

ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief
Historical Security Council
Suez Crisis
William R. Patterson



Introduction:

The Suez Crisis began on July 26, 1956 when Egypt's President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, took the action of nationalizing the Suez Canal. This was a direct challenge to British strategic control in the Middle Eastern region. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 had granted the British a lease over the canal and the British had a sizeable troop presence there until 1954 when they agreed to withdraw most of them. The French were also concerned with the nationalization of the canal since they believed it would strengthen Nasser's influence over their North African colonies. Israel was also worried that the hostile Egyptians would interfere with their shipping rights through the canal, which in fact they had already done on several occasions.

In response to Nasser's action, the British, French and Israelis held a secret meeting to plan retaliation. It was decided that Israel would invade Egypt and attempt to gain control of the Sinai Peninsula. The British and French would then intervene as a 'peacekeeping' force and demand that Israeli and Egyptian forces each withdraw 16 kilometers from the canal, thereby leaving it in the *de facto* control of the British and French.

On October 29, 1956 the Israelis launched Operation Kadesh and invaded the Sinai. The British and French joined the hostilities on October 31 with Operation Musketeer which involved bombing and land invasions. Though the military operations were successful, it was met by a hostile reaction from the Soviets, the United States, the United Nations, and many members of NATO. President Eisenhower intervened personally and forced a cease-fire on Britain, France and Israel. Discussion of the crisis was initiated in the United Nations Security Council and then moved to the General Assembly. Eventually, a United Nations peacekeeping force was deployed and British, French and Israeli troops were withdrawn.

Historical Background:

The Suez Crisis was precipitated by a confluence of historical events. Egypt had achieved its independence in 1922 and was still struggling to define its own identity and to bolster its autonomy from the Western powers. The British and French were struggling to maintain their Great Power status in the aftermath of the Second World War. They both viewed their respective positions in the Middle East and Northern Africa as essential to this goal. Further complicating the matter was the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 which led to hostility with its Arab neighbors, including Egypt.

The situation in Egypt in 1956 was tenuous. Several Egyptian leaders had been previously assassinated by Egyptian radicals and an attempt had already been made on Nasser himself. Increasing pressure from the nationalistic populace drove Nasser to actions that antagonized the Western countries. The immediate catalyst to the crisis occurred when Nasser officially recognized the People's Republic of China. This angered the United States which had been backing Taiwan. In response, the U.S.

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withdrew financial aid for the Aswan Dam project on the Suez Canal. Nasser immediately retaliated by nationalizing the canal.

Also of historical importance at the time was the context of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union were struggling over influence in the region which heightened tensions. When the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries threatened to intervene on the behalf of Egypt, the U.S. began to worry that the crisis would evolve into a larger war which it was not willing to risk. This was the primary reason behind the U.S.'s decision to force a cease fire.

Role of the United Nations:

Worried about the repercussions of the conflict on global peace and stability, President Eisenhower pushed vigorously for a cessation to hostilities. The United States first sponsored resolution 119 in the United Nations Security Council calling for a cease-fire. These resolutions were vetoed by France and the United Kingdom who are both permanent veto-wielding members of the body. No other member of the Security Council voted against the resolution. Undeterred, the United States then went to the General Assembly. The GA held an emergency special session and under the terms of the Uniting for Peace resolution (GA resolution 377A), adopted resolution 1001. This resolution established the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) and called for an immediate cease-fire between the involved parties. Due to these pressures from the UN along with threats that they could be ejected from NATO, the British and French began withdrawing their forces within a week.

The Emergency Force, which consisted of neutral soldiers from non-NATO and non-Warsaw Pact countries, was quickly sent to the area (with President Nasser's consent) to help stabilize the situation. The force initially arrived in Cairo on November 15, 1956 and had reached its full compliment of 6,000 troops by February 1957. The force remained in place, with varying levels of troop strength, until May 1967 when it was withdrawn.

The force was created at the suggestion of Lester B. Pearson who later received a Nobel Peace Prize for his involvement in the crisis. The establishment of the UNEF was significant as it was the first 'peacekeeping' contingent fielded by the United Nations. This force was the forerunner to future peacekeeping missions, the fielding of which has since become the most identifiable function of the UN.

Country Positions:

France, the United Kingdom and Israel stood in isolation against most other United Nations member-states. The United States was the strongest force behind a cease-fire and all members of the Security Council (with the exception of Britain and France) voted in favor of Security Council Resolution 119. General Assembly Resolution 1001 was passed with 64 votes for and none against.

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Resources:

United Nations Security Council Resolution 119:

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/109/53/IMG/NR010953.pdf?OpenElement>

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1001:

<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/a06f2943c226015c85256c40005d359c/14bcd994ee8f6558852560df0067939d!OpenDocument>

GlobalSecurity.org, Suez Crisis:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/suez.htm>

Suez Crisis, Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez_Crisis

Peter L. Hahn. “The Suez Crisis: A Crisis that Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East” in *eJournal USA*:

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/109/53/IMG/NR010953.pdf?OpenElement>

David Fromkin. “The Suez Crisis: Stuck in the Canal” in *International Herald Tribune*, Sunday, October 29, 2006:

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/29/opinion/edfrom.php>