

This page has been archived and is no longer updated.
[Find out more about page archiving.](#)

The Suez Crisis

By Laurie Milner

Last updated 2011-03-03



What were the events that led to the Suez Crisis, and did it deal a final blow to Britain's self-image as a world power to be reckoned with?

Creation of the Canal

In 1854 Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French former diplomat, persuaded the Viceroy of Egypt, Mohamed Said, to permit the construction of a shipping canal through the 100 miles of desert between Africa and Asia. A prospectus was circulated and on 20 December 1858 the Universal Company of the Suez Maritime Canal was constituted.

Britain, which had regarded France's increased influence in this region with suspicion, declined the offer of shares and even organised a boycott resulting in a shortage of investors. Egypt therefore acquired 44% of the shares.

Construction began on 25 April 1859 and the canal was opened in November 1869 complete with a statue of de Lesseps dominating the harbour. Said, who died in 1867, was succeeded by his nephew Ismail. In the first year of the canal's existence, some three-quarters of the vessels using it were British.

By the mid 1870s, Ismail, who had set out to modernise Egypt, but had incurred massive debts, offered his country's shares in the canal for sale. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli bought Egypt's shareholding for £4 million establishing Britain's influence in the running of this new and extremely important waterway.

Vital British interest

The Suez Canal provided Britain with a shorter sea route to its empire and, as the 20th century dawned and oil grew in importance, it provided a short sea route to the oilfields of the Persian Gulf. Britain was therefore committed to protect the canal.



British Sherman tanks advance in North Africa during World War Two ©

During the two World Wars, the Suez Canal came under attack. Soon after the outbreak of World War One, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate and British and Indian forces were sent to protect the canal. Turkey, which had entered the war as Germany's ally in 1914, sent troops to seize the canal in February 1915. This attack was beaten back and by 1916 British defensive lines had been driven deep into the Sinai desert to prevent any further attempt.

The defeat of Turkey in 1918 resulted in much of the Ottoman (Turkish) empire being divided between Britain and France, leaving Britain in control of the oilfields of what is now Iraq.

The fighting ebbed and flowed until 1942, when Axis forces seemed poised to break through to the Suez Canal.

In 1922, Britain gave nominal independence to Egypt, but it was some years before an agreement was reached. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty signed in London in 1936 proclaimed Egypt to be an independent sovereign state, but allowed for British troops to continue to be stationed in the Suez Canal zone to protect Britain's financial and strategic interest in the canal until 1956, at which time the need for their presence would be re-examined and, if necessary, renegotiated.

Soon after the outbreak of World War Two, Italy, Germany's ally, sent forces to invade Egypt from Libya. A British and Commonwealth counter-offensive in December 1940 drove the Italians out of Egypt, but in March 1941 the Italians, reinforced by the German Afrika Korps, attacked again and pushed the Allied forces back.

The fighting ebbed and flowed along the North African coast until the summer of 1942, when the Axis forces seemed poised to break through to the Suez Canal and beyond.

Their new offensive, launched on 1 July, lasted most of the month, but the Allied lines held. In August, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery was appointed commander of the British Eighth Army. On 23 October 1942, he launched a major offensive from El Alamein which forced the German-Italian Panzer Army into retreat.

Subsequent Anglo-American landings in Morocco and Algeria on 8 November cut off the Axis forces in Tunisia, and on 13 May 1943 they surrendered. The canal was safe once more.

The crisis builds

The Suez Crisis of 1956 has its roots in the post-war upsurge of nationalism in Egypt. In 1951, Nahas Pasha leader of the recently-elected nationalist Wafd party revoked the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936.



Anthony Nutting and Abdel Nasser sign the Anglo-Egyptian Suez Agreement ©

Attacks on the British garrison soon followed and in January 1952 the British government authorised an operation to disarm the Egyptian paramilitary police force in Ismailia which was orchestrating the violence. This was successful, but the violence continued. Riots in Cairo of an unprecedented scale followed, culminating in attacks on Saturday 26 January on British property and the expatriate community, thereafter known as Black Saturday.

It was agreed that British troops would be permitted to return if the Suez Canal was threatened.

British threats to occupy Cairo prompted King Farouk of Egypt to dismiss Nahas Pasha, but in July 1952 Farouk was overthrown in a military coup and General Mohammed Neguib seized power. Rather than insist on Britain's rights under the 1936 Treaty, Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary tried to negotiate with the new government.

In 1954, Colonel Gamel Abdul Nasser replaced General Neguib. He had three goals: to make Egypt independent by ending British occupation; to build up Egyptian forces for a successful attack on Israel; to improve Egypt's economy by constructing a high dam at Aswan to irrigate the Nile valley.

On 19 October 1954 a treaty was signed by Nasser and by Anthony Nutting, British minister of state for foreign affairs. The agreement was to last for seven years.

British troops were to be withdrawn from Egypt by June 1956, and the British bases were to be run jointly by British and Egyptian civilian technicians. Egypt agreed to respect the freedom of navigation through the canal, and it was agreed that British troops would be permitted to return if the Suez Canal was threatened by an outside power.

Appeasement fears

In February 1955, Anglo-Egyptian affairs were strained once more by Eden's decision to deprive Nasser of promised British arms. In April, Eden succeeded Winston Churchill as prime minister.

As the last British troops left Egypt, Nasser was completing the purchase of Soviet-made aircraft, tanks and arms from Czechoslovakia, which might help him to realise one of his goals, the destruction of Israel.

On 26 July 1956, President Nasser nationalised the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company to finance his dam.

Despite anti-western demonstrations in Egypt, in January 1956 the United States and Britain had pledged funding to help finance the construction of a new High Dam at Aswan. The US, however, became convinced that the Dam project would not be a success and wanted to reduce expenditure on foreign aid.

It was also concerned about Nasser's purchase of Soviet arms. On 19 July, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles informed the Egyptian ambassador in Washington that his government had decided that it would not provide funding for the construction of the dam.

The British foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, followed suit and withdrew the British offer of aid. The World Bank then refused to advance Egypt a promised \$200 million. On 26 July 1956, President Nasser nationalised the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company, declaring that he would take the revenue from the canal to finance his dam.

Eden, who recalled Britain's appeasement of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, looked to military action which might result in Nasser's downfall and restore Britain's influence in the region. The United States, however, made it clear that unjustified military action would not be tolerated.

Treaties and collusion

The end of the Second World War in 1945 had brought a period of rapid change. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was followed by the first Arab-Israeli War, and a renewed upsurge of Arab nationalism made the Middle East a volatile region.

The United States had emerged from World War Two as a global superpower and, as a former colony itself it was committed to overseeing the decolonisation of the globe. Furthermore, the spread of communism fostered by the Soviet Union was seen by the US as a threat to western democracy.



Detail of the Israeli national flag ©

A secret agreement was made that Israel should attack Egypt as a pretext for an Anglo-French invasion of Suez.

In an attempt to strengthen security in the Middle East against Soviet influence, Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan signed a treaty known as the Baghdad Pact in 1955. But Egypt, which was looking to the Soviet Union for armaments, refused to sign. Iraq later withdrew and the pact, which was renamed the Central Treaty Organisation, became ineffective in preventing the Cold War from reaching the Middle East.

In January 1956, Guy Mollet was elected prime minister in France and promised to bring peace to Algeria, a French colony, in the throes of a nationalist uprising. But the presence of a million French settlers there made a withdrawal from Algeria politically impossible and his attempts to resolve the situation escalated the violence.

Meanwhile, Israel, greatly concerned about Egypt's rearmament and involved in a series of border clashes with Egypt, was purchasing aircraft and weapons from France. The French government had been meeting secretly with Israel and invited Britain to join the negotiations.

In October 1956, Mollet, Eden and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion met at Sevres near Paris and concluded a secret agreement that Israel should attack Egypt, thereby providing a pretext for an Anglo-French invasion of Suez.

Military action

Ben-Gurion then ordered General Moshe Dayan, his chief of staff to plan an attack on Egypt. On 29 October 1956, the Israeli attack was spearheaded by an airborne drop to seize control of the Mitla Pass. Heavy fighting followed.

The next day, Britain and France issued ultimatums to both sides to stop the fighting immediately. The Israelis continued their operations, expecting an Egyptian counter-attack. Instead, Nasser's army was withdrawing.

Militarily the operation was well on its way to being a great success.

On 5 November, some three months and 10 days after Nasser had nationalised the canal, the Anglo-French assault on Suez was launched. It was preceded by an aerial bombardment, which grounded and destroyed the Egyptian Air Force.

Soon after dawn, soldiers of 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, dropped onto El Gamil airfield, while French paratroopers landed south of the Raswa bridges and at Port Fuad.

Within 45 minutes, all Egyptian resistance on the airfield had been overcome and Royal Naval helicopters were bringing in supplies. With El Gamil secured, the British Paras moved eastwards towards Port Said, meeting their first serious opposition en route. With air support, they overwhelmed the Egyptian forces then stopped and dug-in overnight because the beach area of Port Said was to be bombarded next day during the seaborne landing.

On 6 November, the sea and helicopter-borne assault went in. Royal Marine Commandos, together with British and French airborne forces supported by British tanks soon defeated the Egyptian forces, capturing men, vehicles and many of the newly purchased Czech-manufactured weapons.

At midnight on 6 November a cease-fire was called on the insistence of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. The Anglo-French forces had reached El Cap, just south of Port Said, but were not yet in control of the entire canal when they were stopped. Militarily, the operation was well on its way to being a great success.

Backlash

Politically, the intervention in Suez was a disaster. US President Dwight Eisenhower was incensed. World opinion, especially that of the United States, together with the threat of Soviet intervention, forced Britain, France and Israel to withdraw their troops from Egypt. In Britain too there had been widespread outrage.

A United Nations peacekeeping force was sent in to supervise the ceasefire and to restore order. The Suez Canal was cleared and reopened, but Britain in particular found its standing with the US weakened and its influence 'east of Suez' diminished by the adventure.

Eden told the Commons: 'There was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt. There was not.'

Accusations of collusion between Britain, France and Israel started in 1956, but were denied in parliament by Eden who tried to avoid giving a clear and categorical answer.

He was at last asked whether there was foreknowledge of the Israeli attack and on 20 December in his last address to the House of Commons, recorded in Hansard, he replied: 'I want to say this on the question of foreknowledge, and to say it quite bluntly to the House, that there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt. There was not.'

In January 1957, his health shattered and his political credibility severely damaged, Sir Anthony Eden, the British prime minister, resigned. Guy Mollet, the French prime minister, survived longer despite fierce criticism, but his government collapsed in June 1957 over the taxation he imposed to pay for the Algerian War.



British troops moving through Port Said ©



Anthony Eden in 1956 ©

Anglo-American relations were strained by the Suez Crisis, but as Cold War Allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) they continued to cooperate, and by 1962 Britain had adopted the US Polaris missile system. Nonetheless, the real balance of power in the post-World War Two world had been starkly demonstrated and Britain's prestige was dealt a severe blow.

Find out more

Books

Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis by W Scott Lucas (Hodder and Stoughton, 1991)

Britain and the Egyptian Nationalist Movement 1936-1952 by Hoda Gamel Abdel Nasser (Ithica Press, 1994)

Suez by Keith Kyle (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991)

Suez 1956 by Barry Turner (Hodder and Stoughton, 2006)

The Canal Zone and Suez by Laurie Milner, in *The Imperial War Museum Book of Modern Warfare* edited by Major General Julian Thompson (Sidgewick and Jackson, 2002)

Places to visit

Imperial War Museum

The National Army Museum

About the author

Laurie Milner was an historian at the Imperial War Museum's Research and Information Department from 1984 to 2006 and was principal historian on the permanent 'First World War', 'Conflicts Since 1945' and 'Montgomery - Master of the Battlefield' galleries. He co-authored the IWM's 'Battle of the Somme' online exhibition with Nigel Steel. He has acted as consultant to military museums internationally, including the British galleries at the El Alamein Museum for the 60th anniversary of the battle. He is the author of two books, 'Leeds Pals' (Pen and Sword 1991); and 'Royal Scots in the Gulf' (Pen and Sword 1994).