

'Converging offensives' from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (2 November 1956)

Caption: On 2 November 1956, the Italian daily newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera gives an initial analysis of the military intervention by France, the United Kingdom and Israel in Egypt.

Source: Il nuovo Corriere della Sera. 02.11.1956, n° 259; anno 81. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Offensive convergenti", p. 1.

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Converging offensives

Rome, 1 November, night.

Strange as it may seem, one cannot yet speak of war operations because war has not been declared between France and England on the one side and Egypt on the other. There are, however, military operations that in other, more conventional, circumstances would have been called 'major policing' operations. In fact, the Allies' officially declared aim is to restore, if by somewhat drastic measures, the conditions for security in the Canal Zone which, it is claimed, Nasser arbitrarily altered.

Similarly, Israeli forces have invaded the Sinai Peninsula without declaring war, claiming that this was a purely precautionary and preventive move following repeated threats from Egypt and continued attacks by guerrillas from Egyptian 'commando' units.

It is possible that the legal aspects of the conflict will not affect the military operations in any way but it is equally possible that they will, by limiting to some extent the freedom of action that military leaders generally regard as an important factor in forming and executing strategic plans. Future events alone will show whether this is the case.

As far as we can tell from the news bulletins, the Israelis have mounted two separate but converging offensives on Egyptian territory. Israeli forces, predominantly land forces with some air support, have entered the Sinai Peninsula and are moving west towards the Canal.

First reports of the invasion spoke of rapid successes but a distinction must be made between operations in the central sector, round the Kuntilla-Suez line, and in the northern coastal sector, which is far more important because it is easier to assemble large troop concentrations and deploy armoured divisions there. It appears that the advance on that front has not yet gone much beyond the boundary zone, that is to say the area between Gaza (in Israeli territory) and El Arish (in Egyptian territory). On the other hand, the strike across the Peninsula, largely a diversionary tactic, seems to have made better progress. It is clear, however, that nothing decisive will happen until the main bodies of the two armies meet.

However, a new factor has now come into play, greatly to Egypt's disadvantage. In order to drive back the invading Israeli forces, Egyptian troops must be deployed on the eastern side of the Canal and have open communication lines across the Canal with the delta and Cairo. They must also be able to use their own airports to launch counter-attacks against the Israeli air force, which is not very large but is daring and well directed. But it is clear that the British and the French, with their threats to land paratroops at key points in the Canal Zone and their raids on the principal Egyptian airports, are inflicting serious and possibly irreparable damage on the entire defensive organisation of Nasser's forces and may prevent them from mounting any effective resistance.

It almost looks as though, even without any major commitment, the Allied attacks on Egyptian supply lines, communications and air bases may be crucial to the Israeli advance, if only through the psychological effect a dual threat may have on enemy morale.

In this situation, which has so far been marked by the confusion that normally accompanies the initial phases of any conflict, the occasional aerial and naval engagements, especially naval engagements, are of minor importance and are certainly not decisive. The sinking of a small Egyptian frigate by the British and the easy capture of a gunboat off the coast of Palestine certainly do not bolster the bulletins which have so far been desperately short of real news. As to the battle in the air, the discrepancies between the figures released on either side are such that it is impossible to determine what is happening or to predict the outcome.

At present, it can be said that the salient feature of the operations is the destruction wrought by the Allied air attacks on Egyptian targets, exclusively military targets it is to be hoped, because indiscriminate bombing of towns and villages would not be justified on strategic grounds or help to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion.

According to the ultimatum, the Allies' objective is to 'separate' the two combatants, and the best way to do that is to confine the neutralisation operations exclusively to the Canal Zone. It is clear that the Israelis too have no wish to provoke reprisals because Tel Aviv is no less vulnerable than Cairo, even though the Egyptian air force is substantially weaker since the Allied attacks.

All in all, the operations so far have not taken definite shape but appear to be confined to preliminary manoeuvres. Clearly, the Allied ground attack on Egypt will have to be launched simultaneously from Suez and Port Said, that is to say from the south and the north, while the Israelis continue to press forward crosswise, from east to west. It is difficult to predict how much resistance Egypt can mount; Egyptians are not naturally belligerent but they are being bombarded by Nasser's inflammatory nationalist, anti-Jewish, propaganda. If the Egyptians do not get any real help from the other Arab States, the military conflict at least may end sooner than might have been expected.