

Suez: A moment of revelation

50 years since the Suez War

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Mohamed Hassanein Heikal tells Al-Ahram Weekly how decades after nationalising the Canal and going to war over it, Egyptians have finally re-appropriated Suez

"The truth about Suez was always available but for many years it was ignored, hidden, obfuscated. It is gratifying, perhaps, that now this truth is vigorously re-asserting itself. Possibly the most significant expression of this 'rediscovery of Suez' lies in what we might term the rehabilitation of the Egyptian people." For many years now Egyptians have been told that their recent history is one of continuous defeat and humiliation, that Egypt's national struggle was an exercise in futility and its challenging of imperialist domination nothing but reckless folly. But everything that is being said about Suez today, the testimonies and documents that are being released, tells a very different story — a story of human triumph. We have been in four major confrontations with Israel, in 1948, when we were defeated; in 1956 when we were the victors; in 1967, defeated; and finally in 1973, when again we realised a victory.

"Every war has spoils, a prize that goes to the victor. In 1956 the prize was nothing less than the Suez Canal. And where did you find that prize once the dust of battle had settled? Solidly in Egyptian hands." The truth was there. The collusion between Britain, France and Israel is well known. Today, however, the Sèvres Protocol documenting the conspiracy is at last receiving widespread attention. The British destroyed their copy of the protocol, but the Israelis preserved theirs among the personal papers of David Ben-Gurion.

"The revelations and the testimonies all point to the truth of Suez, which has at last been laid bare. And that truth tells the Egyptian people one thing — yes, you were the victors. Yes, the political triumph of Suez was yours, and no, this political victory was not accompanied by a military defeat. This last point, an increasingly glaring truth, needs to be stressed, given the propensity of some Egyptian writers to endlessly list and bemoan their country's defeats. Such writers continue to insist that Suez was a political victory and a military defeat when in fact there was no such defeat. And this the Egyptian people now know. They know that the real threat was not in Sinai, but along the Suez Canal. They know that the order to withdraw from Sinai, leaving just six battalions (some 5,000 men) to provide cover for the withdrawal, was a tactical maneuver. These six battalions were ordered to hold their positions and resist the Israeli advance for 48 hours to as to enable the rest of the army to make an orderly withdrawal, which they did." There is no question of a military defeat. On the contrary, lines of defence were bolstered for a battle that had yet to begin. Anyone can make a paratroopers drop. But what next? As revealed by Louis Mountbatten the allied forces would have had to occupy the whole of Egypt to wrest a military victory, which was impossible.

"That the Egyptian people scored a full political triumph is beyond doubt. That they were not defeated militarily is no less clear. That the real battle did not begin, represents a triumph for the Egyptian people, a triumph which for many years has been denied to them. And those who deny this triumph with the most energy do so in the belief that they are taking the victory away from Nasser.

But it was not Nasser who made the victory, it was the Egyptian people, with Nasser at their head. I am deeply gratified that after 40 years the truth about Suez is at last emerging, restoring to our people their real heritage, their right to dignity and self-confidence, rights that many have sought to deny."Moreover, it has now become abundantly clear that Suez was a turning point in world history. Look, for instance, at the Soviet ultimatum. It may be, and I stress may be — the issue has not been settled that the Soviet ultimatum was not as decisive as was thought at the time. But the value of any political action lies in the effects it has at the time. So even if the Soviets were bluffing, the Israelis took them seriously and so did the British and the Americans etc. So in historical terms Suez, and not the Cuban missile crisis, was the first global confrontation in which the threat of using nuclear weapons was used. In this sense Suez was the first test of the global nuclear balance, while the Cuban missile crisis can be described as its full dress rehearsal.

"Look at the post-Suez world. The European states, especially Britain and France, were forced to adopt a new logic. Post-Suez, the declining imperialist states were forced in to the realisation that their power was limited and that, outside the American umbrella, they could do very little. In Britain, confidence in the conservative Party was gradually eroded while in France, the Fourth Republic fell, and de Gaulle came to power. A whole new configuration of global forces was born."In this context, three very important ramifications of Suez should be noted. The first was its effect on Third World liberation movements; the second concerns its Arab regional consequences, while the third is connected to the way it helped to dramatically reorient the conduct of the Cold War, and in particular American strategy towards the Soviet Union.

"In a single blow, Suez — the triumph of the Egyptian people in Suez — freed the Third World of what we may call the Mossadegh syndrome. Mossadegh had challenged Western hegemony over Iran and was defeated, and his defeat had intensified the Third World's sense of inadequacy in coming to grips with Western domination. I remember Castro telling me once: 'There we were in the mountains dreaming of revolution. And all of a sudden we saw you nationalising the Suez Canal, we saw you fighting and winning. We could only tell ourselves if the Egyptians have been able to face up to the Israelis, the Americans, the British and the French and win, how can we not defeat Batista.'"The profound manner in which Suez affected the third World is almost beyond imagining and it makes me angry when I hear some Egyptians describing it as a defeat, for in doing so they damage not only this moment of our history but a whole range of meanings and values. There are intangibles in the struggles of peoples and nations, intangible but nonetheless capable of great achievements. Human beings have imagination and spirit, they possess vision, attributes capable of transforming dreams into reality. Be as pragmatic and practical as you want, but you ignore such intangibles at your peril.

"Second, the experience of Suez — with the destruction of the oil Tap Line in Syria — also contained the important lesson that Arab unity was not only a prerequisite for development but a key factor in safeguarding national security, giving impetus to the merger between Syria and Egypt the following year. And the very fact that the Suez war was a people's war, a struggle in which Arab peoples participated en masse, begged many questions concerning social justice. Before Suez, Egyptians spoke of Egyptianising foreign interests, after Suez the term nationalisation entered the vocabulary. Issues of social justice came increasingly to dominate the political agenda of states in the region. Saudi Arabia was to abolish slavery a few months after Suez. A new era was dawning, an era in which the deprived began to question their social positions."Let us now ponder the third, less direct but no less dramatic, ramification of Suez on the world order. Eisenhower's post-Suez attempt to re-establish Western dominance in the region was defeated by the very reverberations of Suez. With Kennedy, whose advisers had closely studied the lessons of Suez, a new orientation in the confrontation with the Soviet Union began to take shape, reinforced by the Cuban missile crisis.

"The Soviet ultimatum during Suez introduced a totally new element — the use of the threat of

nuclear confrontation — into the global power game. The Americans began speaking of 'forcing the Soviet Union to change its priorities'. The minutes of meetings of the National Security Council during the Kennedy administration are constantly punctuated with the phrase 'forcing the Soviet Union to change its priorities.' "Until that time, the Soviet Union had been trying to balance its military programme and its economic and social development, improving the standard of living and services available to its people in accordance with its vision of a communist society. But from the moment Kennedy took office, and even during his electoral campaign, he issued warnings about the supposed nuclear gap existing between the US and the Soviets. The idea was to force the Soviet Union to change its priorities, to force it into a futile arms race, and make winning this race its top priority.

"This strategy, adopted and pursued by all American administrations since Kennedy, reached its peak with Reagan's Star Wars programme, with the result that the Soviet Union expended massive resources and energy on the arms race to the detriment of almost everything else." Generally there are two types of international crises. One that stops short of war, like the Berlin Wall crisis, and another, like Vietnam, that is settled by war. Suez, however, was unique in that it was a moment of revelation, one which obliged all international and regional actors to rethink and to reassess their positions and the means by which they should continue with the global power game."

P.S.

* This interview with Heikal was conducted for Al-Ahram Weekly in 1996 by the Weekly's founding Editor the late Hosny Guindy

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