

## Great Britain and France to Egypt, 29-10-1956

Following the end of British colonial rule over Egypt and the withdrawal of the British forces, Egyptian president Nasser started cultivating closer relations with the Soviet Union. In response, the United States and the Great Britain decided to withdraw a promised loan for the construction of a dam. Nasser in turn declared the nationalisation of the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956.<sup>1</sup> International talks over the summer about the status of the Suez Canal did not yield a solution satisfactory to all parties.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile tension had been building between Egypt and Israel for years, but had reached an all time high that summer. The government of Israel claimed it was under threat of imminent attack from Egypt, its fear further bolstered by the conclusion of a military cooperation agreement between Jordan, Syria and Egypt.<sup>3</sup> In October 1956, France, Great Britain and Israel agreed on a secret plan in what would later be called the Sèvres Agreement. Israel would attack Egypt and occupy the Suez Canal. France and Great Britain would then issue an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel demanding that both countries withdraw their forces from the zone. Rejection of the demands would result in war allowing Great Britain and France to insert their forces and (re-)claim control over the Suez Canal.<sup>4</sup> Israel attacked Egypt on 29 October, launching a five-day ground offensive in which it captured almost the entire Sinai Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> Great Britain and France then jointly issued an ultimatum to Egypt and Israel on 30 October around 4.30 p.m. At that same moment the British Prime Minister Eden issued the following statement in the House of Commons:

The U.K. and French Governments have addressed urgent communications to Egypt and Israel. In these we have called upon both sides to stop all warlike action by land, sea, and air forthwith and to withdraw their military forces to a distance of 10 miles from the Canal. Further, in order to separate the belligerents and to guarantee freedom of transit through the Canal by the ships of all nations, we have asked the Egyptian Government to agree that Anglo-French forces should move temporarily—I repeat, temporarily—into key positions of Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez. The Governments of Egypt and Israel have been asked to answer this communication within 12 hours. It has been made clear to them that if at the expiration of that time one or both have not undertaken to comply with these requirements, British and French forces will intervene in whatever strength may be necessary to secure compliance.<sup>6</sup>

Israel offered to accept the ultimatum if the government of Egypt would do the same. But the government of Egypt rejected the ultimatum and attempted to enlist international support. It sent direct letters to various leaders of state, including the United States and the Soviet Union, and registered an official protest with the United Nations (UN) calling for a meeting of the Security Council (SC) to discuss 'this Anglo-French act of aggression'.<sup>7</sup> The UNSC immediately met in session, but France and Great Britain vetoed the resolution which was tabled by the United States and supported by the Soviet Union on 30 October. With few exceptions, international condemnation was

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Robertson, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (Atheneum, 1965), 71–74. G. Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', in *Survey of International Affairs 1956-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 4–6.

<sup>2</sup> Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 7–48.

<sup>3</sup> Barraclough, 51–52 & 56–57.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, *Crisis*, 157–63. Jonathan Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis: Reluctant Gamble* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 151–57. Geoffrey Warner, "'Collusion' and the Suez Crisis of 1956', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 55, no. 2 (1 April 1979): 226–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2616319>.

<sup>5</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, vol. X (London: Keesing's Worldwide, LLC - All Rights Reserved, 2006), 15173.

<sup>6</sup> Keesing's, X:15174. Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 58–59.

<sup>7</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:15177.

strong and continued to grow throughout the crisis.<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria expressed their willingness to come to Egypt's assistance if so requested and some Middle Eastern countries broke off relations with France and Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Egyptian president Nasser ordered a general mobilisation and published a statement asserting that 'at a time when Egypt is defending herself against Israeli aggression, Britain and France are preparing for aggression against the victim of the attack.'<sup>10</sup> Egyptians, Nasser claimed on 1 November, were ready for 'a total war from village to village' which would be waged to the 'last drop of blood'.<sup>11</sup> The deadline expired the morning of 31 October at 5.30 a.m. After the expiration it took another few days for the 30,000 French and 50,000 British forces deployed in the region to come into action.<sup>12</sup> Following a bombing campaign of Egyptian military targets that started on 31 October and lasted until 4 November, British and French forces landed in the country and assumed control of the Canal Zone on 5 November.<sup>13</sup> On 4 November the Soviet Union then stated that the 'responsibility for all possible consequences' rested with the governments of France and Great Britain.<sup>14</sup> On 5 November the Soviet Prime Minister Buganin went further and warned the leaders of the France, Great Britain and Israel in direct communications that if they did not agree to a cease fire the 'war in Egypt can spread to other countries and turn into a third world war'. Buganin emphasised his intent 'to crush the aggressors by the use of force'.<sup>15</sup> The letter to the British prime minister openly questioned, in quasi hypothetical terms, what Britain would do in case of an attack by 'stronger' states that would 'refrain from sending naval or air forces to the shores of Britain and use other means -for instance, rocket weapons...'.<sup>16</sup> Buganin also asked the United States government to partake in a joint military intervention which the US swiftly declined.<sup>17</sup> The United States privately exerted considerable pressure on its allies. The US government threatened to withhold support for an IMF loan to the British government to support the British Pound which was in free fall.<sup>18</sup> Britain and France agreed to a cease fire starting at midnight on 6-7 November, with British Prime Minister Eden reportedly doing so in the face of a cabinet crisis, and following concerted pressure, the withdrawal of British and French forces the next month.<sup>19</sup> Israel followed suit on 8 November under the condition that an international peacekeeping mission was in place before Israeli withdrawal (which in the end took

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<sup>8</sup> Keesing's, X:151784 & 15208.

<sup>9</sup> Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 62.

<sup>10</sup> Brecher and Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, 170-71.

<sup>11</sup> Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 170-71.

<sup>12</sup> Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 60-61, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:15181. Geoffrey Wawro, *Quicksand: America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East* (Penguin, 2010), chap. 6, no pp.

<sup>14</sup> Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 67.

<sup>15</sup> Barraclough, 67-68.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis*, 61. Francis Fukuyama, *Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East, 1956-1973* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1980), 6. As Fukuyama notes, Buganin's letter, however, did not identify a deadline nor did it promise punishment, referring to punishment that could come about rather than punishment that would come about. See Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:15217. For the full transcription of the notes to Great Britain and Israel, see Yaacov Ro'i, *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973* (Transaction Publishers, 1974), 189-91.

<sup>17</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:15217.

<sup>18</sup> Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis*, 161-62.

<sup>19</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:151784. Barraclough, 'Chapter I Suez', 63. Scott Lucas, *Britain and Suez: The Lion's Last Roar* (Manchester University Press, 1996), 110.

four months to complete).<sup>20</sup> Israel suffered close to 200 fatalities, France and Great Britain ten and fifty-six respectively, and Egypt bore the brunt with deaths estimated in the range 1500-2500.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events - November, 1956 French, Israel, Egypt*, X:15205.

<sup>21</sup> 'Suez Crisis - New World Encyclopedia', accessed 11 January 2016, [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Suez\\_Crisis](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Suez_Crisis).