

## THE SUEZ CRISIS: CONCLUSION TO A NEW SET OF ESSAYS

*"If [Britain] had to go down now, the Government and...British people would rather do so on this issue than become perhaps another Netherlands."*

Harold Macmillan, 30 July 1956<sup>1</sup>

I was heartened to read, in his introduction to this volume, Simon Smith's invocation of "the interconnections between the regional and the international contexts" of Suez. I have to declare that, in part, this is because of self-interest. Almost 20 years ago, as I was pursuing my doctoral research, I recognised the "patterns within the region" of the crisis but, seduced perhaps by the drama of the great/flawed man narrative (and the possibility of boosting book sales), I later emphasized "the power of a single, well-place person to change the course of history".<sup>2</sup> In light of these essays, I am happy to recant. The Canal Zone is no longer just a space which one fills with narratives of British failure (be it valiant or perfidious), American manoeuvring (be it moral or sinister), and French and Israeli intrigue; Nasser is no longer written in two dimensions acting as Soviet puppet or Arab demagogue. Indeed, the tale is well beyond Egyptian and Israeli borders; the Suez Crisis only took its shape because of the interests and actions of Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other countries beyond the Middle East.

Having established this, however, what exactly is our reassessment? After all, various collections from 1991 have tried to represent Suez as a multi-national affair, only to run the risk of merely re-scripting the historical play with more actors, some taking centre stage, others departing to the wings. France colludes, invades, but then leaves for the morass of Algeria and the demise of the Fourth Republic. Britain colludes, invades, and fails with an epilogue of imperial decline or (as portrayed in this volume) a retrenchment of influence. Israel colludes, invades, withdraws but --- bolstered by military victory --- awaits the Six-Day War. Nasser's Egypt survives, bruised by the invasion but politically emboldened as (somehow) it extends its sphere of influence into Syria. The United States calls a halt to the proceedings, retains both its European alliances and its moral superiority in the United Nations, and prepares its declaration of regional oversight with the Eisenhower Doctrine.

For Suez cannot be treated as a hermetically-sealed episode. Only two years later, in a chain of events arguably as significant as the 1956 crisis but receiving far less attention from scholars, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown, the Lebanese system reached the point of collapse, and American forces made their first "peacetime" landing in the region. If Suez in some way foreshadowed 1967, then these far-from-aftershocks foreshadowed civil wars of 1975 and invasions of 1991 and 2003.

I suggest that we can productively reconceive of the "regional" in the Suez Crisis, thus connecting not only to international contexts but back to national frameworks and systems, through an approach which highlights the "projection of power". This in no way denies specific political, economic, or military interests but suggests that the contest was for far more than the re-occupation of the Canal Zone and "liberation" of the Suez Canal Company, the breaking of Nasser's support for the Algerian insurgency, or the decimation

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of Egypt's Soviet-supplied tanks and aircraft. Territorial possession and military victory (except possibly for Israel) mattered far less than the presentation, hopefully but not necessarily underpinned by some moral rationale, of superiority. The challenge to London was not just the seizure of a British company and its assets, less than two years after Her Majesty's troops had left the Suez Canal Base, but as Nasser announced the nationalisation, the image of a giant float with "the Sphinx swallowing a British soldier with the British flag sown on his derriere".<sup>3</sup> As the *Times* framed the Government's position on 1 August:

If Nasser is allowed to get away with his coup, all the British other Western interests in the Middle East will crumble. Quibbling over whether or not [Nasser] was "legally entitled" to make the grab will delight the finicky and comfort the faint-hearted but entirely misses the issues.<sup>4</sup>

It is through such projection that one can, for example, draw a line between the eviction of the British from Abadan in 1951 and the determination to rebuff Egypt's nationalisation five years later. Similarly, one might consider that Suez offered France the opportunity to redeem its ejection from the Levant --- by British forces --- at the end of World War II, not only through the evolving Franco-Israeli alliance but through a redemption of French power in the Arab world. One might posit that, in a far different sense, Suez allowed Washington to project a power that not only was separate from but positioned against the use of military operations to control the region. And one might add to Laura James' examination of Nasser by considering his attempted projection of power not only in the Arab and Islamic worlds but as a key member of a non-aligned movement between the supposed great powers.

The significance of this projection was not that it reinforced existing strategic evaluations. To the contrary, in the British case, that demonstration ran counter to the trend of London's planning from 1952. In the Global Strategy paper issued that paper, the Churchill Government had acknowledged that Britain no longer had the economic and military resources to maintain its presence, at least through conventional forces, throughout the world. As Britain searched for a new regional strategy, Eden recognised:

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot hope to maintain our position in the Middle East by the methods of the last century. However little we like it, we must face that fact...If we are to maintain our influence in the areas, future policy must be designed to harness these [nationalist] movements rather than to struggle against them.<sup>5</sup>

The Eden of 1952-53 was Foreign Minister, however, rather than Prime Minister and the Macmillan of 1952-53 was Minister of Housing rather than a scheming Chancellor of the Exchequer. Equally important, as Sue Onslow points out, this consideration of how to project Britain's power was going on well beyond 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet. With the fragmentation of the British system for policymaking and operations, there was not but several "foreign policies", including one emanating from the Prime Minister's office, one



from the Foreign Office, and one from MI6 working with private allies including venturesome MPs, a shadow Egyptian government, and King Zog of Albania.

One of the highlights of the Suez commemoration conferences, many of which focused on reconsiderations of “national” approaches to the crisis, is that this consideration of the “systematic” may be applied not only to Britain but to countries such as France, Israel, and Egypt. What is essential, however is that the systematic is aligned with the notion of the projection of power, not to occlude the regional dimension of Suez but to bring out its importance.

For, in the end, it was those regional interactions that complicated attempted projections of power. By 14 October 1956, with all his rhetorical posturing and explosions of temper, Anthony Eden was ready to accept a negotiated settlement of the Suez Crisis. Then, however, two French emissaries re-presented the regional dimension to the Prime Minister. Messrs. Gazier and Challe explained that Israel was about to attack Jordan, occupying the West Bank, and given that Britain was aligned by treaty with Amman and France was aligned by its ongoing political and military negotiations with Tel Aviv, Paris and London would be opponents rather than allies. To avoid this, all that was needed was a re-configuration of the regional, one in which Britain and France colluded with Israel to overthrow Nasser.

If the strategic complexities of the regional allowed Britain to revive its hoped-for projection of power, they soon exposed the illusions of that projection. London’s lack of resources in support of its Middle Eastern presence led to a haphazard, indeed farcical, military plan, one which was produced not by its generals and admirals but by its politicians and covert operators to remove Nasser through bombing and psychological warfare. And the difficulties of London’s diplomatic position, one further complicated by Washington’s role in negotiations in and beyond the region, led to the acceptance of the ill-fated collusion with France and Israel. As Eden rationalised to Cabinet colleagues:

If [Israel] contemplated any military operations against the Arabs, it was far better from our point of view that they should attack Egypt....He had therefore thought it right to make it known to the Israelis, through the French, that in the event of hostilities between Egypt and Israel, the UK Government would not come to the assistance of Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

The folly of readings of Suez which wedge the crisis into narratives of Eden’s rejection of appeasement or of Cold War manoeuvrings is that the Middle East is not examined but fitted into a history --- much as Eden and Macmillan tried to fit it into their desperate visions of British power --- of the “West”. In that context, the ongoing debate over whether Suez constituted a “watershed” for Britain’s international position needs to be re-framed. One may cling to tangible markers of a continuing but limited British presence, be this the role of political advisor to Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, arms provider, or even supplier of mercenary forces, after 1956. Symbolically, however, Suez represented the collapse of London’s power, not only to the French who turned away from a perfidious Albion, not only to the Americans who moved to fill the vacuum, but also to the emerging regional leaders from Tel Aviv to Cairo to Riyadh.



For the “West” and indeed the “East” of the Soviet Union, the legacy of Suez rested not only in the recession of British Empire but in the complications for those who continued to misread the Middle East. Two months after the Suez War, the US Government would try to step in as the new overseer of the region through the Eisenhower Doctrine, attempting to set up King Saud as the new pan-Arab ruler. Two years afterwards, this vision collapsed amidst regime change in Baghdad, political crisis in Beirut (a crisis supposedly abated by the first peacetime landing of American troops in the Middle East, only to recur less than 20 years later), and union between Cairo and Damascus. The central dynamic for change --- from 1958 through 1967 through 1979 --- lay not in the imposition of Western power but in the negotiations and actions of those within the region.

Fifty years after Suez, the Middle East is no more to be “acted upon” than it was at mid-century. In January 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld offered the first National Security Council meeting of Bush Administration the same logic that lay behind Eden and Macmillan’s rationale for a projection of power in 1956. Just as the removal of Nasser would “protect” pro-Western regimes elsewhere, so regime change in Baghdad would ensure a Middle East in the Western image: “Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that is aligned with U.S. interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond. It would demonstrate what U.S. policy is all about.” The difference is merely one of timeframe rather than effect as the “regional” dimension unfolds: if British rationalisations collapsed in a few days and the French re-oriented their foreign policy in a few months, the fraying of the American mission is a long-term process.

At the end of an earlier conference in London, the British historian Peter Hennessy commented, “What we need is a global history of Suez.” With this conference and the essays that it has stimulated, I believe we have a starting point for this investigation and re-interpretation. Such a history need not be detached from the “national”, notably the divisions, conflicts, and confusion that arise within each political system rather than the purportedly coherent policy that issues from each government. At the same time, that global history need not and should not consist of a juxtaposition of national narratives. Instead, the consideration of Suez 1956 as an episode where “projections of power” intersected and collided both illuminates and undermines contemporary portrayals of the clashes of civilizations and “the spread of freedom”.

*Scott Lucas, University of Birmingham*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in London to State Department, Cable 550, 31 July 1956, US National Archives, Record Group 59, Central Decimal File, 674.84A/7-3156

<sup>2</sup> W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. x; W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Sphere, 1996), p. ix

<sup>3</sup> Alexandria to State Department, Despatch 1, 28 July 1956, US National Archives, Record Group 59, Central Decimal File, 774.11/7-2856

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 1 August 1956

<sup>5</sup> See the Introduction to W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Record of meeting, 18 October 1956, Public Record Office, Kew, Surrey, CAB 128/30, C.M. 71 (56)