

'The challenge' from Le Monde (28 July 1956)


Caption: On 28 July 1956, the French daily newspaper Le Monde examines the reaction of the great Western powers to the show of strength by the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. BEUVE-MÉRY, Hubert. 28.07.1956, n° 3 581; 13e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Le défi", p. 1.

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The challenge

From triumphs to temptations, the Egyptian Head of Government today faces the ultimate test. There can be only two possible explanations for the challenge that he has thrown down to the West. Either (and most observers would subscribe to Mr Pineau's view) it is the act of a desperate man with his back to the wall, or else the Egyptian dictator thinks that he can count on the inertia of the Western powers or, failing that, on solid support from other quarters.

The Cairo bombshell stunned Western Governments. However, for several years they had had an inkling of what Egyptian control over the Suez Canal would mean, because, in spite of the Constantinople Agreement and successive votes in the Security Council, the Egyptians had banned all Israeli vessels. No practical measure had ever been taken to punish them for that move.

The major powers will probably now have to react forcefully. Having the Suez Canal subject to the whims of Cairo means not just permanent uncertainty hanging over this vital sea route. It also means that oil supplies are subject to the vagaries of Egyptian politics.

In throwing down this challenge, the Egyptian Government is testing the cohesion of the West's diplomatic and military machinery. Everything will now depend upon the speed and determination with which the Western nations are able to take retaliatory measures. One measure that is already being considered would involve the oil companies boycotting the Suez Canal. It would mean that oil from the Middle East would have to come around the Cape of Good Hope. The increased transport costs would still be lower than the planned increase in tolls imposed by Cairo. Can the West really hope freely to exploit their oil rights in other Arab countries while this Egyptian crisis continues?

Economic sanctions, including the freezing of Egypt's sterling assets or an end to cotton purchases, would certainly make things difficult for Cairo, but they would also risk raising the temperature not just in Egypt but throughout the entire Middle East.

As an alternative, and probably in an attempt to secure an international mandate for intervention, the British are considering an appeal to the Security Council. This raises the problem of a possible Soviet veto. The major unknown factor in the situation caused by Egypt's impulsive move is what will be the Soviet Union's reaction?

In 1951, it was careful not to get involved in the Mossadeq affair. This time, it is involved. In a surprising speech yesterday, the Egyptian Head of State revealed what everyone had suspected: the arms contracts signed last year were concluded not with Prague but with Moscow. Soviet diplomacy is openly playing the Arab nationalism card and is giving theoretical support to Middle East independence against imperialism.

But to give credence to, or to support, the idea that has just been put forward by Colonel Nasser would mean open confrontation with the interests and positions of all Western countries and, as a result, would put an end to the international experiment in détente. It should also be borne in mind that, as a signatory to the Constantinople Agreement, it could be in Russia's interest also to defend free passage in the Suez Canal which is now under threat.

In order to finish what they have started, Nasser, like Mossadeq, had to be genuinely in a position to choose between the East and the West. The Persian preacher was not. Is Nasser in a better position? The answer to that question extends beyond Egypt's borders and could spell war or peace for the whole world.