet Union. The United States was ideologically supportive of Arab Nationalists but it was however also politically tied to the Israeli state. The United States, although an advocate of self determination, had a strong Jewish cabinet which was greatly sympathetic towards Israel. It was this aspect that undermined America's position with the Arab States in the Middle East. The position both countries took during the crisis greatly affected their future alignments. The United States' appeasing but decisive position during the Suez crisis was proof to the Arab nationalist that American support in a necessary war against Israel would be minimal. The accusatory and strong stance of the Soviet Union would be proof to Arab nationalist as to which superpower to count on when a war against Israel would start. The next war with Israel came in 1967. The Six Days War was a proxy war where the American and Soviet arms were tested. The monarchies and political parties of Arab countries who were not opposed to Arab Unity under Cairo were supported by the United States. This occurred in Lebanon, where the president Camille Chamoun, was supported by the CIA in 1958 after political turmoil, due to Nasserist forces in Lebanon, threatened his power.¹³ Hussein in Jordan followed a similar course of action, asking assistance from the United States in April 1957.¹⁴

¹³ Salem E, Paul. Superpowers and Small States: an Overview of American-Lebanese Relations

¹⁴ Owendale, Ritchie. The Arab-Israeli Wars p.167

¹⁵ Harper, Paul The Suez Crisis p.61

¹⁶ McMillan F. James. Dreyfus to De Gaulle p. 157

¹⁷ idem

¹⁸ Empire to Welfare State p.342

The Suez Canal Crisis introduced the Middle East as new front in the Cold War. The struggles of both France and Britain and their fall as African colonizers helped established the United States and the Soviet Union as the new world super powers. The United States had been suspicious of Russia's arms deal with Egypt in 1954 as and the aftermath of the Suez crisis confirmed US suspicions. Almost all pro-Nasser Arab States turned to the Soviet bloc for arms, weaponry and military training. The United States took advantage of the discord and divide that existed between Arab states. Nasser's power and influence after the Suez crisis was viewed as overwhelming by the monarchies of the Middle East which forced them to seek alliance with the United States. Hussein in Jordan asked for America's support in suppressing the Nationalist uprisings which were threatening his rule. Although unsuccessful in Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon's regimes were toppled by Nasserites. This was the same situation in Saudi Arabia where Nationalist forces threatened the power of the monarchy, and an American base in Dhahran was established.¹⁹ Nasser's influence on "Black" Africa was among the reasons why the Soviet Union pursued close diplomatic ties with him. Nasser used the "Voice of the Arabs", his very own radio station, as an instrument of propaganda which not only broadcast anti-imperialist views and sentiments but did so in Swahili as well. Nasser furthermore appealed to "Black" Africa by maintaining good relations with Lumumba in Congo.

The United States' alliance with Israel was arguably a result of the Soviet arm deals with Arab states. The Jewish population did have a strong influence on America's support for Israel, but the Arab Soviet bloc that had formed was the major reason for America's alignment with Israel. Before the Suez crisis, the United States pursued an 'isolationist' foreign policy in the Middle East. It was only after Nasser's Soviet arms deal that the United States took a stance. Previously, the United States refused to make an arms deal with Nasser on account that it would go with its non-alignment policy. Even as the crisis developed, America's position was not supportive of that of the

¹⁹ Pollack, Josh. Saudi Arabia and the United States, 1931-2002: Volume 6. No. 3

Anglo-French and Israeli campaigns, a potentially dangerous stance since it was during the American elections, where the Jewish vote was essential for Eisenhower. The US's involvement only took shape after Soviet involvement became overwhelming and needed to be countered. The only states that would favor American assistance were the monarchial Arab States and Israel. The Soviet Union was first to arrive in the Middle East and by doing so established a foothold on Africa. The American alignments are hence regarded as a question of necessity and not of choice.

In conclusion, the Suez Canal crisis was not only a major crisis that proved that Britain and France could not maintain their colonies but it also proved that Arab nationalism was never going to succeed with the involvement of the Soviet Union or the United States. The crisis marked a transitional point from European imperialism to Superpower hegemony in the Middle East. The Cold War penetrated the Middle East and subsequently Africa. One can, however, argue that Nasser's Arab Nationalism was doomed from the start and that his signing of an arms deal with the Soviet Union in 1954 ultimately paved the way for the Cold War into the Middle East. Among the questions which arise is whether the policies of the Arab states remain dictated by foreign powers. In addition, could the success of the Suez Campaign have saved the British and or French Empire and also resulted in a more peaceful Middle East? Would the Six Days War have taken place without the alignments that took place in the aftermath of the campaign? Was Suez an example of how most Post World War II independence movements were doomed due to the dependence on a Superpower? Did the Soviet Union feign to support independence in order to achieve its self interests in Suez, and to what extent did oil interests affect the alignments of the Soviet Union and the United States? The Suez Canal crisis can be regarded as evidence that influence in the Middle East, whether by Britain, France, the United States or the Soviet Union, was critical establishing and or maintaining global Superpower rule and status.

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