

The Suez

A Crisis of Regional Power

Background

The Suez Canal, controlled two-thirds of the oil used by Europe.

In July 1956, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the canal.

The Israelis were joined by French and British forces, which damaged their relationships with the United States and nearly brought the Soviet Union into the conflict.

In the end, Egypt emerged victorious, and the British, French and Israeli governments withdrew their troops in late 1956 and early 1957.

The event was a pivotal event among Cold War superpowers.

Background cont.

At 120 miles long, the Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean by way of the Red Sea, allowing goods to be shipped between Europe and Asia more directly.

Its value to international trade made it a source of conflict among Egypt's neighbors—and Cold War superpowers vying for dominance.

Supported by Soviet arms and money, and angry with the United States for reneging on a promise to provide funds for construction of the Aswan Dam on the Nile River, Nasser ordered the Suez Canal seized and nationalized, arguing tolls from the ships passing through the canal would pay for the Aswan Dam.

Egyptian troops had been sporadically fighting Israeli troops on border.

Decision

The Israelis struck first on October 29, 1956. Two days later, British and French military forces joined them.

US president Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles issued warnings to the French, British and Israelis to give up their campaign and withdraw from Egyptian soil. Eisenhower was upset with the British in particular for not keeping the United States informed about their intentions.

The United States threatened all three nations with economic sanctions if they persisted in their attack. The threats did their work: British and French forces withdrew by December, and Israel finally bowed to U.S. pressure, relinquishing control over the canal to Egypt, which reopened the Canal in March 1957. The Suez Crisis marked the first use of a UN peacekeeping force. The (UNEF) was an armed group dispatched to the area to supervise the end of hostilities and the withdrawal of the three occupying forces.

Impact

As Eisenhower had feared, the Suez Crisis also increased Soviet influence over Egypt.

Khrushchev's intervention on the side of Egypt placed the Soviet Union as the natural friend of Arab nations.

It emboldened Arab nationalists and spurred the Egyptian President Nasser to aid rebel groups seeking independence in British territories across the Middle East.

Crisis

In the early 1950s, Egypt violated the terms of the Egyptian-Israeli armistice agreement and blocked Israeli ships from passing through the Suez Canal, a major international waterway.

It also began to block traffic through the Straits of Tiran, a narrow passage of water linking the Israeli port of Eilat to the Red Sea.

This action effectively cut off the port of Eilat -- Israel's sole outlet to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Closure of the Suez Canal and the Tiran Straits damaged Israel's trade with Asia.

Palestinian Arab fedayeen launched cross-border infiltrations and attacks on Israeli civilian centers and military outposts from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Arab infiltration and Israeli retaliation became a regular pattern of Arab-Israeli relations.

Crisis

The U.S. pressured Israel to withdraw from Egyptian territory. United Nations forces were stationed along the Egyptian-Israeli border to prevent an Egyptian blockade and deter cross-border infiltrations. I

srael declared that if Egyptian forces would again blockade the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, it would consider this a casus belli

Crisis

The situation in the Middle East was particularly precarious.

Between protection of Israel and an interest in good relations with the Arabs, President Eisenhower had to maintain a careful balancing act. Israel represented America's most definite ally in the Middle East.

The Arab countries were appealing because of the vast source of potential energy under their territory. The problem was the mutual hostility between Israel and the Arabs. Eisenhower tried to walk a fine line and remain friendly with both areas.

Crisis

President Eisenhower's efforts to please all the people all the time, some were always disappointed.

To the Arabs, Israel was an abhorred neighbor that was unquestionably allied to the United States. No doubt Arab resentment and distrust of the US formed around this point.

By spouting standard anti-American propaganda, the Soviet Union appeared to sympathize with the Arabs and thus gained a foothold in the Middle East.

Action

Israel was not concerned with the canal per se, but rather with gaining unhindered passage to Port Elat - through the Straights of Tiran -and ending the terrorist attacks in Israel. Peres noted that both of these goals were achieved.

Israel's impressive advances across the Sinai provided Prime Minister Ben-Gurion with a bargaining chip when the cease-fire was enacted.

This enabled him to obtain Nasser's guarantee that the Straights would remain open and the Fidaiyyun attacks would end, in exchange for returning the Sinai.

Conclusion

The fear of Soviet influence in Egypt in the United States was real.

The USSR was always the primary concern. From America's perspective the Soviet Union was the Cold War - remove it and the problems ended, subdue Communist influence and the free world was safe.

One can be positive then that the Cold War, in some way, influenced Eisenhower in his reaction to the Suez Canal Crisis.

The United States was against the Anglo-French military initiative and harshly criticized the actions of France, England, and Israel.

Crisis questions

1. Was Israeli actions necessary or could they have avoided the military action?
2. Was there a benefit for the Americans?
3. Does Rational Choice theory help explain the Anglo-French-Israeli actions?