

The Suez Crisis

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When invited to attend the Conference of non-aligned African and Asian countries held in Bandung in 1955, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser was seeking to unify the Arab world around Egypt, of which he became President in June 1956. In order to stimulate the economic and agricultural transformation of the country, he planned the construction of a huge dam at Aswan, but the United States, which otherwise saw Nasser as a preferable alternative to Communism, refused to contribute to the enormous building costs. Accordingly, on 26 July 1956, Nasser announced his intention to nationalise the Suez Canal Company. The majority of shareholders in this internationally vital waterway were French and British, and their concession was not due to expire until 1968. For Nasser, the revenue from operating the Canal would quite simply allow Egypt to finance the building of the Aswan Dam.

France, angered by the aid given by Egypt to the Algerian rebels, and Britain, which wanted to maintain its control over the strategically important Suez passage, decided to launch a joint military attack with a view to regaining control over the administration of the Canal. To achieve this, they had the military support of Israel at their disposal — a State that since its creation in 1948 had felt directly threatened by any prospect of Arab expansionism or reinforcement. Moreover, Nasser had never stopped proclaiming his desire to destroy Israel. On 29 October 1956, Israeli forces took the Sinai Peninsula, a vital area for the protection of the Jewish State. One week later, Anglo-French troops disembarked in Port Said. The operation was entirely successful — the Egyptian army was defeated in a few days, even though Nasser had ordered the sinking of some forty ships in order to block the Suez Canal completely.

However, the world powers did not appreciate France and Britain's actions in the slightest. The Soviet Union, in the process of forcibly putting down the insurrection in Hungary, threatened Paris and London with nuclear reprisals. For their part, the United States, despite being the traditional allies of the European powers, complained that they had not been consulted beforehand. They did not appreciate this kind of neo-colonial gunboat diplomacy at all, and exercised enormous financial pressure on the United Kingdom through the United Nations — so much so that the Anglo-French force had to withdraw despite its military success. Israel also evacuated Sinai. The UN took on the task of repairing the Suez Canal, which was reopened to shipping in April 1957. In the meantime, because Nasser had ordered the destruction of several oil pipelines, Western European countries faced their first cuts in fuel supplies.

The upshot of all this was that Nasser, boosted by his political and diplomatic victory, enjoyed immense prestige in the Arab world. He exploited to the full his image as the victim of an imperialist plot. The European powers were forced to recognise once and for all that they were not world powers and that their role on the international stage could not be more than that of supporting the United States. Indeed, it became difficult for them to pursue an independent policy on the world stage. Their influence in the Middle East became almost non-existent. That is why France, keen to maintain at least the appearance of being a superpower, decided to acquire a nuclear strike force.