

# Suez Canal Crisis

## 1956

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### Statement of the Conflict

In July 1956, Egyptian leader, General Gamal Abdel Nasser, tried to nationalize the Suez Canal after the US-British withdrawal of funds to facilitate the construction of Aswan Dam Project. On 31<sup>st</sup> October, Britain and France launched Operation Musketeer as a combined invasion of Egypt in line with an Israeli invasion two days prior.

### Importance and Background of the Suez Canal:

The Suez Canal has been called one of the greatest projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one which continues to influence global trade today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 120-mile-long canal, which took ten years to build, connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

The project had begun when in 1854 and 1855, Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps obtained a concession from Sa'id Pasha, the Khedive (Viceroy) of Egypt and Sudan, to create the Suez Canal Company. The company was to construct a canal open to ships of all countries and would operate the canal

for the next 99 years. In 1859, construction began and the canal was finally opened on November 17th 1869.

Building of the Canal shortened ship journeys from Europe to India by approximately 7 000 Kilometers, resulting in an increase in global trade. In the **Convention of Constantinople in 1888**, the neutral status of the Canal was affirmed in Article I (guaranteeing passage to all ships during war and peace).

## **Result of the Nationalization**

The nationalization of the Suez Canal created a lot of problems for many countries engaging in international trade, as with tariffs charged for ships entering the canal, and so profit margins for import and export companies dropped. This prompted companies to exert pressure on governments to in turn, pressurize Nasser to re-open the canal.

The British government, for example, was pressurized by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (who had a 60-year license to mine oil in 260,000 square kilometres of Iran in return for a percentage royalty) to remove Mohammad Mosaddegh as Prime Minister because he wished to nationalize the company's assets. They proved to be successful at the coup d'état of 1953 where Mosaddegh was overthrown by British and US forces.

Similarly, in this case, the Eden and Mollet Administrations in Britain and Germany internationally condemned Nasser's move precisely because their commercial interests were being threatened. Moreover, oil exports from oil producing countries also passed through the Suez Canal on their way to Western, oil buying countries. The closure of the canal jeopardized the flow of oil exports, or at least, an increase in the price of oil due to the increased trade distance and custom prices involved.

## **Backdrop of the Cold War**

This crisis is set against the diplomatic backdrop of the Cold War as communism and capitalism battled together in the global arena. History disagrees on the official "beginning" of the Cold War but most historians have arrived at the conclusion that the enactment of the *Truman Doctrine* in 1947 followed by the *Berlin Blockade* in 1949 marked the start of mutual

distrust and rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States of America. Their mutual rivalry stemmed from distrust of one another's economic system of government; the USA was capitalist while the Soviet Union was devoted to spread communism.

Despite having fought together in the Second World War against the Axis, the USA feared the spread of communism propelled by Stalin's tyrannical rule while the USSR resented the American's decade-long denial of accepting USSR as a legitimate part of the international community. Following the war, tensions rose owing to the Russian policy of expansionism in Eastern Europe and the American's practice of arms building.

Thus, the two powers struggled to maintain and expand their "sphere of influence" especially in "Third World" countries such as Latin America, Middle East and Africa. Examples of this include the US "Two Pillar Policy" in Iran and Saudi Arabia to counter the spread of communism and the Russian practice of selling arms to these countries (including Egypt).

### **Arab-Israeli Conflict:**

An added layer to this crisis was the Arab Israeli conflict, which arose over the fundamental question of the displaced Palestinians in Palestine following the British withdrawal and the 1948 Arab - Israeli War. By 1956, however, the newly independent Arab States had also entered the equation, which equated an Israeli presence in the Middle East to a "stain" on land that in their opinion was for Arabs. Hence, an atmosphere of both mutual hostility and open conflict pervaded in the Middle East. Nasser, for example, supported the *fedayeen* movement in Palestine that carried out guerilla raids on Israeli military and civilian targets.

In the Yehud attack of 12th October 1953, an Israeli woman and her two children were murdered in their home by the Palestinian Fedayeen Squad. Israel, in response, initiated *Operation Shoshana* and sent out commando units such as Unit 101 in October 1953, which was responsible for the *Qibya Massacre* where at least sixty-nine Palestinian Arab villagers were killed and forty-five houses, a school, and a mosque were destroyed. There were also major cross border raids into Jordan and Egypt. Such reactions

ultimately prompted more counterattacks, leading to an almost never-ending string of aggression and responses from both sides.

Even in the absence of military conflict, both sides acted to intentionally disrupt the other. For example, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israel and blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba, while Israel diverted water in the Demilitarized Zone in an attempt to artificially shift borders that had been dictated by water boundaries in previous treaties following the 1948 war between Israel and Arab coalition of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Such incidents of low intensity and continuous conflict also led to a war of words and propaganda on both sides. Nasser, for example, denounced “International Zionism” and publicly denied the Holocaust.

On the other hand, Israeli leaders regularly called out Nasser’s aggression and compared him to pre-World War II dictators. Hence, by the time Nasser finally decided to nationalize the Suez Canal, tensions had reached a boiling point - both sides openly distrusted each other, while international attempts at maintaining peace had largely failed. In a Cold War climate, neither the US nor the USSR wanted to diminish their influence in the Middle East by making overtures to one country, which could antagonize the other country. With such highly explosive tensions pushed to breaking point with the nationalization of the Suez Canal, ultimately, Israel decided to invade Egypt on 29th October 1956.

## Timeline of Events

**19th October 1954 -  
Britain and Egypt concluded the Suez  
Canal Base Agreement, which ensured a  
phased evacuation of British troops from  
the Suez**



**Late 1954 -  
Sponsored by Nasser, the Fedayen raids  
began on Israel’s military and civilians**



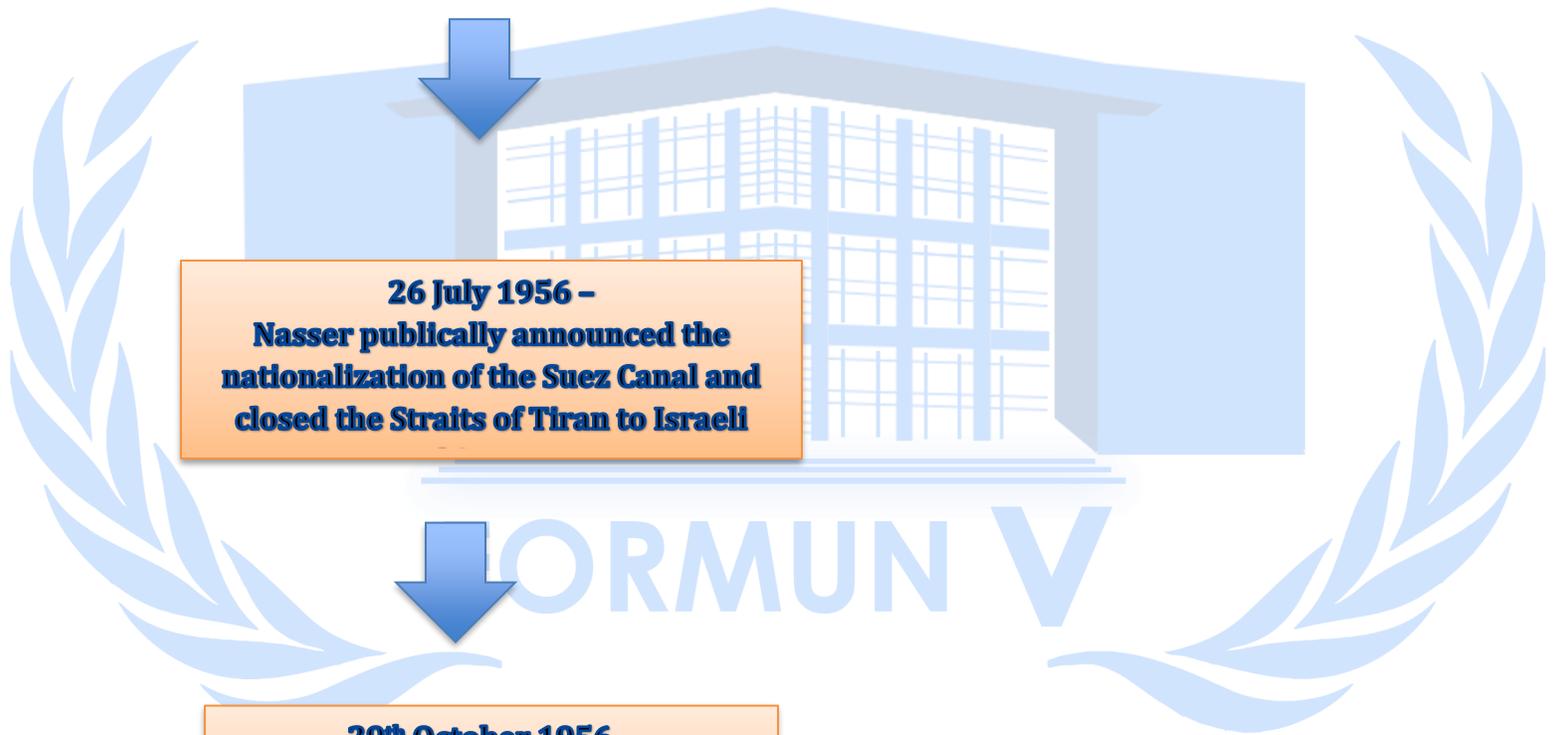
**September 1955-  
Egypt and the Soviet Union signed the  
Egypt-Czech Arms Deal**



**26 July 1956 -  
Nasser publically announced the  
nationalization of the Suez Canal and  
closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli**



**29<sup>th</sup> October 1956 -  
Israel launched "Operation Kadesh"  
to invade the Sinai Peninsula**



**30<sup>th</sup> October 1956 –  
Following an ultimatum to Nasser to  
surrender, British and French planes  
begin bombing Egyptian military**

## **Bloc Positions and major stakeholders:**

### **The United States of America and Western Europe:**

By 1956, mutual fear of the Russian Empire and the spread of communism had brought the western European countries and the USA close as firm allies. Despite this, none had a coherent concrete foreign policy in their affairs with the Middle East. While the USA condemned Nasser's denunciation of Israel, it also refused to provide military assistance to the latter. Similarly, many Western Europe countries maintained a neutral stance by opposing Arab aggression of nationalizing the canal while also condemning Israeli attacks on Palestinian settlers and eviction of civilians from their homes.

### **Britain, France and Israel:**

These countries comprised the Western Bloc, eager to see the denationalization of the canal, as a means to pursue their own economic and strategic interests. The hostility between Egypt and the Western bloc was displayed in the Arab states final struggle against the two remaining imperial powers, Britain and France and the Arab-Israel hostility.

#### **Britain:**

Two years prior to the crisis, on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1954, Egypt and Britain concluded the Suez Canal Base Agreement on a phased evacuation of British troops from the canal, a process which was spread across seven years; hence, the sudden nationalization of the canal by Nasser was taken as a breach of trust by the British. Meanwhile, the increasingly cordial relationship of Britain with Egypt's neighbors, Jordan and Iraq, agitated Nasser who aspired to see Egypt emerge as the leader of the Arab world. He also attempted to display his commitment to the pan-Arabist ideology by appearing to oppose British influence and Western interference in the Middle East.

#### **Israel:**

The hostility between Israel and Egypt can be seen in the ongoing Arab-Israel conflict and Israel's efforts to invade the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula to convert it into the holy Jewish land known as Eretz Israel.

**France:**

Starting in 1949, France and Israel started to move towards an alliance, with France supplying weapons to Israel. There was also tension between France and Egypt as Egypt was supporting the Algerian War of Independence, which seemed to be challenging France's rule in Algeria. By 1956, Israel wanted a war before Egypt received even more Soviet weapons. They asked the French to give them all the help they could in the coming war, which France eventually agreed to.

**Soviet Union and Satellite States:**

**The Soviet Union:**

By 1956, the Soviet union and its satellite states had expansionary objectives and were suspicious of those of the USA and Western Europe. Each bloc attempted to increase its sphere of influence before the other by winning the support of countries. Both the USA and the Soviet Union had their eyes on the neutral states in Central Asia and the Middle East to further their ideological cause and gain access to plentiful resources to be used in their campaigns against each other. This included the Middle-East's vast untapped oil resources and the Suez Canal's geo-strategic importance. The Soviet Union thus saw this crisis as an attempt to get involved in the region under the guide of Egypt's defense needs.

**Hungary, Iran and East Germany:**

These states provided the field which enabled the Soviet Union to carry out their actions and enabled Egyptian-Soviet correspondence as they were controlled from the center in Moscow. For example, in September 1955, Egypt was able to buy Soviet Arms through Czechoslovakia.

**The Non-Aligned Bloc:**

This bloc included Middle-Eastern countries, Cuba and Yugoslavia, each of which had the agenda of not allying with any one super power, hence the Non-Aligned Movement. These countries were blessed with a unique geo-political position, which enabled them to get massive financial and military support from both the USA and the Soviet Union as they did not swear allegiance to any one of the two.

These countries have the primary objective of avoiding the setting of a precedent for superpower involvement in domestic affairs. For example, Yugoslavia may still fear a communist invasion as it recently broke away from the Soviet Union.

Hence, these countries would benefit from supporting the withdrawal of the Israeli-British-French forces from the Suez territory. Simultaneously, they should not consider opposing the Soviets as synonymous to opposing the Israeli-British-French invasion and vice-versa.

### **Questions a resolution must answer:**

1. To what extent is Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal legal under international law?
2. If not, what is the plausible solution to ensure the sanctity of international law?
3. What is the United Nations role in sustaining Old World Legislature set prior to the creation of the United Nations itself (preceding World War II)?
4. Is the intervention by the global community legitimate? How would you define legitimacy?
5. How far is the intervention by Britain and France rooted in colonialism and what can be done to counter it?
6. What is a long-term solution to ensure that Suez Canal continues to prosper global trade?

### **Further Study:**

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/suez-crisis>

<https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472108670-06.pdf>

<http://journals.uoc.edu/index.php/journalofconflictology/article/viewFile/vol3iss2-calcada/vol3iss2-calcada>

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20096792>

<http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/geneva-conventions/p8778>

[https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=21v9mTP\\_jsUC&pg=PA175&=Izzat + Darwaza&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Izzat%20Darwaza&f=false\(The Origins of Arab Nationalism\)](https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=21v9mTP_jsUC&pg=PA175&=Izzat+Darwaza&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Izzat%20Darwaza&f=false(The+Origins+of+Arab+Nationalism))

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/themiddle-east-1917-to-1973/gamal-abdel-nasser/>

