



Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences

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CHAPTER

21 Consequences of the Suez Crisis in the Arab World

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Abstract

Nasser emerged from the Suez crisis as the pre-eminent leader of Arab nationalism. 'Nasserism' was elevated to the status of an ideology throughout the Arab world. As this chapter points out, the confrontation at Suez had the opposite effect to that intended by the planners of the invasion. The intervention stimulated radical nationalism. Existing trends were magnified and strengthened. This chapter traces the antecedents of these developments from the time of the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and calls attention to Nasser's 'extraordinary feat' in 1954 of securing British military withdrawal from Egypt after seventy-two years of occupation.

Keywords: Arab world, Suez crisis, invasion, radical nationalism, Egyptian revolution, military withdrawal

Subject: International History, Modern History (1700 to 1945), Contemporary History (Post 1945), Middle Eastern History

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BEYOND its effect on Egypt and the other direct participants, the Suez crisis had a profound impact on the rest of the Arab world. This was illustrated throughout the crisis over Suez from mid-1955 onwards in the powerful wave of Arab support for Egypt. It was particularly striking in view of the initial lukewarm response of many Arabs to the Egyptian military regime which had emerged from the 1952 revolution. Suez changed this, firmly establishing Gamal Abdel Nasser as the pre-eminent Arab leader until the end of his life, and Arab nationalism as the leading Arab ideology for at least that long.

Suez also gave a final push to the tottering hegemony over the Arab world which Britain and France had sometimes shared and sometimes disputed for over a century. It exposed their weaknesses, encouraging Iraqis, Algerians, Adenis, and others to liquidate their last footholds in the region. Arab leaders ceased paying attention to London and Paris, turning instead towards Cairo, Washington, and Moscow. Finally, because it involved Israel in overt collaboration with the old imperial powers, and in an invasion of the territory of an existing Arab state, the Suez crisis established an image of Israel in the Arab world, and a pattern of conflict with it, which had an impact perhaps as important as that of the 1948 war.

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In spite of the significant effects of the Suez crisis on the Arab world, relatively little primary material has emerged to illuminate the motivations of different Arab leaders and governments (with the exception of course of Egypt), and to enable researchers to chronicle this aspect of the crisis.¹ Whereas we can now follow the Egyptian, British, French, ↪ Israeli, and American sides of the Suez controversy relatively easily through archival or memoir material, to study the various Arab actors involved we are forced to rely largely on the considerable amount of secondary material which has accumulated since 1956.

For this and other reasons, therefore, this assessment of the consequences of Suez for the Arab world will be strictly thematic and reflective rather than detailed and exhaustive. Although we have fewer first-hand accounts by Arab participants in the events compared with others, much can be said about the impact of the crisis on the Arab world. Among other things, it is clear that this impact was felt on several levels. These were:

1. Arab relations with, and attitudes towards, the great powers;
2. The internal and inter-Arab policies of several Arab polities;
3. The Arab-Israeli conflict.

Arab Relations with the Great Powers

It is acknowledged by virtually all students of Suez, of the policies of the superpowers in the Middle East, and of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that Suez marked some sort of turning-point. This is true whether we are speaking of the policies of the countries directly involved in the aggression on Egypt, Egypt itself, the superpowers, or other actors. It is perhaps insufficiently appreciated that as far as Arab relations with, and attitudes towards, the great powers were concerned, Suez only confirmed, magnified, and strengthened existing trends.

Thus the United States emerges from the Suez crisis in most accounts as the dominant Western power in the region, having benefited from the disaster of the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression on Egypt, to replace Britain and France, and soon to inherit Israel from Britain and France as a privileged regional client and ally. Looking at the United States from the perspective of the Arab states, including in this case Egypt, it seems that Washington did not get all of the credit it might otherwise have won for its forthright opposition to the tripartite attack and to Israel's later attempts to maintain its occupation of Sinai and the Gaza Strip. The United States was certainly accorded even more importance in the region after Suez than it had been before, and yet the late 1950s and 1960s were a period of Soviet rather than American advances in the region (as witnessed by scholarly titles on the subject such as *Red Star on the Nile* and *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*.²

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The main reason for America's failure to gain more Arab approval ↪ for its resolute stand in 1956 would seem to be simple. Many Arabs perceived that the United States had played a crucial role in precipitating the crisis via Dulles's sudden withdrawal of the US offer of funds to help construct the Aswan Dam. They also resented American hostility, both before and after the Suez war, to the policy of neutralism, which was growing increasingly popular in the Arab world, and to Arab nationalism. All of this undermined the credit the United States might otherwise have expected for the positive diplomatic outcomes it played a major role in achieving in the autumn of 1956 and the spring of 1957.

Although this may seem too simple an answer, it takes into account a factor often ignored by analysts: for the long period in which the crisis was brewing, and until the invasion actually took place, US-Egyptian relations were far from good. Thus what America eventually did during the tripartite attack came against a background of many months of its apparent hostility to Egypt, to Nasser, and to Arab nationalism

(following a honeymoon for well over two years after the 1952 revolution in Egypt). It might be added that once the crisis was over, American policy under Dulles, as seen in such initiatives as the Eisenhower Doctrine and the American intervention in Lebanon in 1958, did little to dispel impressions in the Arab world that such hostility was the basis of US policy.³

It was perhaps partly in consequence of this situation in US–Egyptian relations that the Soviet Union managed to get as much credit as it did in Arab eyes for its role in the crisis. Egypt, moreover, probably played a determinant role in influencing Arab attitudes towards both the Soviet Union and the United States at this point. This is understandable, for after it had stood up to Britain, France, and Israel in 1956 and survived, the revolutionary regime in Egypt had virtually unlimited legitimacy in the Arab world. Consequently the lead it took was widely followed.

p. 380 We know from accounts by such Egyptians close to the centre of decision-making as Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and Amin Hewedy that Egyptian leaders knew just how limited the Soviet role was.⁴ These leaders seem nevertheless to have consciously stressed publicly the importance of the Soviet contribution to the outcome of the Suez crisis. ↪ They apparently did this in the hope of creating a counter-weight to the United States, which now was the dominant Western power in the region, and which seemed to hold little goodwill for Egypt (whose funds for example remained tied up in American banks by government order until the crisis was well over). Egypt's publicly restrained attitude to the United States and its overt praise of its new Soviet friends in the wake of Suez thus sent a clear signal to the rest of the Arab world.

There is much other evidence that Suez simply confirmed existing tendencies in the Arab world. There was already a clear trend away from involvement with great power military blocs, alliances, and pacts, out of a not entirely groundless fear that these were simply a cover for the maintenance of foreign bases and of a continued unequal relationship between the Arab states and their former colonial masters. There was, further, a strong interest in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in non-alignment, and a growing fascination with the Soviet Union as a possible counter-weight to the Western powers. Suez simply accentuated processes already under way, showing that the Soviet Union was now a factor in the region which could be used to Arab advantage, and that Britain and France were indeed as ill-intentioned and as hostile to Arab nationalist aspirations as most Arabs already knew they were from decades of experience.

Suez destroyed any slim possibility that Britain and France would remain major powers in the Arab world. As damning in Arab eyes as the perceived sin of attacking Egypt and Arab nationalism (Nasser was increasingly representative and symbolic of both) was the fact that the two powers had collaborated with Israel. This collusion confirmed the most extreme Arab nationalist theses, which argued that the great powers' support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine had always been motivated by their desire to use it as a pawn against the Arabs.⁵ What we now know about the collusion from Israeli, French, and British sources indicates that far from being paranoid fantasies, these suspicions were at least in this case quite close to the mark: Israel played an essential role in both British and French planning to defeat the forces of militant nationalism in the Arab world. Thus, when added to provocations like the Lavon and *Bat-Galim* affairs of 1954,⁶ which seemed timed to coincide with crucial moments in Egypt's relations with the Western powers, the long-drawn-out Suez crisis ↪ revived Arab fears regarding Israel's role in the region which might otherwise have eased in time.

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Suez had one other important consequence as far as the position of the old colonial powers in the Arab world was concerned. This was to tar fatally their local collaborators, clients, and allies with the brush of complicity not only with the colonial powers but also with Israel in a joint effort to destroy a popular Arab symbol. This association contributed to the sequence of events which brought down the Iraqi monarchy and, with it, trusted British collaborators such as Nuri Said. It also briefly threatened the throne of King Hussein in Jordan, strengthened the growing opposition to President Chamoun in Lebanon, and proved the kiss of death for those Syrian leaders and party factions associated with Britain and Iraq who had been

persuaded to launch an abortive coup against the pro-Egyptian regime timed to coincide with the Suez attack.⁷

It could be argued that in any case the days of Nuri and the Iraqi monarchy were numbered, and that Hussein, Chamoun, and the Syrian politicians aligned with Britain and Iraq were all on shaky ground. Certainly all were swimming with difficulty against a powerful, growing Arab nationalist tide throughout the region. But Suez did make a difference: now all these men were identified not just with the old colonialism, but with Israel as well, after a direct tripartite assault on Egypt and its head of state, who had developed a considerable Arab popular following. Their domestic opponents capitalized on this association in the popular mind, and within just over two years all but King Hussein were out of office. Indeed, the Jordanian monarch had to resort to extreme measures to wrest back power in April 1957 from the first (and last) freely elected, populist, and pan-Arabist government in Jordanian history, that of Suleiman al-Nabulsi, which had come into office in October 1956 at the height of the Arab nationalist fervour preceding the Suez war.

Internal and Inter-Arab Politics of the Arab States

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As we have just seen, the net effect of the Suez crisis on domestic Arab politics, particularly in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, was a further radicalization of an already unstable situation. Throughout the region, Suez gave a decisive impetus to the growing Arab nationalist trend, led and symbolized by Nasser, whose regime in 1954 had achieved the extraordinary feat of securing a British military withdrawal from Egypt after seventy-two years of occupation. Such an achievement had a powerful resonance in an Arab world still dotted with French bases in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, British bases in Libya, Jordan, Iraq, Aden, and the Gulf, and American bases in Morocco, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

This nationalist trend and the accompanying radicalization provided the main impetus for a wave of fundamental regime changes and other upheavals in the Arab world in the middle and late 1950s. The outcome of the Suez war reinforced the power of Nasser's already persuasive rhetoric, to which many Arabs were already listening. The influence exerted in inter-Arab affairs by Nasser, the Ba'th Party in Syria, and other Arab nationalist leaders and formations had been growing markedly even before Suez. It was reinforced by the visible decline in British power, and the weakening of the solidarity and ability to govern by the dominant traditional élites of the Arab world in the face of rising new social forces which identified with radical Arab nationalism. After Suez, however, with their British allies virtually out of the picture, in Syria and Iraq these élites crumbled before the push of parties and cliques of officers drawn largely from the middle and lower middle classes. They only clung to power in Jordan and Lebanon with difficulty, and, in part, thanks to external help.

Clearly, there was no single formula for these changes which resulted from Suez, and which were refracted differently in the specific politics of each state, much as has been the impact of Islamic political activism in recent years. In general, however, what Britain, France, and Israel achieved was diametrically opposed to their original intentions. Far from destroying Nasser and thereby ending Egypt's insidious influence, by targeting him and failing to unseat him, they made the Egyptian leader's position nearly impregnable for many years and increased his country's prestige and influence. All three parties to the collusion simultaneously witnessed a reinforcement of just those forces in the region which they had most wanted to defeat: pan-Arabism and radicalism. Beyond these general results, there were specific consequences of Suez in the politics of several Arab states, most of them the opposite of those intended by its planners.

In Syria, the conflict between different political factions and their various external backers, so arrestingly described by Patrick Seale in *The Struggle for Syria*,⁸ had already reached a level of intense bitterness. This was further exacerbated by a plot to overthrow the country's pro-Egyptian government, which had been

p. 383 timed to coincide with the Suez attack, and had been planned by an almost amateurish coalition of the Iraqi, British, and American intelligence services.⁹ Their bungled conspiracy contributed in turn to the sense of insecurity among the radical nationalist Syrian factions then in power, helping to drive them in a little over a year into the embrace of Egypt and the ill-fated United Arab Republic.

The failed plot also played a role in bringing closer to power the politicized military officers who had long been interfering actively in Syrian politics, but who soon afterwards were to take control of the country. In such a national emergency, with Syria under pressure from a formidable array of foes, who could better claim to protect it than the military? The traditional civilian politicians, as well as the social class most of them came from, were already losing their dominant position in politics and society, but Suez gave a major impetus to the young military men who took their places and who have ruled with only a few interruptions ever since the late 1950s.

The impact of Suez was devastating to the Iraqi monarchy. The abortive Syrian *coup* attempt marked one of the last occasions that the Iraqi regime was able to project its power beyond its borders. After Suez it was increasingly on the defensive, the outcome of its struggle with Egypt for leadership of the Arab states a foregone conclusion in the wake of Nasser's triumph. To its traditional sin in nationalist eyes of collaborating with imperialist Britain, the regime had now to bear the burden of accusations of having in effect colluded with Israel via involvement in the plot to overthrow the Syrian regime timed to coincide with the tripartite aggression against Egypt. Following Suez, Patrick Seale writes, throughout the region, 'Nuri became the butt of ever more strident attacks: he was an "ally of the Jews", a "valet of colonialism", a "traitor and tyrant such as the East had never known".'¹⁰

Certainly the Iraqi monarchy was already tottering before Suez. But one of its few remaining assets, its prestige in the Arab world, was irrevocably shattered by the attack on Egypt of its protector Britain, and by its own apparent complicity via involvement in the anti-Syrian plot. Before Suez, Iraq could presume to act like the major power in the Arab world, even if both Egypt and Saudi Arabia fiercely contested that claim. After Suez, there could be no hope of such a claim being accepted, and this in turn diminished the already declining domestic strength of Nuri's government. For just as the new order in Egypt gained internally from the pan-Arab legitimacy it acquired at Suez, so did the old order in Iraq lose internally from the pan-Arab obloquy it suffered because of Suez.

In Jordan and Lebanon, the impact of Suez, although less decisive than in Syria and Iraq, was also great. Both were deeply fissured polities in the mid-1950s, with large segments of their populations (possibly a majority in both cases) still reluctant to accord legitimacy to their governments and even to the very existence of Jordan and Lebanon as states. The impact of the Suez crisis added markedly to the pressures both were already facing.

Jordan had been subject to intense political strains from within and without following its incorporation of a new majority of restive, politicized, and educated Palestinians after its annexation of the West Bank in 1950 (an annexation which was recognized by no Arab state). Strongly nationalist, anti-Hashemite, intensely anti-Zionist, and searching for a formula which would help them to regain their lost homeland, most of these Palestinians were strongly attracted to Egypt and to Nasser, as were many Jordanians. This was particularly the case after the British evacuation of the Canal in 1954 was followed by more active Egyptian leadership in the Arab world based on a policy of non-alignment and Arab nationalism. The Egyptian example was already influential before the Suez war: at the height of the crisis, on 21 October, just before the invasion began, a general election in Jordan returned a parliament dominated by an Arab nationalist majority, which soon produced the pro-Egyptian and anti-British government of Suleiman al-Nabulsi.

Although the King eventually overcame this popular current, ending parliamentary government and, during a period of martial law which lasted until 1963, reimposing his personal rule through hand-picked servants

of the throne, the Anglo-Egyptian conflict over Suez and the resulting tripartite invasion had an impact on Jordan. They created a favourable regional environment for the Nabulsi government to come to power, terminate the Anglo-Jordanian treaty, and liquidate British bases. They also helped move Hussein away from his family's traditional patron, Great Britain, and eventually towards a new one, the United States, which in 1957 began subventions to Jordan which continue to this day. As for the country's restive population, Suez left most Palestinians and many Jordanians with an allegiance to Arab nationalism and a devotion to Nasser, which frequently focused on the Palestine issue. This powerful current continued to express itself in spite of governmental repression, often exploding and forcing the hand of the King at times of crisis, such as the years preceding and following the 1967 war.

p. 385 In Lebanon too, the new assertiveness of Egyptian policy before and ↵ after Suez struck a responsive chord, particularly among Sunnis, Druze, and many Greek Orthodox Christians who chafed at Maronite domination of the Lebanese system, opposed President Chamoun's strong pro-Western orientation, and were not fully reconciled to the idea of the total separation of Lebanon from its Arab hinterland. Chamoun's blatant rigging of the 1957 parliamentary elections (with funds provided by the American intelligence services, according to the account of the man who personally handed some of the money over to the Lebanese President,¹¹) further inflamed passions. The resulting polarization ended in the civil war of the summer of 1958, a conflict which seems almost genteel by comparison with the horrors the country has witnessed since 1975.

The Nasserist current in Lebanon, powerfully reinforced by the effect of Suez, was enshrined in a number of forms. One was the strict observance by Chamoun's successor, President Shihab, of a foreign policy closely aligned with that of Egypt. Thus insulated from the potential wrath of the dominant power in the Arab world, Lebanon was able to escape many of the stresses which affected other regional states in the late 1950s and early 1960s, until the Palestine issue forcefully intruded itself after the 1967 war. Another form taken by the influence of Egypt and its leader in Lebanon following the victory of Suez was the rapid proliferation of Nasserist organizations in the popular quarters of the Sunni cities of the coast. Vestiges of some of these, such as the Nasserist Popular Organization in Sidon and the Arab Socialist Union (which united in 1987) linger on even today.

In the sectarian political environment of Lebanon, as to a lesser extent in Iraq and Syria during the late 1950s, Nasserism was among many other things an ideological and organizational bastion for the Sunni urban populace. It held somewhat less appeal for Christians or Shiites, Kurds, or Alawis in all three countries.¹² Although Nasserism was primarily an expression of pan-Arab sentiment, in the Lebanese, Iraqi, and Syrian contexts it was also (occasionally perhaps even more so) a sectarian expression of identity by urban Sunnis. This factor should not be overemphasized, for the ideological aspects of Nasserism, whether in terms of anti-imperialism, non-alignment, or a striving for social justice, affected most sectors of these societies. This was particularly true after the Suez crisis confirmed the status of Arab nationalism as the primary vehicle of expression for the long-standing Arab desire ↵ for national dignity and for the elimination of the last vestiges of foreign domination. Nevertheless, Western efforts to combat Egyptian influence in the mid-1950s, via mobilization of diverse local forces, especially sectarian ones, seem to have spurred the emergence of a largely Sunni Nasserist tendency in certain countries as a response.

p. 386 Lebanon, where the mainly Christian Phalangist and Syrian Social Nationalist parties (the latter known by the initials PPS for *Parti Populaire Syrien*) backed President Chamoun, and where the opposition was organized largely (but not entirely) along sectarian lines, was the most extreme example in this regard. In Syria as well, the opposition to Arab nationalism and Nasser of the largely Christian PPS, widely suspected of being controlled by the CIA, and the involvement in the 1956 coup plot of a leading Aleppo Christian politician, Mikhail Ilyan, aroused long-standing Syrian fears of minority sectarian forces being used against the nationalist movement by the Western powers. In Iraq after the 1958 revolution, the allegiance of many Shiites and Kurds to Iraqi independence, which they expressed via the Communist party and other vehicles,

including support for Nasser's rival, Iraqi leader Abd al-Karim Qasim, was matched by loyalty of urban Sunnis to Nasserism, a contradiction which came to a bloody conclusion in Mosul in 1959 and afterwards.

It might be noted in passing that the prestige which accrued to Egypt in the Arab world as a result of Suez meant that henceforth it would be the Egyptian interpretation of Arab nationalism—in practice that of Nasser and the circle around him—which prevailed, rather than versions that had emerged in the Arab countries to the east, which were the original cradle of Arab nationalism. Thus, when Syria and Egypt united in 1958, it was on the basis of Egypt's preferences and understanding of Arab unity rather than those of the Syrian Ba'th party that the new union was organized. Egypt, which had come relatively recently to Arabism, thus found itself in the lead, rather than Syria, which had prided itself on being 'the beating heart of Arabism' for nearly half a century. In practice, the result was that Arabism took on a more activist and pragmatic form than it would have had the Ba'th party or another such formation continued as its primary protagonist. The story of the role of Arab nationalism in the efforts of Egypt's diplomatic, information, and intelligence services in the Arab world after Suez will perhaps one day be told.

p. 387 Egypt's ascendancy in the Arab world was probably inevitable even before Suez, and indeed it was perhaps only because it seemed so that Britain, France, and Israel chose to attack Egypt in the first place. But Suez set the seal on this process, giving a powerful impetus to Egyptian influence on the internal politics not only of those Arab countries we ↪ have already briefly examined, but others further afield, such as Algeria, Libya, North and South Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other states of the Arabian Peninsula.¹³

Egypt had an impact as well on the Palestinian polity, within Jordan and outside of it. Events before and after Suez played a major role in the revival of the Palestinian nationalist movement, which earlier had been crippled by its defeat in 1947–8 and the resultant expulsion and flight of about 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. While the Palestinian national movement before 1948 had been relatively weak, divided, and disorganized, it expressed faithfully the fierce desire of the Arab population for the independence of their country as well as its freedom from domination by any of the Arab regimes. These trends reemerged as the Palestinian national movement slowly and clandestinely revived in the 1950s, in large measure under the impetus of Suez, and provided important elements of continuity with the pre-1948 period.

Although Suez and the other triumphs of the Egyptian regime convinced many Palestinians that their salvation lay in alliance with the powerful new force of Arab nationalism, whether in its Nasserist or Ba'thist variety, others, particularly those with experience in the Gaza Strip or inside Egypt itself, drew different conclusions. For them, the lessons of Suez, and of their several years of experience with the new regime in Egypt before the Suez war, were altogether more ambivalent. Unlike Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, who tended to think of Egypt as a distant and benevolent ally against Israel and their local opponents and oppressors, most Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Egypt saw things quite differently.¹⁴ They were intimately acquainted with the fact that Egypt's commitment to the Palestine cause was necessarily almost completely subject to sober considerations of *raison d'état*. Many of them had learned these hard lessons inside Egyptian prisons. They had been sent there for launching attacks on Israel which contravened the new regime's desire to avoid tensions with its formidable Israeli neighbour. Some Palestinian nationalists were only released from prison in the period immediately before the Suez war in order to launch such attacks when it suited Egypt's policy of the moment.

p. 388 The lesson a group of men from this background who secretly formed the nucleus of Fatah in the mid-1950s drew was that the Palestinians must have a status independent of the Arab regimes, even ↪ that of Nasser, whom they feared, respected, and at times assiduously courted. Speaking of this period, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), a founder of Fatah, stated: 'We believed that the Palestinians could rely only on themselves',¹⁵ This current led by Fatah came to be the dominant one in the reborn Palestinian national movement, and its leaders have been the most prominent ones in the PLO in the years since that organization was taken over by independent Palestinian nationalist factions in 1968.

The other major current in Palestinian nationalism, that led by the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), founded in the early 1950s by Palestinian graduates of the American University in Beirut like Dr George Habash and Dr Wadi Haddad, soon became almost an auxiliary of Egyptian foreign policy. Unlike the ANM, Fatah from the outset tried to maintain its distance from Egypt, eventually developing relations with the neo-Ba`th regime in Syria and the Algerian revolution, in part to play them off against the powerful centrifugal pull of Egypt. It was significant for the course of Palestinian politics that Fatah, with its nuanced attitude towards Egypt born of events both before and after Suez, and its insistence on 'the independence of the Palestinian decision',¹⁶ came to dominate the Palestinian polity over the three decades after Suez.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

However important were the changes wrought by Suez on the Arab world's relations with the great powers and on its internal politics, the crisis had perhaps its most lasting impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's attack on Egypt—when seen against the background of earlier related incidents between these two countries, such as the *Bat-Galim* and *Lavon* affairs of 1954, the Israeli attack on Gaza of February 1955, and the Khan Yunis raid of August 1955—can be said to have fundamentally transformed that conflict. After Suez, it changed definitively from a dispute primarily related to the question of the disposition of Palestine, albeit one with important implications for the regional power balance, into an inter-state conflict for regional hegemony. This conflict concerned bilateral issues which were often unrelated to Palestine and involved Israel and several Arab countries, foremost among them Egypt.

The potential for such a development had always been there, and indeed was implicit from the very beginning of the Arab states' involvement in the Palestine question in the late 1930s. However, it took Israel's 1956 invasion of Sinai, seen as the culmination of a specific line of policy pursued by Ben-Gurion and his followers from 1954 (and best analysed by Avi Shlaim in an important article,¹⁷) to make this potential real. With Suez, Israel in a sense succeeded, at least for a number of years, in pushing the conflict into its neighbours' territory, making them fight on its terms, obscuring the Palestinian core of the dispute, and putting the Arab states on the defensive. In a sense this represented a continuation of the last phase of the Palestine war of 1948–9, when Israeli forces triumphed on all fronts and invaded Egyptian territory. Suez, however, took Israel much farther, and much more strongly emphasized all these achievements.

It could be argued that as a result of factors such as this emerging from Suez, the 1947–9 war was the last one fought primarily over the disposition of Palestine until the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The fighting from 1967 to 1973 thus followed a pattern set by Suez, in that it involved the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states, the question of regional hegemony, and the interests of the superpowers far more than it did the interests of the Palestinians or the fate of their homeland. A cynic might argue further that, while the interest of most Arab regimes in the Palestine question until 1949 reflected in large measure the genuine sympathy of Arab public opinion for the Palestinians, after that it dwindled into rhetorical decoration for these regimes' *realpolitik* attitudes towards Israel (with a few exceptions such as the Syrian neo-Ba`th regime of 1966–70, or the initial years of Algerian independence).¹⁸ From this perspective, Suez accelerated an existing trend. Even without going quite so far, it is clear that Suez, and the aggressive tendency in Israeli policy towards the Arab states championed by Ben-Gurion and his disciples which it represented, refocused the Palestine conflict into an Arab-Israeli dispute. It furthermore deprived the Arab regimes of the illusion that they could ignore Israel.

In the specific case of Egypt, Suez completed a major, wrenching shift in attitudes which had only begun two years earlier. This involved a reorientation by the new Egyptian regime away from its initial focus on domestic affairs and the issue of British bases on Egyptian soil to a wider arena. Perhaps this shift can be said to have begun when Egypt's leaders came to see that the problems of British bases and relations with

Britain were linked to a related struggle with Britain and its clients for regional dominance—a struggle waged in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as farther afield. But it had its most long-lasting consequences when Israel added its own unique ingredients to this explosive mix.

There has long been a controversy about the lead-up to the Egyptian-Israeli component of the 1956 war. One school would have it that Egypt in fact provoked Israel over a period of several years.¹⁹ This seems hard to sustain in view of the work done by Shlaim and the revelations in Moshe Sharett's diaries,²⁰ which not only show that Ben Gurion and his followers in the Israeli establishment were largely responsible for the war (or at least its Israeli component), but also bear out the long-standing Egyptian contention that until 1955 Egypt would have preferred to avoid a conflict with Israel, and the arms buildup this entailed. In Shlaim's words: 'The 1956 war was not the product of an Arab strategy but of an Israeli strategy which could only be implemented following the triumph of the Ben Gurion faction in the internal power struggle.'²¹

The litmus test of Egyptian intentions towards Israel can be said to be its attitude towards the Palestinians during this period. For before the Israeli challenges of 1954 and 1955 (the *Bat-Galim* affair, the 1954 Israeli sabotage attacks on American and British institutions in Egypt revealed during the Lavon affair, and the Gaza attack of February 1955), Palestinian and Israeli primary sources are unanimous in describing an unyielding Egyptian opposition to any Palestinian attacks on Israel, at a time that secret talks were going on between Nasser and Sharett. Shlaim notes that a study by the Israeli Arabist Ehud Ya'ari, based on

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records of Egyptian military intelligence captured by Israel during the Sinai War confirm[s] that until the Gaza raid the Egyptian authorities had a firm and consistent policy of curbing infiltration by Palestinians from the Gaza Strip into Israel, and that it was only in the aftermath of the Gaza raid that a new policy got underway of organizing the *fedayeen* and turning them into an official instrument of warfare against Israel.²²

Thus raids launched from Gaza by one of Salah Khalaf's comrades, Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) in 1954 led to his being 'promptly arrested by Egyptian Security',²³ Only well after the floodgates had been opened by the victory within the Israeli Cabinet of Ben-Gurion's aggressive line, which resulted in the bloody attack on Gaza in February 1955—in 'reprisal' for Palestinian attacks which the Egyptian authorities had done their best to prevent—did Egypt change its policy and begin to sponsor *fedayeen* attacks.

The rest is well known: Palestinian attacks later in 1955, acquiesced in or instigated by Egyptian intelligence, led to even bloodier Israeli reprisal raids in August 1955 at Khan Yunis and in November 1955 at el-Auja, as the Ben-Gurion line gained strength. In the interim the Soviet arms deal was announced, and soon war was inevitable. It had not been inevitable in 1954, any more than was the resulting resurgence of Palestinian nationalism, which was inflamed by the events of 1954–6 and the subsequent harsh Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. Although the effect of this resurgence did not appear immediately (Fatah was founded in 1959, and only revealed itself in 1965), it is not a coincidence that almost without exception the men who have played the most central leadership roles in the Palestinian national movement since then—Arafat, Khalaf, al-Wazir, and others—were in Egypt and the Gaza Strip at this time, were deeply involved in these events, and all describe them in retrospect as formative ones for them.²⁴

The Suez war, its antecedents, and its aftermath thus not only contributed to a transformation of the conflict between Israel and the Arabs, inaugurating or accentuating crucial inter-state dynamics, unrelated to the question of Palestine *per se*, which proved long-lasting. It also played a role in sparking off the modern resurgence of Palestinian nationalism, thus ultimately reviving an older aspect of the conflict which many Israeli leaders had hoped they had permanently buried: the Palestinian-Israeli one. Today the inter-state conflict between Israel and the Arabs has been settled in the case of Egypt, is virtually dormant in the case of Jordan, and has been quiet between Israel and Syria since 1974 except for their potentially

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explosive proxy wars in Lebanon. One of the most enduring legacies of Suez may thus prove to be its contribution to the reactivation of the conflict's Palestinian–Israeli aspect.

Notes

- 1 The limited primary material available dealing with the impact of Suez on the Arab world includes King Hussein, *Uneasy Lies the Head* (London, 1962); Khalid al-'Azm, *Mudhakkirat Khalid al-'Azm* (Memoirs of Khalid al-Azm) (Beirut, 1972); Camille Chamoun, *Crise au Moyen-Orient* (Paris, 1963); Abu Iyad with Eric Rouleau, *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle* (New York, 1981); and works by Mohamed H. Heikal, notably *Cutting The Lion's Tail: Suez through Egyptian Eyes* (New York, 1987), a translation of *Milaffat al-Suways: harb al-thalathin sana* (The Suez Files: The Thirty Years War) (Cairo, 1986), without the latter's valuable documentary appendices, which include primary materials which shed much light on Arab aspects of the crisis.
- 2 Alvin Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile* (Princeton, 1977), and George Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East* (Washington, DC, 1971)
- 3 That this impression was not totally incorrect can be seen from the accounts of two of those charged with the implementation of the policies of John Foster and Allen Dulles during this period: Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (New York, 1980), and Miles Gopeland, *The Game of Nations* (New York, 1970). That such an impression was strongly held by Egyptian leaders can be seen, *inter alia*, from documents in Heikal's *Milaffat*.
- 4 Notably in Heikal's *The Sphinx and the Commissar* (New York, 1978) and his *Milaffat*, and Amin Hewedy's *Hurub 'Abd al-Nasir* (Nasser's Wars) (Beirut, 1977). More detail can be found in the accounts by Egyptian policy-makers collected in Muhammad 'Awda *et al.* (eds.), *Qissat al-Sawfiyat wa Misr* (The Story of the Soviets and Egypt) (Beirut, 1975).
- 5 See, e.g. the work of the Arab nationalist historian Amin Sa'id, *al-'Udwan, 29 October 1956–1 November 1958* (The Aggression) (Cairo, 1959), which strongly argues this view.
- 6 Heikal, *Cutting the Lion's Tail*, pp. 47–9. The former involved a plot by Israeli agents to plant explosives in American and British targets in Cairo, discovered by Egyptian security forces, while the latter concerned an attempt to send the Israeli ship *Bat-Galim* through the Suez Canal.
- 7 The Syrian *coup* episode is chronicled by Patrick Seale in *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (London, 1965), pp. 262–82, and in Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, pp. 180–230. See also documents in Heikal, *Milaffat*.
- 8 *Op. cit.* in n. 7.
- 9 The almost farcical outcome is best described in the works cited in n. 7, especially that of Eveland, who was instrumental in the plot according to his own account.
- 10 Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, p. 282. Heikal, *Milaffat*, includes a number of fascinating documents on this subject.
- 11 This was again Eveland, who tells this story on pp. 248–53 of his book.
- 12 For some of these sectarian factors, see Eveland. On Iraq see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Serial Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, 1978); on Syria, Seale and Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Religion and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1980* (2nd ed., London, 1981); and on Lebanon, Michael Hudson, *The Precarious Republic* (New York, 1968).
- 13 On the considerable impact of Egypt and Nasserism on the Arabian Peninsula, see Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans* (London, 1974).
- 14 This is well brought out in Laurie Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for a State* (New York, 1988).
- 15 Abu Iyad, *My Home, My Land*, p. 20.
- 16 This has been a favourite slogan of the Fatah leadership for several decades. As a rule, it comes into prominence in moments of tension with a major Arab regime, e.g. during the clashes with Syria in 1976 and again in 1983–7. See the resolutions of the 17th and 18th sessions of the Palestine National Council, in 1984 and 1987, for the prominent use of this term: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 14: 2 (winter, 1985) 257, and 16: 4 (summer, 1987), 196. In the latter the wording is: 'Adhering to the PLO's independence and rejecting ... interference in its internal affairs.'
- 17 Avi Shlaim, 'Conflicting Approaches to Israel's Relations with the Arabs: Ben-Gurion and Sharett, 1953–1956', *The Middle East Journal*, 37: 2 (spring, 1983), 180–201. Some of these issues are dealt with in S. Shamir's and M. Bar-On's chapters in this volume, as well as in works by Egyptian and Israeli authors cited by Shamir.
- 18 This argument, influential in the Arab world over more than a decade and seen in the writings of Naji 'Alloush, Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, and others, is set forth in Ibrahim Barhoum, 'The Arab States' Acceptance of Israel, 1949–1979', MA thesis (Political Studies and Public Administration Department, American University of Beirut, 1981).
- 19 This is the thesis, e.g., of Uri Ra'an, who goes to great lengths in *The USSR Arms the Third World* (Cambridge, Mass.,

- 1969), to show the Egyptian-Soviet arms deal to have been negotiated before Israel's attack on Gaza in February 1955, thus signifying Egypt's prior aggressive intentions.
- 20 Sharett's diaries, published in Hebrew in Tel Aviv in 8 volumes from 1978 until 1980 under the title *Toman Ishi* (Personal Diary), have proven a fertile source for researchers, and include much material at odds with the received version of Israel's early years. Livia Rokach's study entitled *Israel's Sacred Terrorism* (Belmont, Mass., 1980) includes translations from the diaries bearing on Suez, the Lavon affair, and other related matters.
- 21 Shlaim, 'Conflicting Approaches', p. 201. Shlaim's equally radical revisionist conclusions regarding other aspects of the conflict can be found in *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (New York, 1988).
- 22 See Shlaim, 'Conflicting Approaches', p. 188, also Abu Iyad, *My Home, My Land*, p. 22, and Alan Hart, *Arafat: Terrorist or Peacemaker?* (London, 1984), which is based on interviews with Khalil al-Wazir and Arafat, pp. 98–110. Both books, and all other Palestinian accounts of the period, confirm Shlaim and Ya'ari's assessments.
- 23 Abu Iyad, *My Home, My Land*, p. 24. The same events are described in Hart, *Arafat*, pp. 100–103.
- 24 See the works cited in the preceding note for the testimony of all three.