The Suez Crisis

Background

Crisis / Events

Aftermath / Consequences
Key words / terms / figures

- Nationalisation
- Pan-Arab nationalism
- Suez Canal
- Cold War
- Anthony Eden
- Colonel Nasser
- Dwight Eisenhower
- ...

Gamal Abdul Nasser
British PM – Anthony Eden
Israeli PM – David Ben-Gurion
American President – Dwight Eisenhower
Director-General of Israel's Ministry of Defence – Shimon Peres
Chief of Staff of Israeli Defence Forces — Moshe Dayan
The Suez Canal
Background – 1948-49 to 1956

• Concl. of armistice agreements intro’d era of no war & no peace
• Israel still not officially recognised by Arab states or much of int. community.
• Armistice lines / Israeli’s borders encouraged border clashes & incidents
  • Palestinian Arab infiltration & Israeli retaliation
  • Israel hoped policy of reprisal attacks would force Arab govt’s to prevent Palestinian raids in order protect own citizens.
• Major questions:
  • Palestinian refugees – ‘right of return’ – in limbo
  • Water resources?
  • Control of Jerusalem?
• Arab states shocked by defeat in 1948-49
  • Weak & divided
  • Bitterly anti-western
• Israel’s feeling of encirclement
  • Israel’s leaders believed Arab states committed to destruction of Israel
  • Compounded by Egypt’s refusal re: Suez Canal
• Arab govt.’s still not completely independent
  • Western troops & advisers
Background - 1948-49 to 1956

- Egypt refused to allow Israeli ships through Suez Canal
  - 1951 – also blocked the Straits of Tiran

- 1952 – Group of young Egyptian army officers overthrew monarchy, took control of govt.
  - Leader = General Neguib
  - Real organizer = Colonel Nasser (became President 1954)
  - Aims (of Egypt & Nasser specifically):
    - Restore Egypt’s pride of place in Middle East
    - Get rid of British & achieve full independence
    - Est. himself as leader of Arab world against Western imperialism
      - Pan-Arab nationalism?
      - Inc. wanting to be seen as champion of Arab world against Israel
        - Encouraged Palestinian refugees in Gaza to attack Israeli civilians & destroy their property
        - Armed Palestinian guerilla fighters – fedayeen / self-sacrifices
          - 1950-1956 – killed >360 Israelis
          - Thousands of Palestinians died
Gamal Abdul Nasser
Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser & the lead-up...

- Became President of Egypt in 1954
- Persuaded British to withdraw troops from Suez Canal zone
  - Britain & US still wanted to be on good terms – Cold War
    - Wanted Arab support in the Middle East against USSR
    - Egypt = strongest, most developed Arab nation & Suez Canal passed through its territory
  - Nasser wanted Egypt to be neutral
    - Not willing to join an anti-Russian alliance
    - Needed arms to strengthen Egypt’s army though
      - More urgent Feb 1955 when Israeli govt. hit back at Egypt for encouraging Palestinian raids into Israel
- Sep 1955 – Nasser shocked West- agreed to buy Russian arms from Czechoslovakia
  - Britain & US still thought they could control Nasser because he needed money for the Aswan High Dam
  - July 1956 – Britain & US refused to lend Egypt any more money
    - Forcing him to cooperate?
    - Force the Egyptians to replace him?
Nationalisation of the Suez Canal

• ‘Our canal’
  • Nasser shocked West again
    • Wanted to prove Egypt independent & would not be pushed around
    • July 26, 1956 – announced Egypt would nationalize the Suez Canal & use profits to build Aswan Dam
      _We dug the Canal with our lives, our skulls, our bones, our blood..._
      Britain and France could _choke on their rage_
    • Thrilled Arabs in Egypt & elsewhere
  • Britain & France = furious
    • Anthony Eden (British PM) determined not to let Nasser ‘have his thumb on our windpipe’
    • Brit & Fren withdrew their pilots who guided ships through Canal
      • Egyptians kept running it, traffic increased
THE LAST STRAW...
British, French & Israelis meet

- 24 Oct 1956 – British & French Foreign Ministers met Israeli PM David Ben-Gurion secretly in France
  - Ben-Gurion wanted to teach the Egyptians a lesson.
    - Wanted to...
      - End border raids from Gaza
      - Force Egypt to recognize the state of Israel
      - Break Egyptian blockade of the Tiran Straits
        - Inability to use Suez Canal + blockade of Tiran Straits = not good for Israeli econ.
      - Also worried about increasing strength of Egyptian military & fact that Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian militaries were under the same command
        - Felt war was inevitable
  - France also wanted to teach Egypt a lesson, esp. Nasser
    - Nasser had been sending aid to Algerians fighting against French rule
- Other high-level meetings
  - Joint campaign against Egypt being planned (denied at the time)
Events of the Suez War

• 29 Oct 1956 – Israeli forces invaded Egypt
  • Advanced across Sinai towards Suez Canal

• 30 Oct 1956 – Govt.’s of France & Britain order Egypt & Israel to cease fighting & withdraw ten miles from Canal
  • Israelis still long way from Canal but agreed
  • Egyptians refused to withdraw from Canal as it is Egyptian territory

• 31 Oct 1956 – British & French planes bombed Egyptian airfields & destroyed most of their air force. Also bombed Port Said

• 5 Nov 1956 – British & French troops landed at Port Said & advanced along Canal
The United Nations step in

• At UN, Arab states condemned Anglo-French action
  • Arab states halted oil supplies to the West
  • United States condemned the action too.
    • US govt. furious Brit & Fra had used force
    • US govt. wanted Arab support in region – keen to make friends
    • Threatened to cut off financial aid to Brit – would ruin the econ.
  • Russians threatened to use military force

• 6 Nov 1956 – UN declared a ceasefire & sent emergency force to the Canal
  • British & French forced to withdraw
Nasser — leader of the Arab world

• Nasser became hero of Arab world
  • Had stood up to Brit & Fra & gained complete control of Suez Canal
  • Lost territory when Israel captured Sinai
    • Israel persuaded by Americans to withdraw in 1957
  • Could claim Egyptian army only defeated because Israelis had British & French support

• One of main effects of crisis = many Arab states became more anti-Western & more willing to accept Russian aid
  • USSR began to supply most of Egypt’s weapons & pay for Aswan Dam and other projects
  • Nasser did not want to be tied to Russia & was not a communist though, wanted Egypt & other Arab states to be neutral

• 1964 – Nasser invited Arab leaders to conference in Cairo
  • Mistrusted each other but united by opposition to Israel & support for Palestinians
Israeli gains

• Made gains
  • When they withdrew from Sinai, UN moved in to guard border bet. Israel & Egypt
    • UN forces sent particularly to Gaza to prevent raids on Israel & Sharm el-Sheikh to guard Israeli shipping through Straits of Tiran
The Suez Crisis (1956)  Map and chronologic overview

1. Oct. 29  Israeli paratroops dropped east of town of Suez
2. Oct. 30  More paratroops dropped east of Mitla Pass, troops begin crossing the border at Qussaima
3. Oct. 31  British bombs dropped on Cairo and Cairo International Airport
4. Nov. 2  Israeli paratroops land near Al-Tor, in the south-west Sinai
5. Nov. 5  British paratroops land west of Port Said
           French paratroops land south of Port Said
           Israelis capture Sharm al-Shaikh to lift blockade of Gulf of Aqaba
6. Nov. 6  Anglo-French invasion force bombardment and landings
7. Nov. 7  Anglo-French occupy most of Suez Canal zone as far as Ismailia, when UN orders a halt
8. Nov. 21  First UN troops land at Port Said
9. Nov. 23  British and French forces withdraw
10. Dec. 22  Withdrawal completed at midnight
11. March ’57  Israeli withdrawal completed in March
The Suez Crisis
Main Events

• What was the Suez Crisis?
• A small war fought by Britain, France and Israel against Egypt first week November 1956.
• Cause?
• Structural causes and immediate ones.
  • Rise of Arab nationalism in the M.E. endangered British client regimes and the French presence in Algeria. Presence of Israel since 1948 gave a focus to Arab resentment. Gamel Abdel Nasser emerges after April 1954 as a charismatic leader.
  • M.E. source of Europe's oil & in 1950s oil overtakes coal as main source of energy.
  • Intellectual structures: Egyptian leader Nasser portrayed as a new Mussolini by British and French leaders; lessons of appeasement.
  • Imperial Humiliations: GB had had to leave India and Palestine with her “tail between her legs.” France had been humiliated in Vietnam in May 1954 with the military defeat at Dien Bien Phu.
Origins of the Crisis

• After Nasser takes power in 1954, he successfully moves to close British bases in the canal zone (October 1954). He refuses the British offer to join the Baghdad Pact. In 1955, he begins to make overtures to the Soviet bloc. September 1955 signs arms deal with USSR.

• At the same time, he asks the US and GB to finance the Aswan dam project. Playing off two superpowers against each other. The trigger for the crisis comes on 20 July 1956 when the Americans, tired of Nasser’s double game, pull the plug on the Aswan project.

• In retaliation Nasser nationalizes the Suez canal. The canal would have become Egyptian anyway in 1968. But the rest of the world feared that Egypt would not abide by the 1888 Constantinople convention, which specified that the Canal should remain open, even in times of war, to ships of all nationalities.

• Also: Nasser had his hands on the West’s windpipe. Could cut off oil shipments.
So, what should you know???

- Reasons for the conflict / Causes
- Course of conflict / Events
- Resolution
- Effects/Significance on the region
- Evidence – Stats, quotes, etc....
- Role of key individuals
- Role of the superpowers in the conflict
- Competing narratives - contestability