

## Suez: what lessons now?

50 years since the Suez War

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### **Fifty years on, four main lessons may be learned from the events surrounding the Suez crisis, writes Roger Owen\***

The Suez crisis of October 1956 was one of those seminal twentieth-century events which connected the emerging Cold War with the early period of post-colonial independence. Beginning as a dispute between the Egyptian government, on the one hand, and Britain and France, on the other, over President Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company in July 1956, its impact spread rapidly to involve the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Nations and most of the states in the Middle East, North Africa and the developing world. It was also closely connected with Russia's bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising against Soviet domination in Budapest during the same month, an event which many now argue could well not have taken place if the United States and two of its major European allies were not otherwise occupied in either promoting, or trying to prevent, the tripartite Anglo-French and Israeli attack on the Suez Canal.

At the heart of the crisis lay the poisoning of the once sanguine relationship between President Nasser and Sir Anthony Eden, which had marked the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty leading to the total withdrawal of a British garrison that had been present in Egypt for nearly 75 years. Just why this rapid deterioration happened is still not fully known. But, from Eden's point of view, far from ushering in a new era in Anglo-Egyptian relations, the treaty had been followed by an Egyptian attempt to reduce what remained of British power in the Middle East, notably in Jordan, while, at the same time, bringing the Soviet Union, via the 1955 arms deal, right into the heart of what Britain and the United States were still trying to protect as a western preserve via their sponsorship of the Baghdad Pact. Hence, by the time the last British troops left Egyptian soil on 'Evacuation Day' in June 1956, Eden's patience had worn so thin that he was ready, just a thousand hours later, to contemplate an attack on Egypt which was clearly designed not only to kill President Nasser but also to secure the overthrow of his regime.

Who knows what would have happened if the Anglo-French attack could have been launched almost straight away? As it happened, the British general staff, remembering the fierce opposition put up by Egyptian fedayeen against its troops in the Canal Zone fighting in 1951 and 1952, demanded an invasion force of 80,000 men, something which it took until September to assemble, allowing time for world opinion to unite in protest. It was then, when it looked as though Eden's last chance of a war was gone, that the French and the Israelis were to come up with a plan to use an Israeli invasion of Sinai as a pretext to launch an attack on Port Said on the pretence of separating the warring parties. Given President Eisenhower's anger at the way he had been kept in the dark about the plan, the result was a political and military fiasco, with the Anglo-French invaders being forced to leave almost as soon as they had arrived, allowing President Nasser to proclaim a famous victory against imperialism, to seize leadership of the Arab nationalist movement, and to begin that process of state-led industrial development which lasted for a good ten years before being brought to a sudden end by the equally sudden military defeat at the hands of the Israelis in June 1967.

Meanwhile, in the same month of October 1956, the uprising against the Soviet-backed Hungarian government in Budapest was providing both the Soviet and American leaderships with a huge challenge. Khrushchev, as has now been revealed from documents in the Moscow archives, was in the middle of an attempt to restructure Soviet power in Eastern Europe after Stalin's death, based more on the use of trusted intermediaries like Gomulka in Poland than the direct use of Soviet force. At the Politburo meeting of 30 October it was almost unanimously decided to allow Imre Nagy, the new Hungarian leader, to ride out the storm. But, only a day later, the decision was reversed, due, it would seem, to a belief that Nagy was no longer in proper control. Eisenhower, having been partly responsible for an empty but domestically potent American policy of rolling back Soviet power in Eastern Europe, realised that there was no way he could intervene militarily. But there are other things he could have done to soften Khrushchev's hard line if only he had been better appraised of the new, post-Stalinist policies which his Cold War enemy had until that moment been trying to implement.

As Russian documents also show, this was a moment when Khrushchev felt that he was going to lose not just Hungary but also his new ally Egypt to a new, Anglo-French dominated Egyptian administration. In the event he saved Hungary, but only at great cost to the international communist movement, while being forced into an increasingly tense relationship with President Nasser that involved him in replacing not just the tanks and guns lost to the Israelis in 1956 but also in financing a large part of the construction of the Aswan High Dam.

What are the lessons to be drawn from all these events 50 years later? Let me suggest four.

First, the western powers' attempts to contain the destabilising effects of Britain's withdrawal from its major Middle Eastern military base in Egypt in 1956 were basically flawed. Their main regional alliance, the Baghdad Pact, did not include either Egypt or Jordan, while the Israelis, seeing the British soldiers depart, realised that they now faced a powerful Egyptian military with Soviet arms which they were determined to find some way of cutting down to size. The British military withdrawal from the Gulf in the early 1970s was managed with much more finesse.

Second, the lessons which both the British and the French drew from the fiasco were to dominate their foreign policy for the next 50 years. On the one hand, the British decided never again to make a major move without American approval. On the other, the French turned their back on Washington and developed their independent 'force de frappe', while cultivating the basic alliance with Germany that was to become the corner-stone of the new European Common Market. Interestingly, though, both stances are now under increasing domestic attack, in Britain because of Tony Blair's unflinching support for America's failed occupation of Iraq, in France because of part of the French right's belief, under Nicholas Sarkozy, that France's future progress depends on better cooperation with the world's leading economic and military power.

Third, for the historian, not only is the Suez affair a classic instance of super-power misunderstanding, great-power miscalculation, and third world hand-wringing, but it is also one in which ineptitude and incompetence played a role, difficult to understand at the time, but with which we are now more familiar via America's misadventures in Iraq. The British not only under-estimated Egyptian capacity to run the Canal but also over-estimated Egyptian skills at urban guerilla warfare. To make things worse, having abandoned the idea of establishing a forward base at Alexandria for fear of the opprobrium huge civilian casualties would bring, they chose to attack Port Said, a city connected to Cairo and the rest of Egypt by a narrow causeway which could easily be blocked.

Fourth, and I say this with great sadness, the Egyptians can only celebrate Nasser's Suez victory without having any of the information they need to answer such basic questions as, what was President Nasser's military plan, why did he withdraw all his troops from the Sinai in advance of the

attacking Israeli army, and was he, or were his advisers, able to draw the appropriate lessons from something which may have been easy to claim as a political victory but which could, for all we know, have been a significant military defeat?

The British and French have recently released new data concerning their actions under their respective 50- year rules. The American and Russian archives are open to all who seriously want to use them. Only the Egyptians are left in a position in which, as historian Khaled Fahmy has ruefully noted, they can learn more in their own archives about Muhammad Ali's two great military victories against the Ottoman army in 1830 than they can about the famous battle of Port Said in 1956.

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**P.S.**

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