

Forum: Historical Security Council

Issue: The Suez Crisis (1956)

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Position: President

Introduction

The 1956 Suez Canal Crisis refers to the series of military and diplomatic confrontations between the then-Republic of Egypt (now the Arab Republic of Egypt) and the coalition between Israel, the United Kingdom, and France. The conflict erupted after Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser declared the nationalization of the Canal, stripping it from the control of the British-French Suez Canal Company.

An Arab Nationalist, Nasser advocated for the complete separation of Egypt from British influences, thereby pursuing an independent set of diplomatic and quasi-socialist policies, such as the redistribution of land, resource rationing, and an emphasis on developing the industrial capabilities of the nation. While Nasser's agrarian reforms, industrial modernization, and land distribution strengthened Egypt's standing in the pan-Arab world, his actions increasingly collided with the interests of the United Kingdom and France. The nations' conflicts further intensified with Egypt's open support of Algeria's War of Independence from French control and Nasser's resentment towards the NATO-led Baghdad Pact, a set of policies to prevent the spread of communism in the Middle East.

This series of slow-boiling tensions between Egypt and the West culminated in the United States and the United Kingdom's abrupt withdrawal of fiscal support towards Egypt's Aswan High Dam project on October 29, 1956, which Nasser deemed crucial to the nation's industrialization and agricultural developments. This move prompted him to declare the nationalization of the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956. Despite the United Nations Security Council (SC) passing Resolution 118, which reaffirms Egypt's sovereignty of the canal, a secret agreement known as the Protocol of Sèvres was made between the United Kingdom, France, and Israel to regain control over the canal zone and topple Nasser's government.

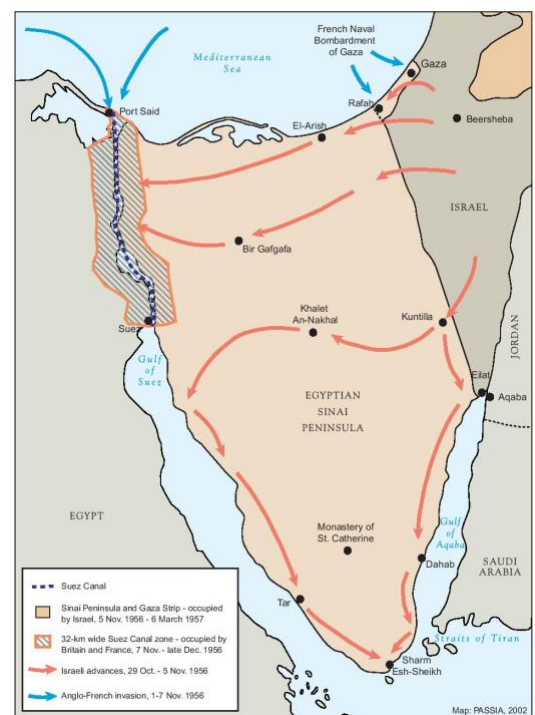


Figure 1 The Suez War, 1956

The Israeli military landed on the Sinai Peninsula (Fig. 1) on October 29, 1956, to engage in military confrontations with Egypt, thereby allowing Britain and France to issue a joint ultimatum calling for a so-called cease-fire, which, in reality, laid the justification for the military of the two nations to enroll in the conflict on November 5, when Nasser ignored the ultimatum. However, this self-directed escalation scheme was soon leaked to the public within days. Despite the then U.K. Prime Minister Anthony Eden's vehement denial, it resulted in the U.S. refusing to provide any form of support to the British and French initiative, including an embargo on oil supply to the U.K. and threats to devalue the British Sterling by selling parts of its bond holdings. Facing tremendous political pressure within the parliament, widespread anti-war protests in the U.K., and potentially catastrophic economic consequences, P.M. Eden announced a unilateral cease-fire on November 6. Seeing efforts to call for a cease-fire were vetoed by France and the U.K. in the Security Council, the U.S. convened the First Emergency Special Session (through Res. 997 ES-I) of the General Assembly (GA) on November 7. It called for the formation of the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) by Resolution 1001, leading to the withdrawal of all external military forces from the Suez Canal Region and the eventual reopening of the canal on April 24, 1957.

The Suez Canal Crisis created significant repercussions for the United Kingdom and France, as P.M. Eden of the U.K. soon resigned on January 9, 1957, while also severely impacting Guy Mollet's position as the French prime minister. While Israel's reluctance to comply with the UN Resolution left conflicts between it and Egypt unresolved, which was believed to be the precursor for the Six-Day War in 1967, the victory for Egypt prompted Nasser to accelerate its nationalization of all remaining British and French assets in Egypt, which includes the tobacco, cement, pharmaceutical, and phosphate industries. Along with Nasser's rise in popularity among the Arab World and the Egyptian public, Egypt's victory also benefited the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev, who, despite the Union's minimal involvement in the war, threatened to bomb the U.K., France, and Israel if the parties did not withdraw from the Canal, thereby uplifting Egypt's prestige among the Arab World and Third-World Nations. The aftermath of the crisis resulted in the exacerbation of de-colonization among African nations. It was widely regarded as an end to the United Kingdom's place as a global superpower.

Definition of Key Terms

Suez Canal

A sea-level waterway that runs North to South across the Isthmus of Suez in Egypt to connect the Mediterranean and the Red Seas. As the shortest passage between Europe and MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia), Western European Countries imported 1.2 million barrels of crude oil daily through the Canal during the 1950s, accounting for 60% of all oil imported pre-crisis.

Pan-Arabism

Advocating for unity among all Arab people, the term is often associated with Arab Nationalism. It supports the independent socio-economic development of Arab states, often time using quasi-socialist or centralist policies while rejecting Western influence within the region. Nasser was a crucial leader in the pan-Arabic movement and pushed the campaign to heights during the 1960s by creating the United Arab Republic.

Algerian War of Independence

A series of armed conflicts between France and the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) between 1954-1962 for the independence of Algeria. During the conflict, Egypt provided continuous material and political assistance to the Algerian guerrillas, which France perceived as the revolution's main sustenance.

The Baghdad Pact

A defensive military organization founded in 1955 by Turkey, Iraq, Great Britain, Pakistan, and Iran. Similar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, the Baghdad Pact was established to prevent communist incursions and foster peace in the Middle East.

Aswan High Dam Project

An embankment dam was built across the Nile in Aswan, Egypt between 1960 and 1970. Initially, both the United States and the Soviet Union were interested in aiding the dam's construction, but the United States later withdrew from the program, leaving the Moscow-based Hydroproject Institute as the sole designer of the dam.

Sir Anthony Eden

The successor of Winston Churchill, he was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1955 to 1957. Despite his inexperience in foreign affairs, he showed great interest in maintaining U.K.'s role as an international superpower. In the Suez Canal Crisis, Eden was left isolated without U.S. support and attempted to cover up the secret scheme by lying to the Parliament, eventually resigned on January 9, 1957.

Guy Mollet

The French Prime Minister from 1956 to 1957, Mollet, was agitated by Nasser's continuous support of the Algerian rebels. While the defeat in the canal crisis did not lead to his immediate downfall, he received widespread criticism from the anti-colonialist faction within his party, which, along with the war crimes committed and expenses poured into the Algerian War, eventually led to his government's collapse in June 1957.

The Suez (Canal) Company

A company formed by Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1858 to manage the French-built Suez Canal. While the French investors and the then-Egyptian ruler Sa'id Pasha owned approximately 50:50 of the corporation's equity, the shares held by the Pashas' were later sold to the British government. As promised by Nasser, the Suez Company received financial compensation from the Egyptian government after the crisis in 1956.

United Nations Emergency Force

Established in 1956 during the Suez Crisis, the UNEF monitors the ceasefire between Egypt and Israel. Its objective is to ensure the withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli troops from Egypt. UNEF has successfully

stabilized the situation and prevented further conflict escalation. It has also broadened its role to provide peacekeeping and humanitarian aid in other crisis-ridden regions.

Sinai Peninsula

A triangular peninsula linking Africa with Asia, separated by the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal from the Eastern Desert of Egypt. It was the focus of Israeli-Egyptian combat in every military confrontation between the two countries from 1949 to 1973, including the Suez Canal Crisis. It was eventually demilitarized and returned to Egypt in 1982 as part of the Camp David Accords.

Background

In 1956, Nasser took control of the Suez Canal and promised to pay back Anglo-French shareholders. He also said he would use the canal's profits to fund the Aswan Dam. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden saw this as an opportunity to intervene against Nasser, stating to his cabinet, "We have a good reason to take action against him due to his seizure of the Suez Canal."

With the US cautious and much of the non-aligned world supportive of Nasser's stance, Israel, France, and Britain colluded in secrecy. On October 29, in accordance with the Protocol of Sèvres (see below), Israel struck across the undefended Sinai Peninsula between Israel and Egypt, along with a wartime curfew imposed on its Arab Minority, shooting any Arab on the streets of the Israeli-controlled town of Kafr Qasim. This curfew, enforced by the Israeli Border Police, led to the death of 43 Arabs.

Following the bombing of Cairo and the destruction of Egyptian air defenses, an Anglo-French group arrived at Port Said just 15 minutes after the UN deadline for ending hostilities. With support from the French navy, Israel cemented its control over the Gaza Strip on November 3 and the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula on November 5, leading to complete British and French control of the Canal on November 7.

However, the triparty's action attracted widespread international scrutiny (as represented by the series of resolutions passed in the First Emergency Session of the United Nations General Assembly, see below) following document leaks revealing the secret plan, along with U.S.'s fear of regional instability, led to collective pressure from Washington and the UN for the triparty to halt their military actions. In response, Britain and France left the Suez in late December 1956, while Israel left the Sinai and Gaza in March 1957, as the UN deployed the UNEF to secure the area.

Suez Canal Users' Association (SCUA)

SCUA was founded on September 9 under the recommendations of the U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles as a consortium made by eighteen important maritime players (U.S., U.K., France, Australia, Denmark, West Germany, Iran, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Norway, Sweden, and Turkey) to

discuss solutions for the future operation of the waterway following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. Despite SCUA's proposal to provide Britain, France, and Egypt with an equal share in the Canal's ownership and other U.S. and international mediation initiatives, this peace plan failed to gain full support from any competing powers.

The First Canal Users' Conference (London Conference)

Convened in August 1956 by the United States, the Conference called representatives from 18 nations, without Egypt, to propose solutions to resolve the issues of the ownership and operation of international vessels on the Suez Canal. The then-Secretary of State Dulles secured an eighteen to four vote, approving the U.S. proposal for an international board of directors to control the Canal on August 23.

However, when a delegation of five countries led by Australian prime minister Robert Menzies presented the eighteen-nation proposal for international control to Nasser, he refused to accept anything less than permanent Egyptian control, softened only by new guarantees of free international passage through the Canal.

The Second Canal Users' Conference (The Second London Conference)

From September 19 to 21, a second conference was held in London, where the SCUA proposal was adopted. The same eighteen countries that had previously backed the Menzies proposal for international control supported the proposal. This decision was a crucial victory for Dulles's middle path between war and capitulation. As expected, the Soviet Union opposed the proposal and warned against foreign intervention, but the British and French regarded it as an empty threat.

Officials from Britain and France, both in Washington and across the Atlantic, were unwilling to provide a clear answer to any American representative regarding their proposed resolution. It was unclear whether the resolution aimed to promote a peaceful settlement based on the SCUA framework or was merely a pretext for war. Instead, the officials provided vague statements emphasizing the need for decisive action after the London conference to maintain pressure on Nasser.

Throughout the conflict, the United States focused on applying political and economic pressures, as Dulles maintained that military force was not the solution. However, its hopes for trans-Atlantic unity were shattered when the British and French governments called for a UN Security Council meeting in Egypt for early October without consulting Washington after the failed eighteen-nation proposal. This move largely agitated the Eisenhower administration, which withdrew support to the United Kingdom and France later in the conflict.

United Nations Security Council 743rd Meeting

On October 13, 1956, members of the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 118 to prevent the escalation of the conflict. The resolution outlined six provisions, agreeing that any resolution for the Suez matter

should ensure free and open access to the Canal, respect Egypt's sovereignty, keep the Canal's operation independent, determine tolls by agreement, allocate development fees, and resolve disputes through arbitration. However, this resolution lacked the means to enforce itself, failing to prevent the Israeli attack on October 29.

Protocol of Sèvres

The Protocol of Sèvres is a series of secret agreements between the U.K., France, and Israel to regain control over the Suez Canal Zone. The protocol planned for Israeli aggression on October 29 to agitate an Egyptian response purposefully, thereby justifying the U.K. and France to issue an ultimatum to both sides to call for a ceasefire. The ceasefire was intended to force Egypt into accepting the temporary occupation of key positions on the Canal by forces to guarantee freedom of passage through the Canal until a final settlement had been reached. As the request bluntly contradicted Nasser's purpose of re-nationalizing the Canal, the parties used the expected rejection from Egypt as the *casus belli*, or motive, for their invasion.

This protocol was largely negotiated behind the public spotlight, with Sir Eden denying the deal in the face of parliamentary scrutiny while attempting to destroy various documents pointing to the scheme after the failed invasion of Egypt. The protocol was also hidden from the U.S. government, which led to Dulles and Eisenhower's refusal to condone the U.K.'s actions after the files were revealed to the public. The absence of U.S. support was widely believed as the main reason for the failure of the Protocol of Sèvres.

United Nations First Emergency Special Session (ES-I)

On November 10, 1956, the United Nations General Assembly convened its First Emergency Special Session to resolve the Suez Crisis. As the 743rd Meeting of the Security Council failed to resolve the instability, the "Uniting for Peace" article under General Assembly Resolution 377 A (V) was invoked to transfer the authority of the issue from the Security Council to the General Assembly.

The emergency session passed eight resolutions (Res. 996-1003), which included the formation of the UNEF, which would provide an international presence between the opposing parties in the Canal zone. On the first day of the special session, the General Assembly adopted the U.S. resolution (Res. 997), which called for Israel to immediately withdraw its forces from Egypt behind armistice lines, despite the opposition from the U.K., France, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand. Resolution 1000, introduced by the then-Canadian Minister of External Affairs, was unanimously passed to create a U.N. police force, which later became the UNEF. The Chief of Staff for the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization, E.L.M. Burns, was later appointed to command the force and was granted powers to pursue further recruitment from all member states except the Security Council's permanent members.



Figure 2 Canadian MEA at UNGA ES-I

Major Parties Involved

The entities involved in the conflict may be recognized as two main parties: the triparty alliance between the United Kingdom, France, and Israel, who share the common goal of regaining control of the Suez Canal zone and retaining their influence in the region; and Egypt and the Soviet Union, under the banner of anti-colonialism, characterizing themselves as the symbol of the pan-Arab movement and the third world.

United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

Walking out of the economic repercussions of World War II, the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Anthony Eden was eager to maintain its global standing while grappling with wealth inequality and public health. The Suez Canal served as an essential strategic waterway for the U.K., as it heavily relied on the Canal's transportation of oil, coal, and other goods the channel provided.

France (Fourth Republic)

Similarly, France was determined to retain its influence over the African continent after the de-colonization and non-alignment awakening. Guy Mollet was particularly agitated by the Egyptian government's continuous material and political assistance to the Algerian guerrillas under Nasser. France and the U.K. are the two principal shareholders of the Suez Company overseeing the Canal.

State of Israel

In 1956, Israel allied with Britain and France to reopen the Straits of Tiran, which Egypt had blocked, preventing Israeli access. Israel also wanted to limit Egypt's influence in the Middle East and Africa as an Arab Nation, end the pre-existing blockades set up by the Nasser Government, and prevent Soviet support from maintaining a balance of power in the Middle East.

United States of America

The US opposed the triparty invasion of the Suez Canal under the Eisenhower Administration despite its long-standing alliance with the nations, as it was considered a breach of international law and a threat to stability in the Middle East. During the conflict, diplomatic and economic pressures were applied to force the triparty to withdraw, including threats to halt financial aid to the U.K. and sell off its holding on the British Sterling.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

Despite Egypt's stance as a state of non-alignment, it accepted the economic and indirect political support from U.S.S.R. The Soviet government, under Nikita Khrushchev, aimed to frame the triparty invasion of the Suez Canal as a symbol of colonialist aggression and a violation of Egypt's sovereignty. The USSR's involvement aimed to expand its influence in the Middle East and counter the United States' participation in the region.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
July 26, 1956	Nationalization of the Suez Canal <i>Nasser announces the nationalization of the Suez Canal.</i>
August 1-2, 1956	Triparty Negotiation <i>The U.S., U.K., and France held talks in London.</i>
August 16-23, 1956	First London Conference <i>Generated an "Eighteen-Nation Proposal," suggesting the formation of an international body to govern the Canal zone.</i>
September 9, 1956	Egyptian Response <i>Nasser rejects the "Eighteen-Nation Proposal" from the First London Conference.</i>
September 19-21, 1956	Second London Conference <i>Formation of SUCA, but did not produce any substantive resolutions.</i>
October 5-13, 1956	SC 743 rd Meeting <i>Drafted and passed resolution no. 118.</i>
October 28, 1956	Israeli Provocation <i>Israeli forces strike deep into Egypt's Sinai Desert.</i>
October 30, 1956	U.K.-France Ultimatum to Israel and Egypt <i>Britain and France delivered an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel demanding that they stop fighting and withdraw their forces from the area near the Suez Canal.</i>
October 30, 1956	U.K. and France Intervention (Indirect) <i>Britain and France began air attacks on Egyptian targets. The Israeli advance continues.</i>
October 31, 1956	GA became decision-making body <i>The Suez issue is transferred to the UNGA under "Uniting for Peace" Resolution.</i>
November 4, 1956	The First Emergency Session (UNGA ES-I) <i>Resolution 997 was passed, demanding a cease-fire and the installment of UN peacekeeping forces.</i>
November 5, 1956	U.K. and France Involvement (Direct) <i>French and British paratroopers land in the Canal Zone and began fighting.</i>
November 5, 1956	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Soviet Union requested the United States to join in the intervention of the Suez War. • Eisenhower is re-elected on election day. • British and French amphibious forces began going ashore into Egypt. • Khrushchev (Gen-Sec of the Soviet Union) warns Israeli, British, and French leaders of potential bombing using nuclear weapons.

November 6, 1956	Continuation of UNGA ES-I; Resolution 1000 Passed
November 6, 1956	Declaration of British Withdrawal <i>Sir Anthony Eden announced a cease fire without prior communication with France and Israel</i>
December 22, 1956	Complete Withdrawl of French-British Task Force
April 24, 1957	Canal Re-opened to Shipping

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The two London Conferences and SUCA represented unilateral efforts by Western nations to retain control and ensure their access to the waterway. However, the implicit bias of the eighteen-nation alliance and its negligence to the core interests of Egypt led to Nasser’s rejection of the resolution.

Resolution 118 proved to be a representation of the inefficacy of the Security Council in its attempts to avoid further military confrontation between the parties. The veto power, used by the U.K. and France and later by the U.S.S.R., proved to be the main obstacle preventing the passing of any meaningful resolution. The failed negotiation and the absence of Egypt in the debate led to the dissatisfaction of all sides in the conflict.

The First Emergency Special Session under the General Assembly, whose power sources from the “United for Peace” resolution, turned out to be the most effective platform to provide equal representation and meaningful discretion that led to the eventual resolution of the conflict. The eight resolutions generated by the Emergency Session provide strong measures to prevent further escalation of military confrontation, promote the demilitarization of the Canal, and sustain peace via its deployment of the Emergency Force, providing a comprehensive solution to the conflict.

Possible Solutions

When re-enacting the historical crisis, delegates should be aware of the interests held by all stakeholders in the conflict to strike a balance between the different parties. It is not suggested for the delegates of the Permanent Members of the Council to halt the negotiation via the excessive use of veto powers; Rather, active negotiation and the proposal of balanced solutions are more valuable for the effective resolution of the conflict.

Applying Economic and Political Sanctions

The political and economic pressure applied by the U.S. is the main reason for the U.K.'s withdrawal of force. As the Canal was vital in transporting energy resources and commodities between Europe and Asia, blocking other sources of the supply for such goods would be an effective measure to force the U.K. and France to the negotiating table. However, it should be acknowledged that the two countries are permanent members of the council, and hence the aforementioned sanctions will more likely be unilateral rather than a collective action of the council. In reverse, offering preferable conditions, such as ensuring open access to the Canal, could also serve as an incentive for the two nations to withdraw their military presence.

Addressing the revealed Protocol of Sèvres

The Protocol of Sèvres is an underground, unethical secret treaty that was purposefully hidden from public scrutiny. As the documents leaked soon after the protocol implementation, the council could also divert its attention to questioning the legality and legitimacy of the U.K., Israel, and France's involvement in the conflict. Although such interrogation would not have immediate, concrete impacts on the trajectory of the conflict, it would pressure the three parties to explain their actions, thereby deligitimizing their military presence along the Canal.

Advocating for an immediate ceasefire

Beyond its geo-political significance, the Suez Canal Crisis also created great humanitarian challenges. The unjust treatment to the Arab minorities in the Israeli-controlled territories, the death of 3,200 civilians, along with the lack of crucial energy and food supply as a result of the blockade poses great threats to all parties that were involved in the conflict. The council could leverage this reality during the debate to advocate for an immediate ceasefire as well as the partial reopening of the Canal for the transportation of humanitarian aid.

Arbitrating the ownership of the Canal

A key issue that awaits settlement during the conflict is the ownership of the Canal and its accessibility to foreign vessels. While Nasser's interest as an Arab nationalist is to remove all foreign influences in Egypt, it is important to note his commitment to compensate stakeholders of the Suez Canal Company after the nationalization of the Canal. To ensure mutual accountability, and to protect the Canal's status as a free and open passageway for civilian vessels, the idea of an international body overseeing the management of the Canal can be reconsidered under the precondition of equal stake among all users of the Canal, including Egypt.

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Appendix or Appendices

I. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez>

(U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian's Chronicle on the U.S. Response to the Suez Canal Crisis)

The United States held a rather unorthodox stance on the Suez Canal Crisis. Instead of siding with the Tripartite Alliance, the U.S. supported the withdrawal of troops from the region. This document delves into the specific considerations of the Eisenhower administration, from the impact of the Canal on global trade to the threats made by Khrushchev.

II. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/why-was-the-suez-crisis-so-important>

(U.K. Imperial War Museums – Why was the Suez Crisis so Important?)

A concise yet informative chronicle of major events and evolution of the Suez Canal Crisis. It is particularly helpful as it focuses on the actions and considerations of individual nation-states rather than the actions taken by the UN. The debate of this conference will happen under the same context as the information presented on this webpage.

III. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149871>

(Stories from the UN Archive: UN's first peacekeeping force)

Compiled by the UN Archives, the resources delve into how the international community responded to the Suez Canal crisis.