

# THE SUEZ CRISIS

## A Crisis That Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East

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Central Press/Getty Images

An aerial view of ships sunk at the entrance of the Suez Canal to prevent passage during the 1956 attack on Egypt by Israel, France and Britain.

*This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Suez Crisis, when a major regional war nearly erupted between Egypt, Israel, Britain, and France that may have drawn in the Soviet Union and the United States. Through determined diplomacy, however, President Dwight D. Eisenhower averted a larger conflict. But the crisis also affected the future balance of power in the Middle East.*

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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.



President Dwight D. Eisenhower (left) meeting with his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1956.

National Park Service photo, courtesy Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

## ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

The Suez Crisis had complex origins. 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 August 1955 and April 1956. After Egypt purchased Soviet weapons in late 1955, pressure mounted in Israel to launch a preemptive strike that would undermine Egyptian Premier Gamal Abdel Nasser and dismantle Egypt's military ability before it had time to absorb the Soviet armaments.

Meanwhile, Britain and France 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.

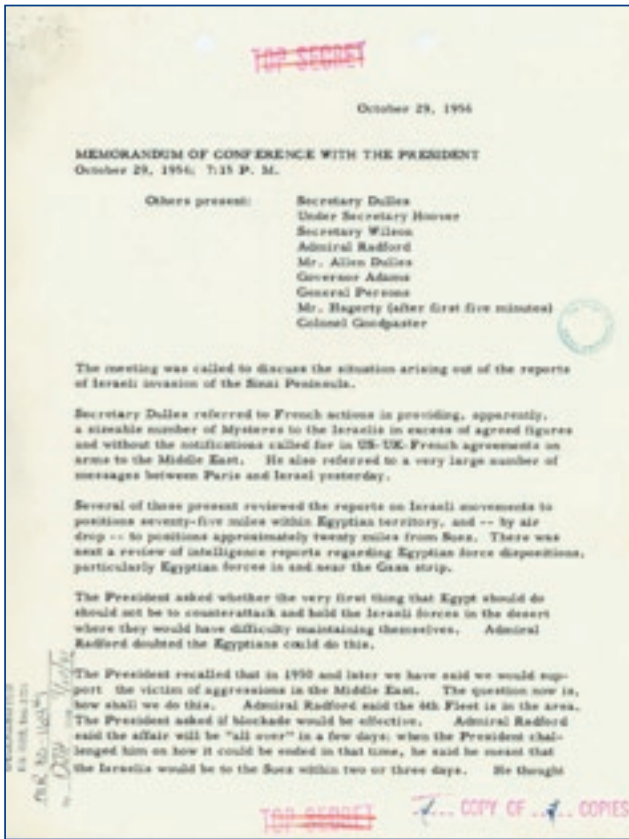
The Suez Crisis erupted in July 1956, when Nasser, denied economic assistance by the United States and Britain, retaliated by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company. Nasser seized the British- and French-owned firm to demonstrate his independence from the European colonial powers, to avenge the Anglo-U.S. denial of economic aid, and to garner the profits the company earned in his country. The deed touched off a four-month international crisis during which Britain and France gradually massed their military forces in the region and warned Nasser that they were prepared to use force to restore their ownership of the canal company unless he relented. British and French officials secretly hoped that the pressure would ultimately result in Nasser's fall from power with or without military action on their part.

## THE U.S. RESPONSE

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



This declassified October 29, 1956, White House memo discusses reports that the Israelis had invaded the Sinai Peninsula and speculates on how to respond.

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.

### HOSTILITIES ERUPT

In October the crisis took a new turn, unexpected by the United States. Unknown to American officials, France and Britain colluded with Israel in an elaborate scheme to launch a secretly coordinated war on Egypt. Under the ruse, Israel would invade the Sinai Peninsula, Britain and France would issue ultimatums ordering Egyptian and Israeli troops to withdraw from the Suez Canal Zone, and, when Nasser (as expected) rejected the ultimatums, the European powers would bomb Egyptian airfields within 48 hours, occupy the Canal Zone, and depose Nasser. 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. Yet war erupted on October 29 when Israel launched a frontal assault on Egyptian forces in the Sinai. Within days Israeli forces approached the Suez Canal.

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. Before UNEF could be deployed, however, Britain and France landed paratroopers along the Suez Canal on November 5.

The British and French landings pushed the crisis into its most dangerous phase. 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.

Shaken by the sudden prospect of global conflict, Eisenhower also moved quickly to avert it. He applied political and financial pressures on the belligerents to accept on November 6 a U.N. ceasefire deal that took effect the next day, and he endorsed efforts by U.N. officials urgently to deploy UNEF to Egypt. Tensions gradually eased. British and French forces departed Egypt in December and, following complex negotiations, Israeli forces withdrew from the Sinai by March 1957.

### CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS

Although quickly mitigated, the Suez Crisis had a profound impact on the balance of power in the Middle East and on the responsibilities that the United States assumed there. It badly tarnished British and French

prestige among Arab states and thus undermined those European powers' traditional authority over the region. Nasser, by contrast, not only survived the ordeal but secured a new level of prestige among Arab peoples as a leader who had defied European empires and survived a military invasion by Israel. The region's remaining pro-Western regimes seemed vulnerable to Nasserist uprisings. Although Nasser showed no immediate inclination to become a client of the Soviet Union, U.S. officials feared that the Soviet threats against the European allies had improved Moscow's image among Arab states. And the prospect of promoting Arab-Israeli peace seemed nil for the foreseeable future.

In reaction to these consequences of the Suez War, the president declared the Eisenhower Doctrine, a major new regional security policy in early 1957. Proposed in January and approved by Congress in March, the doctrine pledged that the United States would distribute economic and military aid and, if necessary, use military force to contain communism in the Middle East. To implement the plan, presidential envoy James P. Richards toured the region, dispensing tens of millions of dollars in economic and military aid to Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Libya.

Although never formally invoked, the Eisenhower Doctrine guided U.S. policy in three controversies. In spring 1957, the president dispensed economic aid to Jordan and sent U.S. Navy ships into the eastern

Mediterranean to help King Hussein suppress a rebellion among pro-Egyptian army officers. In late 1957, Eisenhower encouraged Turkey and other friendly states to consider an incursion into Syria to stop a radical regime from consolidating power there. When a violent revolution in Baghdad in July 1958 threatened to spark similar uprisings in Lebanon and Jordan, finally, Eisenhower ordered U.S. soldiers to occupy Beirut and to transport supplies to British forces occupying Jordan. These measures, unprecedented in the history of American policy in Arab states, clearly revealed Eisenhower's determination to accept responsibility for the preservation of Western interests in the Middle East.

The Suez Crisis stands as a watershed event in the history of American foreign policy. By overturning traditional assumptions in the West about Anglo-French hegemony in the Middle East, by exacerbating the problems of revolutionary nationalism personified by Nasser, by stoking Arab-Israeli conflict, and by threatening to offer the Soviet Union a pretext for penetrating the region, the Suez Crisis drew the United States toward substantial, significant, and enduring involvement in the Middle East. ■

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*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*