

What was the impact of the Suez Crisis on the balance of power in the Middle East?

The situation in the Middle East, since the First World War, had been one that was defined by the holdovers of colonial power and influence. Both the British and French Empires, once the dominant forces in the region, had waned in their power, and been replaced by the superpowers of the USA and USSR. This massive shake-up in the order of the region is shown at its most explosive at the outbreak of the Suez Crisis, in October 1956. Why the nations involved were spurred to such extreme means, and the results of the actions taken by all parties involved, are what this assignment will attempt to convey.

The Waning of British and French Power in the Middle East.

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Great War, the Middle East had been a zone of control almost completely dominated by the powers of France and Britain, or their allies. British rule in Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus, Egypt and Iraq, and French rule over Syria, Lebanon and Hatay ensured that the colonial powers had a hegemonic grip on power in the region, and they would remain as the primary forces in the region until the end of the Second World War. As it did around the rest of the world, the Second World War signified the end of the colonial rule in the Middle East, with independence movements gaining momentum in all areas under colonial rule, a trend which was most violently visible in Palestine, with Zionist groups demanding a Jewish state and the creation of Israel, and the Palestinian-Arab groups instead calling for the withdrawal of Western influence and the creation of a Palestinian state (Barr 2013). The overlapping aims of these two groups made conflict almost inevitable, but the coercive force that led to the breaking point of tension being reached was the rivalry between Britain and France in the region, and the support that France gave to the Zionist forces in their push for recognition as the primary controlling force in the area. The best example of this is to be seen before the end of the Second World War, with “the French administration already supporting... Zionist terrorists” (Barr 2013, Pg. 266). This was only exacerbated by the rise of Arab nationalism, most notable in the former British colony of Egypt. United behind Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, the nation was able to comfortably take up a prominent position in the rings of nations not directly involved in the Cold War between the USA and USSR, such as Yugoslavia, and at the time, China. However, Nasser's pan-Arab rhetoric and desire to see “Egyptian hegemony over a wide area” (Barr 2019, Pg. 189) only added to the inevitability of conflict between the Zionist and Arab forces in the region, and increased the chances that a full scale war would break out between the two groups.

In the time since the direct withdrawal of British and French troops and authority from the region, which took place from 1943 to 1948, the dominance and influence of the

colonial powers had not been completely removed. One of the most important international waterways on the planet, the Suez Canal, was still under the direct influence of the British and French governments, who held large shares in the Suez Canal company, which governed and ensured the openness of the waterway. So when, in 1956, Nasser chose to nationalise the canal, it was seen by the British and French governments as a sign of aggression, and one that they would not let slide. (Barr 2019).

Nasser's reasons for seizing control of the canal were myriad, from wanting the revenue to finance the construction of the Aswan Dam, a massive project meant to help modernise and develop Egypt, to the removal of the influence of the British and French in the region. What he did not expect to happen was the violent and almost immediate reaction of the British and French governments, and their willing cooperation with the Israeli government (Barr 2019). When, in October, the Israeli army stormed across their border with Egypt, the Egyptian army was caught off guard, and the situation rapidly took a turn for the worse. As the forces of Israel approached the Suez Canal, the British and French governments demanded that both sides withdraw and establish a cordon around the canal, to ensure safe travel for trade and shipping in the waterway (Barr 2019). What was immediately clear to every observing nation in the conflict, such as the USA and USSR, was the cooperation and planning behind such an operation. The British and French had goaded the Israelis into moving directly against the Egyptian forces, and created an environment ripe for their forces to land and secure the canal, ostensibly for the purposes of preserving international trade and free transit of the Suez Canal. The reaction from the superpowers was almost immediate, and brutal. President Eisenhower threatened to crash the British Pound Sterling currency by selling the bonds that the US government held, and Premier Khrushchev in the USSR promised to "enforce the peace" with Soviet boots on the ground (Westad, 2007). This quick, violent reaction by the USA and USSR, as well as by the United Nations, showed the British and French that their support for violent colonial activities was greatly diminished from the time of the Great War, where they had been rewarded for their sacrifices with the Middle Eastern mandates, which, it could be argued, were the root cause of the current issues in the Suez.

The aftermath of the British and French interventions in Egypt, and the consequences they faced, tolled the death knell for the colonial empires of the two former hegemonic powers in the region. Not only was Egypt able to gain the support of both the USA and USSR, but was able to rally the international and Arab communities in support of it, something which would come back to haunt the Israelis in both the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, both of which can be viewed as direct results of the Suez Crisis. The main consequences of the Suez Crisis were, however, the waning of British and French power in the Levant and Middle Eastern regions, as well as the beginning of another power's entrenchment in the area, most notably, the United States of America.

Assertion of American Power in the Middle East.

American presence in the Middle East was not a new phenomenon by the time of the Suez Crisis. What was unusual, was the impact that the United States was able to display through its support of the Egyptian government. Not only did American intervention and threats, in conjunction with those made by the Soviet Union, lead to a withdrawal of the British and French troops that had seized the Suez Canal, but the financial support that Egypt had desperately wanted for the construction of the Aswan Dam did not come from the United States, and was instead fulfilled by the Americans superpower rival: the Soviet Union (Barr 2019). While Egypt was obliged to thank the Americans for their support in bringing their allies to heel, the resentment shown towards the Americans in the wake of the Suez Crisis led to the massive amount of support they were about to provide to a more cooperative government in the region, the State of Israel.

Understanding American policy in the Middle East, and the interests of the nation in conducting foreign and defence policy, is tied explicitly to the continued existence of Israel (Barr 2019). The Suez Crisis showed the American government that even with the more limited support of the British and French governments, the Israeli army could conduct successful operations against another power in the region, and if need be, act independently. However, the Zionist nature of Israel created a general disposition in the Arab states, as was evidenced by the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars, against the government of Israel. American support for the Israeli government and the Zionist movement went back as far as the Second World War, with then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt being subjected to the “rapidly burning political issues” (Barr 2019, Pg. 25) surrounding the creation of the Israeli state. Given the super-power politics exhibited by both the US and USSR throughout the Cold War, it was only logical that the two powers would have greater sway in some regions of the Middle East than others. The Soviet Union had a greater sway over Egypt and most of the Arab nations, and the US was the primary power in Israel, Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Iran. Having Israel as a military and economic partner in the region greatly strengthened not just the strategic position for the American forces, but gave them a springboard for interventions against other powers in the Middle East, as was displayed through Israeli participation in the two Gulf Wars and other American interventions in the Middle East.

Western support for Israel only succeeded in worsening the relations between the Middle Eastern nations, specifically down the lines of the Israeli and Arab states. The first Arab-Israeli war, fought between 1948 and 1949, had set the Israeli government against the Arab states, particularly Palestine, basically since the inception of the Israeli state. This did not mean that there could never be cooperation between the two sides, but the resulting wars and tensions between the two, exacerbated as it was all over the rest of the world, by the lingering presence of colonialism. The new presence of American and Soviet diplomats, advisers and military personnel only

replaced those of the British and French, in a new form of colonialism and exploitation.

Inflammation of tension between Israel and the Arab nations.

As previously discussed, the tensions between Israel and the Arab nations were such that very little was needed for them to boil over, and plunge the region back into conflict. The cause of the second Arab-Israeli War, the Suez Crisis, is proof enough of this. British and French grievances over the Suez Canals nationalisation, and the election of President Nasser, were enough to spur them to war. Israel, the primary Western partner in the region, was approached with the opportunity to attack Egypt and further their own interests. Given Egyptian involvement in the First Arab-Israeli War, and the closeness of the Sinai peninsula to Israel, made Egypt one of the primary military threats to Israel.

When British and French paratroopers landed along the Suez Canal, and Israeli troops began to move into the Sinai peninsula, it became abundantly clear that there was cooperation between the three parties. Despite what then US President Dwight David Eisenhower thought: that it was unlikely that "Britain would be dragged into this" (Barr 2019, Pg. 239), the British and French encouraged Israel to attack the Egyptians, opening the opportunity for them to play world police against both sides, and secure their interests in the Suez region. While this was a seemingly foolproof plan to the British and French, the speedy reactions of both the American and Soviet governments proved to be too much for the two powers, who rapidly withdrew from the Suez.

The ease with which the Israeli forces moved into the Sinai peninsula and the lack of serious resistance that the Egyptians were able to put up seriously hurt Egyptian prestige in the Arab world, but the perceived defeat of the colonial powers by Egypt was more than enough to make up for the poor performance of the Egyptian army. On the other hand, it placed into Israel's hands the contested and previously closed Straits of Tiran, as well as the entire Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip. This very favourable strategic position was to be to Israel's benefit in the Six Day War, and the Yom Kippur War, which while both Israeli victories, left Israel in a slightly less beneficial position than before. The animosity currently shown towards the Israeli state by the Arab states in the Middle East, and the overwhelming amount of support that the Israeli government receives from the Western powers, can be traced all the way back to the aftershocks of the Suez Crisis.

Conclusion:

While the Suez Crisis was one of the more inflammatory spates in the Cold War involving the old colonial powers, it has been largely ignored in public memory, unlike the Vietnam War or other preeminent conflicts. However, the effects that the Suez Crisis had on the international relations of the nations involved, and the situation in the entire Middle Eastern region as a whole are massive. The current situation in

Palestine can be viewed as a direct result of the inflammation of tensions in the wake of the Crisis, and the support that Israel enjoys from the Western powers is another of the long term effects of the Suez Crisis. Over time, the balance of power has shifted again, but the direct effects of the Suez Crisis have been covered in this assignment. Primarily, the inflammation of Arab-Israeli tensions, the reduction of the old colonial powers' influence in the region, and the entrenchment and creation of a new balance of power favouring the Americans and their Western allies can be viewed as the primary effects of the War.

The most visible outcomes of the Crisis were, however, the total reduction in the influence of the colonial powers in the Middle East. Since the mid 1930's the control that the British and French enjoyed in the region had been slowly disintegrating, and the situation became untenable for both during the Second World War. When the British finally left in 1948, they left behind a fractured and very unstable region, ripe for the outbreak of conflict. The first Arab-Israeli war that directly followed the declaration of the state of Israel made the Israeli involvement in the Suez Crisis an inevitability, with the tensions remaining between the Egyptian and Israeli governments being as high as they were beforehand. The gains that Israel made in the Crisis ensured that when the next Arab-Israeli wars rolled around, the Arab nations would be at a much greater disadvantage. The Suez Crisis almost completely ensured that the Arab governments would be opposed to Israel, as the willingness of the Israeli government to cooperate with the former colonial powers of Britain and France went against the anti-colonial messaging of the main backer of the Arab states, the Soviet Union, and would have placed them in a worse position. Afterall, the Arab states had resisted the colonial efforts of the old powers since the Great War, whether it was Britain or France, or the Ottoman Empire before them.

Reference List:

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