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Nicholas Brock

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Down But Not Out: The Resilience of Imperial Britain in the Wake of the 1956 Suez  
Crisis

By

Nicholas Christian Brock

Dr. Fraser J. Harbutt

Adviser

Department of History

Dr. Fraser J. Harbutt

Adviser

Dr. David Leinweber

Committee Member

Dr. Amin Erfani

Committee Member

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Nicholas Christian Brock

Dr. Fraser J. Harbutt

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## Abstract

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By Nicholas Christian Brock

The 1956 Suez Crisis is traditionally interpreted as the moment when the United States assumed Western leadership in its entirety, as the United Kingdom, badly beaten over its joint intervention in Egypt with France and Israel, retreated from any imperial pretensions and the thought of playing a global role. However, this paper argues that such a view indicates an unconsidered assessment of the crisis and is wholly unsupported by the diplomatic and historical record. Rather, the Suez Crisis was but a single episode in the complex and developing post-war Anglo-American alliance: any ill will was quickly swept under the rug as both the United States and the United Kingdom realized that through cooperation instead of opposition they could each better achieve their interests throughout the Middle East, namely continued access to the region's petroleum and "containment" of the spread of international Communism. These were the two chief prizes for British and American statesmen, and both oil and the Soviet threat played a key role in Anglo-American diplomacy before, during, and after the Suez episode. Entrenched grudges and American economic pressure transformed the Suez Crisis from an unpleasant geopolitical conflict into one that was intensely personal. However, the United States and the United Kingdom were wiser than to allow bruised egos to prevent a continuation of their war-time partnership in this most vital of theaters, the Middle East, and each, therefore, strove to further his individual and shared interests in the region through cooperation and consultation with the other.

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To My Parents, Steven Brock and Susanne Bowen, for Everything

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## Introduction

It was the decision taken by the Egyptian President, Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser, to nationalize the Suez Canal that set off the Suez Crisis on 26 July 1956. During a speech in Alexandria, Nasser threw down the gauntlet to the two European powers who were the largest shareholders in the canal, the United Kingdom and France. As Nasser spoke the name of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the man behind the canal's construction eighty-seven years before, Egyptian troops seized control of the theretofore international waterway. Thus began a crisis that would resurrect the gunboat diplomacy of the nineteenth-century, as Britain and France attempted to undo Nasser's action militarily, and ultimately cost the British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, his position as Head of Her Majesty's Government.

The traditional historiographical interpretation of the 1956 Suez Crisis is that of a watershed in the global balance of power. This is seen to be the moment when the proverbial torch of Middle Eastern leadership was passed from the United Kingdom to the United States. Thereafter, so the argument goes, the United States took over from Great Britain as the preeminent Western voice in the region's affairs. Too frequently this argument is accepted *prima facie* as true. It ought not to be. This thesis will explore the evolving nature of the Anglo-American alliance or "special relationship" and examine how it was affected by the Suez Crisis.

The primary focus of this enquiry will be the official historical record of the United States State Department, the *Foreign Relations of the United States*. The sundry memoranda and correspondence the series contains offers an unvarnished view of the



American diplomacy vis-à-vis the United Kingdom and the Middle East. Additionally, it contains various assessments designated strictly for internal use, which provide an insight into the thinking of the leaders who crafted the United States diplomatic positions.

These are supplemented with the memoirs of the statesmen involved with the crisis. A close and comparative reading of their writings adds to the picture that the official United States diplomatic record presents. They are instructive on how each statesman viewed the crisis and its aftermath and a comparative study helps to eliminate any one individual's personal biases that have infiltrated his narrative.

What these sources reveal is that the Suez Crisis in its entirety is considerably more complex than the simplistic notion of a comprehensive power transfer in the Middle East from the United Kingdom to the United States. They document the breakdown of the Anglo-American alliance, forged during the Second World War, as Anthony Eden felt he could no longer depend on the United States to pursue a course of action consistent with what he deemed to be Britain's national interest. They recount how Eisenhower took a great deal of personal offence to Eden's independent action, quite likely compounded by his memory of their historic, wartime closeness, and how this personal umbrage towards Eden had an influence on the ferocity of the American response.

The evidence also highlights the importance of the sterling area, a British-backed currency bloc, to Great Britain's sense of great power importance during this era of decolonization and how this belief spurred Eden to action in 1956 but also created glaring vulnerabilities that Eisenhower could capitalize on to ensure his fiat was obeyed. However, these sources also present an image of an Anglo-American relationship that differs tremendously from that of the United States browbeating Britain into compliance,

as happened at Suez. In fact, it was the United States that initiated the reconciliation post-Suez with the United Kingdom, as it realized that the alliance was too important to be wrecked by this single incident. Overwhelmingly, the idea that repeats itself throughout the post-Suez diplomatic record is of recognition of the value of Anglo-American alliance to the United States. So valued, the United Kingdom was able to continue to exercise considerable influence in the affairs of the Middle East post-Suez as an integral partner of the United States in the region.

### **I. Deciding to Fight**

On 26 July 1956 Gamal Abdul Nasser, without any prior warning, nationalized the *Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez*. This Egyptian-registered but primarily British and French-owned corporation controlled one of the world's most important transit points, the Suez Canal. Nasser's nationalization was his defiant response to the United States withdrawal of funding for the construction of his pet project, the Aswan High Dam. With this, Nasser intended to make good on the promise of economic reform and political liberation that he had made when he and the Free Officers overthrew King Farouk on 23 July 1952. The Free Officers' success owed much to the previous régime's failure to enact meaningful domestic reforms aimed at lifting the country out of poverty and to the perception that it consistently failed to defend Egyptian interests against foreign, imperialist interference, namely that of Britain.

Thus, in nationalizing the Suez Canal Nasser made clear that he was not King Farouk and that he was prepared to make the bold decisions necessary to preserve Egypt's political independence and to deliver on his promises of economic reform.

However, his choice was not without consequences. Nasser's nationalization greatly upset both Britain and France and set their countries on a collision course.

Tension between Nasser and the West was nothing new. There existed longstanding animosity between the vehemently anti-British Nasser and the United Kingdom, primarily as a result of Britain's historic control over the country. France believed Nasser to be at the root of their current difficulties in Algeria and accused Nasser of aiding the FLN rebels they were currently fighting. Egypt's falling out with the United States, however, was relatively recent, and quickly followed the Egyptian government's recognition of People's Republic of China and the country's purchase of Soviet arms through Czechoslovakia.

Nasser's overtures toward the Soviet Union used up what goodwill he could have hoped to call on from the United States for the Aswan Dam project. To Eisenhower Nasser "gave the impression of a man who was convinced that he could play off East against West by blackmailing both."<sup>1</sup> Still Eisenhower felt duty bound to provide Nasser an offer, given a meeting the two states had had in December 1955, but after Nasser countered with demands that "would be totally unacceptable to all three of the financing authorities [the United States, Britain and the World Bank]," Eisenhower thought it prudent to end America's involvement with the Aswan project.<sup>2</sup>

Britain was "informed but not consulted" on the American withdrawal of the Aswan proposal.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it was Britain who bore the brunt of Nasser's retaliation for the cancellation of the offer to finance the dam's construction when he nationalized

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden: Full Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 470.

the Canal. To Britain, Egyptian control of the Canal seemed to present a very direct threat to its security, as “more than half of Britain’s annual imports of oil came through the canal.”<sup>4</sup> If Nasser decided to close it, which given the nature of his past antagonisms did not seem unlikely, British oil reserves would last a mere six weeks—to say nothing of the “comparatively smaller stocks” of other Western European nations.<sup>5</sup>

According to Anthony Nutting, who served as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs under Eden, Britain’s policy towards Egypt throughout the crisis owed much to Eden’s longstanding personal grudge against Nasser. “The drama that was to become the Suez disaster,” Nutting writes, “actually began on March 1, 1956,” as this was the day when King Hussein of Jordan dismissed General Glubb from his position as Commander of the Arab Legion.<sup>6</sup> The Arab Legion was the name given to Jordan’s army and had been created in 1920 when Transjordan—as it was then known—existed only as a British League of Nations Mandate. Even after its independence, Jordan preserved the tradition of having a Briton command the Legion.

According to King Hussein, the dismissal of General Glubb was a response to discontent among his native, Jordanian officer corps as well as Egyptian propaganda attacking Glubb and the British influence in Jordan he represented.<sup>7</sup> Eden, instead, contends how “[he] thought at the time, and [he] [is] convinced now [in 1959], that part of the King’s sentiment towards Glubb was based on jealousy of a younger man for an older one long established in a position of authority in the country.”<sup>8</sup> Eden, therefore, places much more weight on “a personal dislike” between the King and Glubb, which he

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<sup>4</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 478.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 388.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

says “had grown to something of a phobia” by the time of Glubb’s dismissal, than King Hussein’s explanation that he had done “what he considered essential for the preservation and honor of the kingdom,” faced as he was with very persuasive, anti-Western propaganda.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Nutting claims this is a retelling very much at odds with what transpired between him and Eden the day of Glubb’s dismissal, when he argued at length with Eden about the subject. As Nutting tells it:

I can testify that, at the time, he put all the blame on Nasser and brushed aside every argument that more personal considerations had in fact influenced Hussein’s arbitrary decision. And on that fatal day he decided that the world was not big enough to hold both him and Nasser. The ‘Egyptian dictator’ had to be eliminated somehow or other, else he would destroy Britain’s position in the Middle East and Eden’s position as Prime Minister of Britain.<sup>10</sup>

Such a Manichean view as Nutting suspects helps to explain Eden’s quick recourse to force to resolve the crisis. The morning after Nasser’s announcement, Eisenhower relates how Eden cabled him urging that Britain and the United States “could not afford to allow Nasser to seize control of the Canal” and must take a stand against him.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, if Britain and the United States “did not do so at once...the influence of Britain and the United States throughout the Middle East would be ‘irretrievably undermined.’”<sup>12</sup> Ominously, Eden added that they both “must be ready, as a last resort, to ‘bring Nasser to his senses’ by force. The British, he said, were prepared to do so.”<sup>13</sup>

To Eden, Nasser was no ordinary villain. Eden considered Nasser’s to be of the most dangerous sort, to wit one where “the dictator...has a streak of paranoia...[and] sees

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<sup>9</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 389.

<sup>10</sup> Nutting, *No End of a Lesson*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

himself as a conqueror on behalf of his people, dominating a large part of the world.”<sup>14</sup> When faced with such a “megalomaniacal dictator,” Eden felt “it [was] important to reduce [his] stature...at an early stage.” Analogizing Suez 1956 to his personal experience with Chamberlain’s appeasement policy prior to the Second World War, which prompted his resignation as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Eden writes in his memoirs how

[a] check to Hitler when he moved to reoccupy the Rhineland would not have destroyed him, but it would have made him pause. The world would then have had time to assess the truth, and the Germans occasion to question themselves. The process would have been altogether salutary....Nowadays it is considered immoral to recognize an enemy. Some say that Nasser is no Hitler or Mussolini. Allowing for a difference in scale, I am not so sure. He has followed Hitler’s pattern, even to concentration camps and the propagation of *Mein Kampf* among his officers. He has understood and used the Goebbels pattern of propaganda in all its lying ruthlessness. Egypt’s strategic position increases the threat to others from any aggressive militant dictatorship there.<sup>15</sup>

Thus to Eden Nasser was quite the special case. With respect to the Suez Crisis, Eden believed himself to operate from the vantage of a man who had once before cried no, only to have his counsel rejected as Britain’s leadership instead opted for a policy that led only to disaster. With Suez Eden was not only determined to prevent Britain’s making this mistake a second time, he was in a position to ensure it.

R. A. Butler, a veteran senior Conservative in Eden’s Cabinet, describes how “[his] mood was one of deep misgiving and anxiety on hearing this analogy with fascism and this personalization of Nasser.”<sup>16</sup> To Butler, Eden had got it wrong, and “[it] was surely unwise to use in 1956 the language that ought to have been used in 1936.”<sup>17</sup> Now

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<sup>14</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 480.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

<sup>16</sup> R. A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible: The Memoirs of Lord Butler, K.G., C.H.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 188.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

“[the] circumstances had altered,” and “Egypt’s new revolutionary government was acting contrary to [Britain’s] interests, and probably to international law, but it represented a popular movement not an imposed tyranny.”<sup>18</sup>

However, Butler does offer an interesting codicil explaining why these Hitlerian analogies had such resonance. They were in fact quite prevalent, and Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Leader of the Opposition, likewise equated Nasser with Hitler. These comparisons, Butler argues, stemmed from “deep-seated emotions affecting liberal-minded people, but they coalesced only too easily with less generous sentiments: the residues of illiberal resentment at the loss of Empire...[and] the transfer of world leadership to the United States.”<sup>19</sup> “It was these sentiments,” Butler writes, “that made the Suez venture so popular, not least among the supporters of the embarrassed Labour party.”<sup>20</sup>

Butler’s explanation thus helps to square the vengeful Eden Nutting describes with the image of Eden as the prescient, experienced statesman that Eden himself presents. Quite likely Eden did believe, as Nutting contends, that Nasser presented an existential threat to Britain’s position in the Middle East. Perhaps Eden too earnestly did believe—he *does* say as much—that unchecked Nasser would stop at nothing to create his Arab empire, but that seems to give Nasser far too much credit. Far more likely is it that Eden’s conception of Nasser as the “megalomaniacal dictator” owed more to the resentment Butler describes at a Britain, victorious in the most trying test she had ever faced, emerged less independent and less able to make her presence felt internationally.

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, 188.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Such insecurities, Nutting maintains, prejudiced Eden's willingness to genuinely seek a negotiated, diplomatic resolution to the Canal issue.<sup>21</sup>

From the outset Eisenhower sought to "urge calm consideration of the [Suez] affair and to discourage impulsive armed action."<sup>22</sup> In a letter to Eden on 31 July, shortly after the canal's nationalization, Eisenhower expressed his belief that the only acceptable path forward was to hold a conference with the signatories of the Convention of 1888, which had thereto governed the Canal, as well as other maritime nations, so that "there would be brought about such pressures on the Egyptian government that the efficient operation of the Canal could be assured for the future."<sup>23</sup> "I cannot," he continues, "over-emphasize the strength of my conviction that some such method must be attempted before action such as you contemplate should be undertaken."<sup>24</sup> Thus Eisenhower's dismissal of force to retake the canal was not absolute; however, it explicitly qualified any potential support for armed action against Nasser as permissible only after all attempts to resolve the issue through diplomacy had failed.

As far as Eisenhower saw it, Egypt's nationalization of the Canal was entirely within its rights: "the waterway, although a property of the Canal Company, lay completely within Egyptian territory *and under Egyptian sovereignty*."<sup>25</sup> However, while he did not contest Egyptian ownership of the Canal *per se*, Eisenhower did consider "the Canal to be a utility essential to global welfare rather than a piece of property to be operated at the whim of a single government."<sup>26</sup> If Nasser were to restrict international

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<sup>21</sup> Nutting, *No End of a Lesson*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 664.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



access to the Canal, then that would truly be a cause for concern and perhaps merit military intervention.<sup>27</sup>

Negotiation, Eisenhower's preferred solution, proved difficult. A key problem was Egyptian obduracy toward a negotiated resolution: Egypt declined its invitation to the 16 August London Conference and rejected the plans this and later conferences produced. Any progress reached at the United Nations over principles governing the relationship between the canal users and Egypt foundered over the enforcement mechanism.<sup>28</sup> Lack of progress on the diplomatic front led Eden to increasingly seek to respond to Nasser with force. With this aim in mind, from the 22-24 October Britain met with France and Israel at Sevrès, France to formulate a combined plan to retake the Suez Canal Zone. It began with an Israeli attack into the Sinai, codenamed Operation Kadesh; thereafter, Britain and France would issue joint ultimatums to both Egypt and Israel demanding both sides cease all combat and withdraw their forces ten miles from the Canal.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Egypt was asked to "accept the temporary occupation of the Canal Zone by Anglo-French forces in order to insure the freedom of movement by ships of all nations until a definitive resolution."<sup>30</sup> The Israelis launched Operation Kadesh on 29 October 1956, and, finding their ultimatum unheeded, Britain and France initiated Operation Musketeer two days later to reoccupy the Canal Zone.

By late October Eden had come to believe that "it was idle to hope for effective action by the United States or the United Nations."<sup>31</sup> Instead he believed force to be the only recourse left to him. This, according to Eden's Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd,

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<sup>27</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Christian Pineau, *1956 Suez* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1976), 115

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 579.

was done with a sober understanding of what military action meant. “Those who contend that Suez was a watershed in our national history,” writes Lloyd, “often maintain that Eden’s Government still regarded Britain as capable of independent action on a global scale. It needed Suez, they say, to convince us that we were no longer a Great Power.”<sup>32</sup>

This Lloyd categorically rejects:

We knew the facts only too well. During our talks in Washington, Eden put in a paper on our economic situation. The Second World War had turned us from the world’s greatest creditor to the world’s greatest debtor. We could not undertake any more external commitments. Our gold and dollar reserves only covered three months’ imports. All this made the safeguarding of our supplies of oil from the Middle East the more important.<sup>33</sup>

Recognizing the importance of the Middle East’s petroleum to Britain and believing Nasser posed an unacceptable threat to this interest and therefore to Britain’s security, Eden decided to fight to take back the vital artery through which Britain’s steady stream of oil flowed.

## **II. A Risky Business: Britain’s Precarious Economic System and American Economic Diplomacy**

The nature of the United Kingdom’s post-Second World War imperial system, what John Darwin terms the “fourth British Empire,” owed much to its being born of “an economic and geopolitical crisis that was far more severe...than [after 1918].”<sup>34</sup> Whereas after the First World War Britain had been able to maintain and even expand its imperial commitments, financial realities, not to mention insurgent nationalism, complicated any

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<sup>32</sup> Selwyn Lloyd, *Suez 1956: A Personal Account* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 541.

attempt at a similar strategy this time. Post-1945 British leaders expected that Lend-Lease, the American subsidies and charity that had backstopped and bankrolled the British war effort, would be continued to aid in Britain's recovery. Thus when President Harry S. Truman withdrew Lend-Lease soon after the end of the war, the British leadership was understandably surprised. Without continued American economic support, the speed of Britain's economic recovery was hamstrung and its certainty more precarious.

The United States did eventually realize the seriousness of the stakes and the greater Cold War implications of a weakened Britain. The Marshall Plan in 1947 was an expression of this. The plan was representative of a "seismic shift in American policy," Darwin writes, one that demonstrated that "Britain's importance as an *imperial* ally had been [at last] grasped in Washington."<sup>35</sup> Relief brought with it the necessary financial latitude to continue an active Middle Eastern foreign policy that preserved Britain's traditional zones of influence.

There was of course an ulterior motive: the Middle East was a massive economic boon to the metropole. Middle Eastern commercial interests brought the British Treasury approximately £100 million per annum and, as then Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin observed in 1947, also had the potential to make a "great difference on [Britain's] future dollar earnings."<sup>36</sup> For Bevin and for his successors, these dollar earnings were key. In light of the post-war dollar shortage and the Bank of England's commitment to defending an obscenely overvalued pound, the pressure placed on Britain's balance of payments

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<sup>35</sup> Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 540.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 536.

was great. That the Middle East offered relief in this area was a major reason behind Britain's continued intense regional focus.

At the crux of the issue was oil. The reason why the region lessened Britain's balance of payments crisis was due to the way British petroleum interests had evolved in the region during the first half of the century. At first it was defense concerns that prompted the deepening of Britain's Middle Eastern involvement. In 1913, under the direction of then First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, the British government purchased a majority stake in the Anglo-Persian (later Anglo-Iranian) Oil Company. This initial action was spurred by the desire to safeguard a reliable source of oil for the Royal Navy, which was now necessary following its recent conversion from coal power.

However, it was not oil's military applications but rather its civilian ones that heralded the region's ascendancy in British foreign policy calculations. As British domestic demand for oil grew, the importance of Britain's petroleum infrastructure in the Persian Gulf did as well. Expenditures on oil were the single greatest drain on Britain's foreign exchange reserves and particularly on dollar outflows. The principal point at issue was the currency in which oil contracts were resolved: dollars or pounds.

Sterling oil was, consequently, highly prized, as it entailed no currency outflows from the sterling area, the currency bloc comprised of former British mandates, India, the white Dominions (minus Canada) and the dependent empire. The bloc's purpose was to pool the foreign exchange reserves—particularly dollars—so as to more effectively cope with the dearth of available dollars, to promote inter-bloc trade so as to mitigate the need to use dollars, and to delay the eventual repayment of the sterling area debts—the so-called sterling balances—that Britain had accumulated during the Second World War and

owed to other sterling area members. The sterling area was thus intricately linked with continuance of a strong pound—a policy then universally desired by the area’s debtor (the United Kingdom) and its creditors (everyone else) alike.

The damage caused by dollar oil was so severe because of the currency’s global scarcity. With much of its manufacturing base destroyed or damaged in the war, Western Europe turned to the Western hemisphere—and particularly to the United States—for its needed manufactures. The consequently huge demand—not merely from Britain but from all of non-Soviet Europe—for American wares resulted in a demand for dollars that was unsustainable and led to Western Europe’s running a large balance of payments deficit.

By the 1950s Great Britain’s Middle Eastern petroleum infrastructure began to show serious strains. While the loss of the Haifa refinery in 1948 and the \$50 million it had annually saved Britain’s balance of payments had hurt, it was nothing compared to what followed.<sup>37</sup> The 1951 nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), under the instigation of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, struck at the heart of Britain’s sterling oil system. Not only was the AIOC Britain’s single most valuable foreign asset, the oil refinery at Abadan was the world’s largest and crucial to the supply of refined petroleum products to Western Europe. While the curtailed flow of crude oil production following the AIOC’s nationalization was swiftly restored by increased production in Kuwait, replacing the refined petroleum products Abadan produced was a much larger challenge. The estimate was that replacing the refining

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<sup>37</sup> Steven G. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944-1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55.

capacity lost with Abadan would cost some \$504 million and was sure to be a slow, drawn-out process.<sup>38</sup>

The AIOC nationalization also dealt a blow to the Treasury's efforts to bring order to Britain's balance of payments. British officials calculated an annual loss of £100 million in so-called "invisible income," following the 1951 nationalization. While this amount represented a mere four percent of Britain's overall balance of payments, it was nearly a quarter of Britain's £419 million current account deficit. "Britain's reserve position was so delicate," Steven Galpern explains, "that policy-makers believed that the slightest adverse change on the debit side of the account augured trouble."<sup>39</sup> A £100 million shift risked turning an already dangerous situation critical.

Awareness of the precarious financial situation confronting the United Kingdom in the 1950s helps to contextualize the ferocity of the British response to the canal's nationalization. Over the previous seven years repeated setbacks and confrontations over Britain's Middle Eastern petroleum interests had led, Galpern explains, to "a pattern of foreign policy aggressiveness at Whitehall—particularly among Treasury officials—regarding the defense of sterling through British control of Middle Eastern oil [as] British policy makers did not think Britain could regain or maintain its prominence in international affairs without restoring the strength and stability of the pound."<sup>40</sup> If Britain were to continue its role as a major international power it was incumbent on British politicians to preserve their Middle Eastern sterling oil system. This belief undergirded Britain's entire regional foreign policy, which calculated and weighed the costs and benefits of each decision with its implications for the sterling petroleum trade.

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<sup>38</sup> Galpern, *Money, Oil and Empire*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

The problem with such a narrowly defined interest was that it was exceedingly vulnerable, particularly in a region where Britain's presence was greatly resented by an increasingly militant and nationalistic indigenous population. The Suez Canal was one of the key choke points in the sterling oil system as it was the point of transit through which Middle Eastern oil reached Britain. Were it to be closed to British commerce, the balance of payments problem would become dire, as the British would be forced to pay in dollars for American tankers to transport the various necessary petroleum products around the Cape of Good Hope or seek alternative, dollar-denominated solutions in the Western Hemisphere. That such a vital national asset might fall under the control of an unfriendly, antagonistic leader such as Nasser was entirely unpalatable back at Whitehall.<sup>41</sup>

Following the outbreak of the Suez Crisis another vulnerability was made apparent to British leaders, one that they had previously been willfully oblivious to: the nature of American support and the extent to which it would unquestionably be extended. According to the thinking of British leaders, the United States, as Britain's ally, would at the very least give tacit sanction to the Anglo-French intervention over the canal. According to Anthony Nutting, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, John Foster Dulles, the American Secretary of State, reassured both Britain and France on 1 August that he would not agree to a resolution to the Suez issue "which would leave it in the unfettered control of a single power [Egypt] which could...exploit it purely for purposes of national policy."<sup>42</sup> Dulles even talked about figuring out how "to make Nasser disgorge," a belligerent statement that Nutting claims sat well with a jingoistic Eden.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, such talk also helps to explain why the British leadership believed they had

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<sup>41</sup> Galpern, *Money, Oil and Empire*, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), 52.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

reached an implicit understanding with the United States that were they to intervene militarily, they would not be opposed.

Outright, effusive endorsement of their foray into Egypt was believed in Whitehall to be highly unlikely, but given such pronouncements on the part of Dulles, the notion that the United States would forcefully oppose the defense of what Britain termed to be a vital national interest was not given the consideration it ought to have received. Eden attributed the lack of enthusiasm in Washington for prior British proposals to resolve the Suez issue militarily to an attitude of “prudence rather than divergence.”<sup>44</sup> Harold Macmillan, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, believed that “the American Government, while publicly deploring [Britain’s] action, would be privately sympathetic, and thus content themselves with formal protests.”<sup>45</sup> Blaming their personal closeness with Eisenhower, Selwyn Lloyd recounts how “[Eden’s Government] felt that [they] might argue away like members of a family but at the end of the day would never seriously fall out.”<sup>46</sup> “Not having the Americans on the same side, or at least benevolently neutral,” Lloyd continues, “was unthinkable.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, as Eden, Macmillan and Lloyd all saw it, Washington might protest its ally’s actions, but in the end they assumed they did not have to question their ally’s support. When this proved to be wishful thinking, Prime Minister Anthony Eden and his cabinet were understandably shocked. Hoping for support or at least grudging acceptance, Eden received neither. Instead, Eisenhower responded with forceful opposition and viewed Britain’s machinations—like Dulles—as a personal affront.

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<sup>44</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 482.

<sup>45</sup> Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956-1959* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 149.

<sup>46</sup> Lloyd, *Suez 1956*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



Eisenhower and Dulles' behavior in this respect is truly bizarre. Dulles admits on 26 October 1956 how the United States has "information of major Israeli preparations and suspect[s] there may be French complicity with them and possibly UK complicity with various moves which they think it preferable to keep from us lest we indicate our disapproval" by which, Dulles writes, "we are quite disturbed."<sup>48</sup> Eisenhower and Dulles repeatedly maintain how they believed the Israeli target to be Jordan, in retaliation for *fedayeen* attacks and mimicking the Qalqilya raid Israel had launched on 11 October when it destroyed a Jordanian police station. However, a top-secret CIA report confirms that every single motivation considered cast this raid as a response to some sort of grievance with Nasser's Egypt and, presciently, singled out "[providing] a diversionary threat against Egypt in order to afford greater freedom of action for France and the UK in the Suez situation" as a reason for the Israeli mobilization.<sup>49</sup> Given such intelligence, it strains belief to suggest that Eisenhower did not at the very least have a very strong reason to suspect that Egypt—not Jordan—was the true target, as British complicity in an attack against Jordan, their ally, would not make any sense.

On 28 October, the day before the Israelis launched Operation Kadesh and attacked the Sinai, Dulles asks Eisenhower if he "got the information about the [British] build-up around Cyprus—30 to 63 [transports] in the last 48 hours" and noting that France's "transport had [also] been increased from 3 to 21...and that 2 important French ships have been moved to the Mediterranean."<sup>50</sup> The fact that British troop transports had

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<sup>48</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Washington, October 26, 1956, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Volume XVI: Suez Crisis: July 26-December 31, 1956* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1990), 790.

<sup>49</sup> Special Watch Report of the Intelligence Advisory Committee, Washington, October 28, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Volume XVI*, 798.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President and the Secretary of State, Washington, October 28, 1956, 5:38 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957, Volume XVI*, 806-807.

more than doubled and France's increased by seven hundred percent contemporaneous with Israel's complete mobilization ought to have indicated unmistakably that Britain and France were anticipating and expected to participate in a major military conflict. Eisenhower and Dulles Additionally, American intelligence knew that France had recently supplied Israel with sixty Mystère planes—five times the previously agreed amount and therefore violating international agreements aimed at preventing the region's increased militarization and the eruption of another Arab-Israeli war.<sup>51</sup> With France clearly backing Israel through the Mystère sale and the British and French navies jointly massing off the coast of Cyprus, the most basic of analyses clearly indicates British and French foreknowledge of and most likely participation in the upcoming Israeli assault. And given the aforementioned Anglo-Jordanian defense treaty, there was absolutely no possibility of this imminent strike being on Jordan, as Dulles and Eisenhower purport to have believed. The CIA's hypothesis that the Israeli mobilization was but a diversionary attack on Egypt to aide an imminent Anglo-French assault to resolve the Suez issue quickly becomes the only tenable one.<sup>52</sup>

Thus Eisenhower and Dulles both had to have known that Britain, France and Israel were preparing for an attack on Egypt and, given Israel's total mobilization, this attack appeared to be quickly approaching. Inexplicably, however, Eisenhower did nothing to prevent this attack, as he ought to have if he was prepared to respond with such vigorous opposition as he later did. Eisenhower ignored the very urgent need to initiate full and frank discussions with both Britain and France to bring both back from the brink. Bluntly, Eisenhower's behavior in the run-up to the crisis belies the image of

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<sup>51</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 56.

<sup>52</sup> Special Watch Report of the Intelligence Advisory Committee, Washington, October 28, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Volume XVI, 798.

the pacific crusader that his memoir's title, *Waging Peace*, implies. Instead of frantically working to prevent conflict, Eisenhower sat idle. "The President's thought," the memorandum of the telephone call between Eisenhower and Dulles on the eve of the Israeli assault records, "is to wait till morning."<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps Eisenhower, like Eden, erred in believing knew his ally too well and could accurately and consistently predict how he intended to act. Perhaps Eisenhower assumed that as old friends from the Second World War, Eden would not calculate to embroil him in so great a conflict so close to the upcoming American election. However, while former wartime camaraderie does not excuse Eisenhower's failure to make clear his strong opposition to Britain and France's patently obvious plan to use force against Egypt, it does explain the vitriol of Eisenhower's response. Eisenhower appears as a man who feels personally wronged by the actions of his erstwhile allies and who believes that his trust has been unfairly exploited. Most of all Eisenhower initially seems very determined to see to it that his allies, Britain and France, both feel a level of pain commensurate with the offense their actions had caused him.

After he had been notified that the scenario he refused to consider had in fact materialized, Eisenhower angrily rebuffed the notion that the United States would tolerate Britain's actions. During a conference at the White House that day, 29 October, he explained that "nothing justifies [their] double-crossing us" and concluded that "this matter must be handled on the basis of principle."<sup>54</sup> The principle of which Eisenhower was speaking was the 1950 Tripartite Declaration in which France, Britain and the United

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<sup>53</sup> Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President and the Secretary of State, Washington, October 28, 1956, 5:38 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Volume XVI, 807.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, October 29, 1956, 7:15 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Volume XVI, 836.

States agreed to preserve the Middle Eastern territorial *status quo*. As far as Eisenhower was concerned, that Egypt had rejected protection under such a declaration was irrelevant; Eisenhower believed that America must make good on its word and come to Egypt's defense.

The United States immediately realized the implications of the declared Anglo-French intentions on the flow of oil to the United Kingdom. The conflict already begun, it was merely a matter of time before Nasser was able to close the canal to the petroleum trade on which Britain so depended. Under-Secretary of State, Herbert Hoover, Jr. observed that "the British may be estimating that [the United States] would have no choice but to take extraordinary means to get oil to them."<sup>55</sup> Eisenhower however had little interest in assisting Britain in this respect. For Eisenhower there was not "much value in an unworthy and unreliable ally," and he thought that "the necessity to support them might not be as great as they believed."<sup>56</sup> Moreover, he now had great reservations "over an idea of asking Congress for \$600 to \$800 million to support oil deliveries and other economic aid to Britain and France when the full impact of their actions [began] to be felt."<sup>57</sup>

That Eisenhower was prepared to halt American economic assistance to Britain illustrates just how serious his opposition to the Anglo-French action was. In addition to his taking personal offense over Britain's actions, Eisenhower's opposition also stemmed from his Administration's erroneous belief that the West was on the cusp of a major

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<sup>55</sup> Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, October 30, 1956, 10:06-10:55 a.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 853.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 854.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 855.

victory over the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. His Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, put it thus:

It is nothing less than tragic that at this very time, when we are on the point of winning an immense and long-hoped-for victory over Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe, we should be forced to choose between following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa, or splitting our course away from their course.<sup>58</sup>

Such an assessment of contemporary Eastern European events was not only untrue; it was myopic and wholly unfair. Apart from abandoning a valuable ally, the consequences of failing to support the United Kingdom were serious. The United Kingdom's humiliation over Suez would have a devastating effect on the credibility of any British Middle Eastern military threat and therefore on the effectiveness of Britain's power projection in the region. Any decline in British regional influence would most probably be accompanied by a corresponding increase in the influence of the very anti-Western, anti-American, pan-Arab leaders whose policies and demonstrated readiness to deal with the Soviet Union posed a real threat to the United States strategic regional interests. However Eisenhower was determined to make his will felt on this issue: to him the Anglo-French intervention was unacceptable—a throwback to another era. If Britain desired American economic assistance, British leaders would have to come to heel.

The initial response of the United States after having learned of the Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula was to seek a resolution ordering a cease-fire from the United Nations. When America learned of Britain and France's complicity, they maintained the same approach, though now adjusting it so as to fully incorporate the updated list of the belligerents. Not surprisingly, British and French support for such a

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<sup>58</sup> Memorandum of Discussion at the 302d Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, November 1, 1956, 9 a.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 907.

resolution was less than forthcoming. What the United States could count on, however, was an increasing flexibility in British attitudes as the true nature of their short-term economic outlook became apparent.

Soon after the extent of Anglo-French collusion with the Israeli assault on the Sinai had become apparent following the unveiling of the Anglo-French ultimatum earlier that day on 30 October, Eisenhower began to assess America's options for discouraging the British and the French from their unilateral action. During a conference at the White House, Eisenhower recognized his economic leverage and sought to craft his diplomatic efforts around it. He explained to his trusted aide Colonel Goodpaster that he thought that "those [Britain and France] who began this operation should be left to work out their own oil problems—to boil in their own oil, so to speak," and he expected that "before long they would be short of dollars to finance these operations and would be calling for help."<sup>59</sup>

The preparation for Operation Musketeer failed to take into account the mission's highly probable, damaging effect on the British economy. While the British government was aware of its reliance on American assistance, if there were a halt in Middle Eastern oil shipments, there was no viable plan to address the issue. Instead, all that had been planned for was rationing, which Eden implemented beginning 7 November.<sup>60</sup> In addition to the curtailment of oil deliveries, the crisis also brought tremendous downward pressure on the value of sterling. As Britain was deeply committed to maintaining sterling's value

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<sup>59</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation With the President, White House, Washington, October 30, 1956, 4:25 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 873.

<sup>60</sup> Diane B. Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 131.

at \$2.80, the Bank of England was forced to expend large amounts of its dollar reserves to maintain the peg.

This rapid depletion of Britain's dollar reserves quickly developed into a major problem. In order to stem the hemorrhaging, Britain sought aid from the United States only to discover that it was unavailable so long as the American call for a cease-fire remained unheeded. Harold Macmillan, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, met with the cabinet on 6 November outlining the extent of the damage caused by the heavy selling in sterling that month. The scenario he outlined was grim: \$279 million in Britain's reserves had been lost in November, an amount equal to approximately fifteen percent of Britain's total reserves.<sup>61</sup> Cognizant of the imminent catastrophe that loomed were Britain not able to stem the selling of sterling and with the majority of his cabinet supporting his decision, Eden agreed on 6 November to the American request for a cease-fire.

However, despite the cease-fire's having come into effect, Eisenhower continued to use economic diplomacy to force compliance with his directives. He refused to permit any aid to be extended to Britain until the Anglo-French withdrawal was completed. To the United States consternation Eden stalled on the implementation of the withdrawal, as he wanted "to avoid a vacuum between [Britain's] departure and the arrival of a sufficient United Nations force [to protect the canal]."<sup>62</sup> Additionally Eden objected to the rushed manner in which he felt the United States sought to end the crisis, which left the question of unrestricted international access and the Arab-Israeli conflicts unresolved.<sup>63</sup>

Eisenhower's refusal to mobilize American resources to lessen the effects felt in Britain due to the sharp drop off in oil deliveries from the Middle East had two main

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<sup>61</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 623.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 632.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 640.

motivations. First, Eisenhower understood the importance of balancing Arab public opinion, which was necessary to get Egypt to agree to a cease fire, against the United Kingdom's need of oil.<sup>64</sup> Second, Eisenhower distrusted both Britain and France for the “cabal [Operation Musketeer] in which...[they] were involved” and therefore resolved that “this Government should keep out of the oil supply problem until [it was] assured that the cease-fire was in effect.”<sup>65</sup> After Britain and France's betrayal over Suez, Eisenhower had no qualms about dragging his feet over restoring the normal flow of oil to the Europeans, especially if such an action risked inflaming the Arab world and, thus, compromising his efforts to bring Egypt to agree to a cease-fire and replace Anglo-French troops with UN peacekeepers.

Since the introduction of the cease-fire, the state of Britain's reserves had continued to worsen. The financial disaster Macmillan outlined on 6 November was looming ever and ever closer now that British reserves had fallen as of 1 December below the \$2,000 million level—the level deemed necessary for the proper functioning of the sterling area.<sup>66</sup> Faced with continued American intransigence on the issue of economic aid, Britain eventually agreed on 3 December to a complete withdrawal by 22 December. Immediately after the announcement by the British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd of Britain's withdrawal, Harold Macmillan revealed that the United States government had now agreed to Britain's “drawing against its IMF quota of \$1,300 million” thereby rescuing Britain from a major balance of payments crisis.<sup>67</sup> Such economic assistance was now possible as both Dulles and Eisenhower agreed that “the

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<sup>64</sup> Memorandum of a Discussion at the 303d Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, November 8, 1956, 9-11:25 a.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 1075-6.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1077.

<sup>66</sup> Kunz, *Economic Diplomacy*, 150.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.



statements made by the British and French with respect to their intention to withdraw their forces seemed...to meet substantially the UN requirements,” therefore obviating any remaining American objections.<sup>68</sup>

The consensus in the historiography of the Suez Crisis is that it was Harold Macmillan’s assessment of the danger to the pound that was decisive in bringing Anthony Eden around to agreeing to cease fire. A risk to sterling was a risk to the very prestige on which British influence in the Middle East largely rested. The policy options that Eden faced were few, and they all ended with the ultimate withdrawal of Anglo-French forces. Reoccupation of the Suez Canal over the objection of the United States was simply not a viable option, as Britain could not withstand the economic maelstrom its Suez adventure had brought about without American help.

Context is important when assessing how the United States used its economic might to force Britain to conform to its desired course of action during the Suez Crisis. As Kunz explains, the Bretton-Woods system of fixed exchange rates underpinned a very different international financial system than the one currently in existence:

[Then] the US government not only presided over the main capital markets but funded and controlled international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Indeed it was because the United States had a monopoly on the world’s dominant currency that its use of financial weapons against Britain was so strikingly successful. Such a policy could not be accomplished today, when not only are international institutions far more independent of the United States but privately held dollars...within and without the United States far exceed American or other governmental holdings.<sup>69</sup>

With such advantages it is understandable how the United States found it easy to apply the necessary pressure on Britain. At the time of Suez this convergence of control

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<sup>68</sup> Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the President in Augusta, Georgia, and the Secretary of State in Washington, December 3, 1956, 1:30 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 1240.

<sup>69</sup> Kunz, *Economic Diplomacy*, 228.

of such key international financial organizations provided the United States with an opportunity to influence the actions of the European powers. It is important to note, however, that America's optimum effectiveness in this area was limited to Britain; France had had the foresight to borrow against its account at the IMF prior to the outbreak of hostilities, guaranteeing that French policy would be insulated from the debtor diplomacy of the United States. Had Britain just followed the French lead and anticipated and taken precautions against the economic pressure that might arise during a complex military maneuver like Operation Musketeer, the crisis might very well have resulted in an Anglo-French victory and an American diplomatic defeat. America, shorn of its most decisive tool, economic diplomacy, might have found it difficult to compel Britain to halt its reoccupation of the Suez Canal Zone.

### **III. A Changing of the Guard?**

The contrast between Britain and France's financial vulnerabilities during the crisis is particularly instructive when evaluating the continued effectiveness of the United States economic power in synchronizing British policy with American aims in the Middle East. Whereas France had taken a precautionary loan of its IMF reserves in anticipation of the economic fallout of Operation Musketeer, Britain had not and therefore found itself in a very dangerous position as far as its foreign exchange reserves were concerned following the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt.

While the pressure the United States was able to exert during the crisis was unique—and in many respects a result of particularly poor planning on the part of Eden's government—the United States' opinions thereafter continued to exercise considerable

weight in British calculations due to America's military and economic might. What is, however, of some debate is the degree to which this episode marked a permanent shift in Middle Eastern leadership on the part of the West; that is, to what degree did the Suez Crisis result in the transfer of British regional strategic commitments to the United States and in subsumption of Great Britain's Middle Eastern policy into that of the United States? Was the United States military and economic power always sufficient to bring British policy into line with America's going forward, as it had been during Suez?

Kissinger's conclusion that the Suez episode "marked America's ascension into world leadership" and the moment when America "cut itself loose from allies it had always held accountable for the blight of *Realpolitik* and for their flawed devotion to the balance of power" is consistent with the majority of the historiography that interprets this crisis as one of power transfer.<sup>70</sup> In Darwin's estimation Suez signaled "the end of illusion: the brutal exposure of geopolitical realities in a 'superpower' world;" one which "marked the pricking of the Churchillian bubble: the belief that Britain could intervene decisively in world affairs, when and if it chose."<sup>71</sup>

Albert Hourani similarly concludes that "the [Suez] crisis also showed clearly a change which had taken place, but had not yet been fully recognized: not even in the Middle East could Britain act as the dominant power... This had been true since 1945, but had not become apparent because of American willingness to acquiesce in Britain's playing the major role in the Arab parts of the Middle East. After 1956, no British government would take this acquiescence for granted."<sup>72</sup> For Rogan the damage to

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<sup>70</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 548.

<sup>71</sup> Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 605.

<sup>72</sup> Albert Hourani, "Conclusion" in *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences*, eds., Wm. Roger Louis and Roger Owen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 404.

Britain caused by Suez was severe, and he quotes and shares the assessment of Mohammed Heikal, the eminent Egyptian journalist and commentator, that “No Arab leader could be Britain’s friend and Nasser’s enemy after Suez. Suez cost Britain Arabia.”<sup>73</sup>

The historiographical camp that interprets the fallout from the Suez Crisis as one of changing preeminence in the Middle East—of Britain’s decline and America’s ascendancy—is far and away the dominant one. Thereafter, so the argument goes, Britain’s capacity for action independent of the United States in the region was severely curtailed if not eliminated entirely. The United States henceforth exercised responsibility for the region, especially in guarding against the spread of the Soviet Union’s influence as the United States “containment” policy dictated.

However, Simon Smith offers a much more qualified interpretation of this argument, and he even challenges the notion that a transfer of regional responsibilities occurred. Smith agrees that “the US role in the region undoubtedly expanded in the aftermath of Suez” but argues that “this did not apply universally, nor did it presage the total eclipse of British influence, especially in the Gulf.”<sup>74</sup>

The truth, unsurprisingly, lies somewhere in between. The attempted reoccupation of the Suez Canal in November 1956 did do considerable damage to Great Britain’s standing in the Middle East but a key distinction must be drawn between the opinions and perceptions of ordinary Arabs and those of the ruling elites, many of whom had longstanding ties to Britain. Among the former, who were also the most susceptible to Nasser’s pan-Arabist propaganda, Britain’s aggression against Egypt was seen as another

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<sup>73</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 304.

<sup>74</sup> Simon C. Smith, “Power Transferred? Britain, the United States, and the Gulf, 1956-71” *Contemporary British History* 21 (March 2007): 3.

attempt by the European imperialists to control events in the Middle East. And it could hardly not be seen to be so. Britain could not hope for—nor was she successful in—winning over a group that had for centuries been abused by European imperialists.

While the elites were undoubtedly sympathetic to such positions, across the region leaders understood that their relationships with Britain had evolved through longstanding mutual interest and as such were not prepared to entirely jettison decades of cooperation over this single event. The immediate consequence of the crisis was that Britain lost the argument over the Suez Canal: any concessions Britain could have hoped to extract from Egypt over international control evaporated as soon as it became clear that Britain had cast her lot in with the French and the Israelis in a move to retake the canal by force. So too did Britain lose whatever residual influence in Egypt she had: there was no longer any possibility of the British military reoccupying the Suez Canal base in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union or some other enemy, as the 1954 Suez Canal Base Agreement had stipulated.<sup>75</sup> That offer was long gone as was any British influence in Egypt the agreement would have preserved. However, those like Nutting who predicted a destruction of British influence due to the hatred the invasion had inspired in the Arab world overlook how inconsequential much of the popular Arab indignation turned out to be, particularly given Nasser's increasingly aggressive stance post-1956. Nutting's summation of crisis's aftermath reflects this error:

[The] ineptitude of Britain and France's intervention had enormously strengthened Egypt's position internationally. She now had friends everywhere; the U.N. were on her side; and the anger of the Arab world over Nasser's sudden decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company without consultation of the Arab League had now melted in the warm glow of brotherhood and sympathy which

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<sup>75</sup> Charles B. Selak, Jr., "The Suez Canal Base Agreement of 1952" *The American Journal of International Law* 49 (October 1955): 487.

had flowed from all Arab hearts when Egypt was attacked by the 'Western imperialists and their Israeli stooges'<sup>76</sup>

When Nutting speaks of Egypt's increased international standing in the aftermath he would do well to acknowledge how inconsequential this proved. It is a mistake to suggest that Britain's position throughout the Middle East had been entirely ruined by its action in Suez. Britain's intervention in Suez in autumn 1956 did have a major effect on Britain's relations with the Arab world, and British influence did indeed evaporate in many countries where previously it had held sway. However, there was of course a reason that the Middle East was a region of longstanding British influence: it had incredible petroleum reserves and much of these and their derivatives were priced, crucially, in pounds sterling. Hence, even after Suez, the Middle East retained a preeminent place in the strategic calculations of Whitehall and was hardly a region Britain was prepared to quit.

It is hardly surprising that after Suez Britain's influence in Egypt was nonexistent, but this was hardly a seismic shift from the situation that existed prior to the invasion. The writing had been on the wall since 1952, when the Free Officers overthrew King Farouq and made clear their determination to make good on their pledge to excise British influence from Egypt, that Britain's ability to influence events within Egypt was nearing its end. A formal timeframe was agreed two years later in the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, negotiated by Eden, which pledged the complete evacuation of British forces from the Suez Canal Zone and base by June 1956, ending seven decades of British military occupation.

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<sup>76</sup> Nutting, *No End of a Lesson*, 168.

Equally in Jordan, as we have seen, 1956 proved a bad year for Britain. That March the sacking of General Glubb, then the commander of the Arab Legion, Jordan's military, convinced Eden that Nasser was conspiring against him in Jordan. Nutting recalled how Eden believed that "Nasser had prevented Jordan [sic] joining the Baghdad Pact, and now he had got rid of Glubb" and that "Nasser was [Britain's] enemy No. 1 in the Middle East...[and] therefore must be himself destroyed."<sup>77</sup> After Glubb's sacking, a British minister relates, it became increasingly difficult for Britain "to maintain its influence in Jordan."<sup>78</sup> Later, in October, days before fighting broke out in Suez, an election in Jordan confirmed the anti-British trend in the country. The voting "resulted in substantial gains for pro-Egyptian elements and the installation of a Cabinet largely opposed to continued alliance with Britain."<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, Jordan's Parliament ended the Anglo-Jordanian treaty and began to pursue diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>80</sup>

In Iraq as well there was a precipitous decline in the weight of British opinion. This falling out is particularly visible in the decision taken by the Iraqi government, following Britain's intervention in Egypt, to cease to "participate in meetings of the Baghdad Pact Council at which Britain is present."<sup>81</sup> The Baghdad Pact, comprised of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Britain, had come into force the year before with the aim of involving Britain in the region's defense, particularly against Communist incursions. Its formation was an expression of the high regard in which these countries held the

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<sup>77</sup> Nutting, *No End of a Lesson*, 27.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, October 1, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 620.

<sup>79</sup> Operations Coordinating Board Report, December 22, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 428.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

United Kingdom. Iraq's withdrawal was a testament to the damage caused by Suez, especially given the country's long association with Great Britain.

The story, however, was very different in the Persian Gulf. There was, admittedly, throughout the crisis popular unrest against Britain in the various sheikhdoms under British protection in the Persian Gulf.<sup>82</sup> However, the danger posed by such discontent was tempered by the nature of Britain's political relationship with these states. Legally, Kuwait and the other sheikhdoms were British protectorates, and Britain therefore exercised control over their foreign policy, in addition to its special domestic privileges. These states appreciated British influence, as with it came backing in diplomatic disputes against their larger, more powerful neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, an important American ally.

Analyzing the consequences of Britain and France's Suez intervention, a US State Department study concluded that the effect has been "the emergence of the U.S. as the leader of Free World interests in the area and tacit recognition of that fact by our British and French allies in all areas except the Persian Gulf."<sup>83</sup> "The United Kingdom," it continues, "is convinced that its continued predominance in the Persian Gulf is essential to guarantee the flow of oil necessary to maintain the British domestic economy and international position."<sup>84</sup> It was in the Persian Gulf, motivated by the region's petroleum assets, that British influence proved most resilient.

The persistence of British influence in the region was an asset for the United States, though American leaders did not always treat it as such. Both countries had overlapping concerns in the region—oil and Soviet influence—but approached these

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<sup>82</sup> Operations Coordinating Board Report, December 22, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 421.

<sup>83</sup> Staff Study Prepared in the Department of State, October 30, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 623.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.



issues very differently and differed over the seriousness of many of the threats. The Suez episode was a case in point. Whereas Eden believed that barring intervention “Nasser would have become a kind of Moslem Mussolini and [Britain and America’s] friends in Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and even Iran would gradually have been brought down,” Eisenhower saw a real risk of destroying America’s influence in the Middle East by linking United States foreign policy to British and French neo-imperialism.<sup>85</sup> He thought that the United States must do “what was decent and right” and “[assert] [American] leadership, [else] the Soviets would take over the leadership from [the United States].”<sup>86</sup> Given the United States hegemonic position over the non-Soviet world’s economy—and particularly over Britain—Eisenhower was in an excellent position to make his assessment of the stakes at Suez the one that counted.

Post Suez, both Eden and Eisenhower sought a *rapprochement*. Eden, writing with a few years’ perspective in 1959, had found a way to transform this unpleasant episode into a rather positive development in the Anglo-American partnership and cites Britain’s involvement in the Suez Crisis and the showdown between himself and Eisenhower as having “led to the Eisenhower Doctrine and from that to Anglo-American intervention in the following summer in Jordan and the Lebanon.”<sup>87</sup> The European powers’ intervention, Eden argues, “helped to show that the West was not prepared to leave the area wide open for infiltration and subversion by others.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in a letter to Winston Churchill, Eisenhower bemoaned the strain Suez had placed on Anglo-

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<sup>85</sup> Message from Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower, London, November 5, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 984.

<sup>86</sup> Memorandum of Discussion at the 302d Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, November 1, 1956, 9 a.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XVI, 915.

<sup>87</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 646.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

American relations and wrote that “nothing [saddened] [him] more than the thought that [he] and [his] close friends of years have met a problem concerning which [they] do not see eye to eye” and that “[he] shall never be happy until [their] old time closeness has been restored.”<sup>89</sup> Such amicable sentiments, however, were not sufficient to explain the depth of regional cooperation, which owed much more to a mutual appreciation that working together was essential to achieving their shared goals.

However, it was not Eden, but Macmillan, who as the post-Suez Prime Minister was tasked with repairing the Anglo-American relationship. As Macmillan saw it, this was “[the] most urgent, and at the same time the most delicate, task which confronted [him] on becoming Prime Minister,” as “with this [the Anglo-American alliance] was closely linked the new defence organisation and strategy for the United Kingdom.”<sup>90</sup> However, the wounds from Suez were still smarting, and Macmillan had no intention of groveling for American attention and assistance. He writes:

I was not at all in the mood, nor were my colleagues, to appear in a white sheet or put ourselves, however, let down, if not betrayed, by the vacillating and delaying tactics which Dulles had pursued in the earlier stages of the Suez crisis and by the viciousness with which he and his subordinates had attacked us after the launching of the Anglo-French operation. There might come a moment when my close ties with America and my former association with the President could be usefully exploited; but I was in no mood to make the first approach.<sup>91</sup>

He did not have to. On 22 January Macmillan received word that Eisenhower was “anxious to see [him]” in either Washington or Bermuda—whichever he preferred—and wanted to discuss “all the great issues confronting the world, not merely those of the Middle East.”<sup>92</sup> Such an invitation bespeaks the importance Eisenhower placed on the

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<sup>89</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 99.

<sup>90</sup> Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, 240.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

continuation of Anglo-American cooperation and goodwill—his letters to Churchill had said as much.<sup>93</sup> That it was the United States, not the United Kingdom, that initiated the reconciliation, attests to the continued importance of the alliance *to the United States* with respect to global areas of concern but especially those in the Middle East.

When in March 1957 the leaders of the United Kingdom and the United States met at Bermuda, it was their first joint summit since the end of the crisis a few months before. There the United States recognized the importance of reestablishing the goodwill between their two countries that had been damaged by America's forceful condemnation of Britain's actions. In a telegram to the US State Department, the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, John Whitney, communicated how while "latent anti-Americanism which boiled over during the Suez crisis has simmered down...it can and will be a factor in [US-UK] relations for some time to come."<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Whitney contended that it "seems imperative...that Bermuda must provide a clear indication to the British people that [the] President and [the] US [Government] are not aloof or indifferent to [the] British alliance and British worldwide interests."<sup>95</sup>

Eisenhower appears to have agreed with Whitney's assessment, and his conduct at the Bermuda conference demonstrates this. Meeting with Macmillan, who had succeeded Eden to the premiership following the latter's resignation in January 1957, Eisenhower stressed the importance of cooperating with Britain throughout the Middle East. There Macmillan communicated that "despite recent events, he felt that the UK still had an important role to play in the Middle East" and "suggested that if [they] could only work

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<sup>93</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 680-681.

<sup>94</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State, March 7, 1957, 6:00 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 698.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

out common objectives regarding this area, joint plans could then be developed in the same way as they were done so well during World War II.”<sup>96</sup> To this Eisenhower “replied that he wished to assure the British that the US wants if anything to build them up again in the Middle East.”<sup>97</sup> Clearly, both leaders were determined not to let any unhappiness over Suez result in a long-term rift between their respective countries.<sup>98</sup>

The Bermuda Conference also developed a very important area of Anglo-American collaboration post-Suez—oil. At the conference British and American leaders confirmed their mutual acknowledgement of the importance of the Middle East for NATO’s petroleum demands and therefore of the need to work together to assure these were met. Stressing the United Kingdom’s relevance to these solutions, Macmillan pointed to the centrality of Kuwait to any discussions on how to ensure the continued availability of sufficient supplies of Middle Eastern oil, as of “[the] great producers of oil, Kuwait is by far the greatest of these and in itself can produce oil enough for all Western Europe for years to come.”<sup>99</sup>

Kuwait, still then a British protectorate, represents an instance where Britain’s special influence meant it had a vital role to play. Consistent oil deliveries to Western Europe were obviously of interest to Great Britain, but the United States was also aware that reliable access to oil was critical for the area’s continued economic growth as well as for NATO’s forces. Thus ensuring the security of European access to Kuwaiti oil was essential for meeting the United States interest of defending Western Europe against

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<sup>96</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda, March 21, 1957, 3:45 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 716.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 712-716.

<sup>99</sup> Diary Entry by the President, March 21, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 720.

Communism just as it was for maintaining Britain's sterling oil system in the Persian Gulf.

However, on other issues Anglo-American collaboration at the conference was more strained. When Britain's Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd brought up threats to Britain's Protectorate and Colony of Aden, highlighting that it was "an important Free World outpost, with a refinery, etc., which was now being menaced by the Soviets through assistance to Yemen, with additional help from Saudi Arabia," he was rebuffed.<sup>100</sup> Never mind that the United States exercised great influence with King Saud or that the United States had issued the "Eisenhower Doctrine" aiming, in Eisenhower's own words, at "[blocking] the Soviet Union's march to the Mediterranean, to the Suez Canal...and to the underground lakes of oil which fuel the homes and factories of Western Europe."<sup>101</sup> Rather than assist in these areas where America's interest seemed obvious, the United States greatly discounted the urgency of its ally's concerns:

The Secretary [Dulles] pointed out that one difficulty was that the US and the UK each attached a different magnitude of importance to particular problems, such as Aden and Buraimi. The problem was therefore one of trying to develop joint views. The US would now certainly be more involved in this general area than before, as a result of recent developments, and there was therefore a much greater need for close coordination.<sup>102</sup>

Dulles's reply is crucial as it develops an important point of post-Suez, Anglo-American relations. Here the US Secretary of State acknowledges that the American leadership interpreted the result of the Suez crisis in a way that called for increased regional involvement on the part of the United States. In the eyes of American statesmen,

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<sup>100</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda, March 21, 1957, 3:45 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 716.

<sup>101</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 182-183.

<sup>102</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda, March 21, 1957, 3:45 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 716.

the traditional European powers, Britain and France, had indeed been greatly discredited among much of the region's population, and therefore it was necessary that the United States involve itself much more in pursuit of Western interests, as the European powers could no longer effectively do so. However, Dulles's comment also recognizes that Great Britain and the United States had still distinct regional interests, which determined why "each attached a different magnitude of importance to particular problems" in the Middle East.<sup>103</sup> Thus, despite a greater US presence, Dulles accepts a separate, independent British agenda.

One of the key decisions reached at the Bermuda conference was a decision for both the United Kingdom and the United States to undertake a comprehensive assessment of "the present situation and probable future developments throughout the Middle East, dealing first with those aspects of the problems bearing upon the supply of oil to the free world, with a view to making recommendations for furthering the common interests of the two Governments in this area."<sup>104</sup> Such a prompt clearly acknowledges that both countries understood that cooperation in the region was mutually beneficial. The results of the agreed-upon study bear this observation out.

The basic problem is familiar: the Middle East is where the majority of the world's proven oil reserves lie, and "a supply of oil from the Middle East in a steadily increasing volume is essential to the economic progress and strategic strength of the NATO countries."<sup>105</sup> However, "certain Middle East governments have shown a willingness and capability to deny Western access to oil reserves...and to disrupt Middle

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<sup>103</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda, March 21, 1957, 3:45 p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XXVII, 716.

<sup>104</sup> Paper Agreed Upon at the Conference at Bermuda, March 23, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 473.

<sup>105</sup> Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to the Secretary of State, May 14, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. X, 682-683.

East oil transport facilities.”<sup>106</sup> How then to manage the threats posed by rogue Middle Eastern régimes hostile to the American and British interests?

The decision reached was that “[the] United States and [the] United Kingdom should accordingly seek to retain access to the oil resources of all four of the major Middle Eastern producing states: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia,” a strategy that augured well for America and Britain given “the heavy dependence of these four countries on revenues derived from the sale of their oil in free world markets.”<sup>107</sup> In focusing on all of the major petroleum-producing countries, the United States and Britain were in a sense hedging their bets, as a broader supply base theoretically translated to great security against potential supply disruptions. The margin, however was slim: reliance on only two of the countries would not be sufficient to satisfy Western Europe’s petroleum needs.<sup>108</sup>

Protecting the West’s continued access to the access to the region’s oil thus depended on the continued existence of governments friendly to the West. Of the major petroleum producers Iran’s stance was the least concerning. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had been reinstalled during the 1954 CIA *coup*, and had aligned himself with those to whom he owed his throne, the United States and Great Britain. The *coup*, prompted by Britain’s ire following Mossadegh’s 1951 nationalization of the AIOC, therefore seemed to have accomplished its goal. Iran, being a predominately Persian

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<sup>106</sup> Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to the Secretary of State, May 14, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. X, 683.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

nation, was also insulated from the Nasserist propaganda that bedeviled Western interests throughout the Arab world.<sup>109</sup>

Nasser's anti-Western, pan-Arab propaganda, spread largely through his Voice of the Arabs radio service and the passions it aroused were a persistent challenge in Anglo-American diplomatic relations with the remaining, Arab oil-producing states. Kuwait, then still a British protectorate, provided an instance where Britain's regional heft proved an asset post-Suez. It was "the view of the United States," the survey concludes, "[that] a substantial British position in the Gulf is important to continued access to... [its] petroleum resources."<sup>110</sup> Britain's influence in Kuwait would thus obviate the need for the United States to preoccupy itself with concerns about that petroleum producer's reliability. Thus allowing the United States to concentrate on Iraq and Saudi Arabia, both of whom the United States continued to court with a mixture of economic development aid and generous rents paid for allowing the United States to maintain a military presence, as at Dhahran.<sup>111</sup>

The United States, cognizant of the pervasive, anti-imperialist mood, worked carefully—but diligently—at building up its regional ties. In the aftermath of Suez Eisenhower wished to make clear that "despite [America's] disagreement in 1956 with [its] major European allies over a logical course of action respecting the Suez Canal, [the United States] [was] fully determined to sustain Western rights in the region."<sup>112</sup> "The existing vacuum," Eisenhower believed, "must be filled by the United States before it is

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<sup>109</sup> Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to the Secretary of State, May 14, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. X, 683.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 684.

<sup>111</sup> Operations Coordinating Board Report, December 22, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 427.

<sup>112</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 178.



filled by Russia.”<sup>113</sup> The policy that resulted, dubbed the Eisenhower Doctrine, aimed at protecting the Middle East from Russia’s interest in dominating the region and its oil for the purpose of “power politics” with the West.<sup>114</sup> First, the doctrine “[authorized] the United States to...assist any nation or group of nations in the general area of the Middle East in the development of economic strength dedicated to the maintenance of national independence.”<sup>115</sup> In pursuance of this aim the Eisenhower Doctrine allowed the President “to undertake in the same region programs of military assistance” for said nations and explicitly “[authorized] such assistance and cooperation to include the employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid, against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism.”<sup>116</sup>

This doctrine, Dulles maintained, did not aim at “the establishment of a United States sphere of influence in the Middle East or interference by the United States in the internal affairs of any Middle Eastern state.”<sup>117</sup> Instead it operated off of the United States’ conviction that “there is a broad identity of interest between the United States and the nations in the general area of the Middle East,” and “[it] is on this firm base of common interest that the Government of the United States desires to cooperate with the Governments of the area to their mutual benefit.”<sup>118</sup> Still it is easy to see how Eisenhower’s claims of armed intervention were likely to be received with considerable apprehension among rulers who cherished their political independence: though aware of

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<sup>113</sup> Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 178.

<sup>114</sup> Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East, January 5, 1957, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower 1957*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Letter From the Secretary of State to the President’s Special Assistant (Richards), March 9, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 455.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

the potential threat the Soviet Union posed, they had had quite a bit of experience with the *real* threat of Western imperialism. Fashioning an entirely new system of Western influence would therefore pose quite a challenge. Fortunately, Britain's experience provided an excellent blueprint.

The British-sponsored Baghdad Pact had been in existence since 1955. Like NATO, one of its primary purposes was to keep the Russians out, but instead of the Americans, the Baghdad Pact aimed at keeping the British in. Though inherently valuable to its Middle Eastern members, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, the alliance was also very important for Britain's numerous regional interests. Such interests included, but went beyond the region's mineral wealth. In an internal State Department communiqué, the British ambassador was cited as enumerating these reasons so:

(1) It is the focal point of commonwealth land, sea and air communication; (2) It is a good base area against the USSR in war; (3) It has large oil resources; (4) It protects NATO's right flank; (5) It denies the Soviets access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean; (6) It bars the way to Africa; and (7) The UK has great economic interests in the area.<sup>119</sup>

These were advantages that the United States, as well, prized. The region's oil was of course highly valued, but the United States was equally aware of the Middle East's strategic importance, given its geographical proximity, were war to break out with the Soviet Union. Given this, the State Department memorandum continued, the agreement reached between both the United Kingdom and the United States that in order to achieve their goals in the Middle East, they should be "giving full support to the Baghdad Pact" and that the United States should continue to pursue the policy outlined in

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<sup>119</sup> Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Elbrick) to the Under Secretary of State (Hoover), June 21, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 107.

the Eisenhower Doctrine seems eminently sensible.<sup>120</sup> It was onto Britain's pre-existing Baghdad Pact that the United States would begin to graft its new plan for American regional involvement.

Macmillan recounts that by June 1957, roughly six months after the Suez cease-fire, "the Americans were now prepared to be associated" with the Baghdad Pact, an achievement, he believes, that "was certainly a success for British diplomacy."<sup>121</sup> While Britain remained the Pact's largest financial benefactor, even increasing its contribution by some £500,000 that June, the United States began to supply its own economic aid.<sup>122</sup> The State Department appreciated that "[the] U.S. [had] been able to use [the Pact] as a basis for stimulating needed regional economic developments" and resolved that this ought to continue.<sup>123</sup> The decision was therefore that United States should step up its association with the Pact through participation in the Pact's Economic and Counter Subversion Committees.<sup>124</sup> These seemed most congruent with America's anti-Communist mission in the region.

However, at the same time the support in the United States in 1957 for a formal commitment was cold, and it was consequently America's wish that Britain continue to lead with respect to Western, military leadership among these countries. Rebuffing the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri as-Said's suggestion "for [an] organization [of] pro-American Doctrine nations," as the Eisenhower Doctrine as also known, Dulles explained the United States had no interest in a formal organization, "as it would provide [a] basis for

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<sup>120</sup> Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) to the Secretary of State, May 14, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. X, 685.

<sup>121</sup> Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, 269.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>123</sup> Staff Study Prepared in the Department of State, October 30, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 633.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

charges re[garding] US attempts to dominate and commit states in [the] area by attaching strings to US assistance.”<sup>125</sup> Such a position echoed the Eisenhower administration’s long-term reluctance to formally associate the United States with the Baghdad Pact, as in doing so it “would probably have a better chance of retaining the credit it [had] won in the Arab-Asian world by its stand on Israeli, British, and French military intervention in Egypt.”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, if the United States were to move towards a formal, treaty relationship and one that naturally included Saudi Arabia, there were concerns that doing so “might lessen [King Saud’s] influence in [the] Arab world. Given that Saud was believed to be “moving slowly in [a] direction [toward] closer cooperation with pro-Western states,” Dulles believed that “[any] effort [to] spotlight or accelerate this move through formal alignment with these powers might retard [the] present progress” the United States had made with the Saudi King.”<sup>127</sup> Ultimately, though, the impetus to mollify potential American opposition to involvement in a treaty-pact of some form with the constituent countries of the Baghdad Pact, and thus involve itself formally in the defense of the Middle East, came following a concerning development near the end of the decade: the 1958 Iraqi *coup d’état*.

The overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq on 14 July 1958 greatly alarmed both the United States and the United Kingdom. It also provoked acute concern in both Lebanon and Jordan that they too would succumb to revolution, a fear which prompted the dispatch of 3,500 American troops to Lebanon as well as two British battalions to Jordan with the aim of shoring up each country’s respective security

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<sup>125</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq, March 28, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 474.

<sup>126</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate, December 14, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 408.

<sup>127</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq, March 28, 1957, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 474.

situation.<sup>128</sup> Such a clear and present danger to friendly, pro-Western governments, by revolutionaries with overt Communist sympathies, prompted the Eisenhower administration to begin to reevaluate its non-committal position on the Baghdad Pact.

In a telephone call from London on 28 July 1958, Dulles reported to Eisenhower how Baghdad Pact countries, apart, obviously, from Iraq, had thereafter urged that the United States to join the Pact, and that he himself “feels that it is absolutely necessary that we give some special reassurance to [America’s] support for Iran, Turkey and Pakistan.”<sup>129</sup> At a meeting of the National Security Council in late July, Dulles reiterated this counsel: “the United States,” he believed, “would have to step up economic and military assistance in the Baghdad Pact area, which is now under greatly increased pressure. Turkey, Iran and Pakistan fear that they now lie between two hostile areas—the USSR to the north and the Arabs to the south.”<sup>130</sup> If the United States wished to prevent further gains by the Communist in the region, so his argument went, America absolutely had to increase its military involvement.

Though the Iraqi *coup* prompted an American reappraisal of the optimum level of its involvement in the defensive arrangements of the northern tier, i.e. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan, it was the new Iraqi government’s swing toward Moscow, and its expected withdrawal from the Pact, that brought the United States to strengthen its ties with the remaining members and to commit fully to their defense.<sup>131</sup> Thus, on 5 March 1959 at Ankara, the United States entered into a treaty with Iran, stipulating that “[in] case of

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<sup>128</sup> Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, Vol. XII, 71.

<sup>129</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Dulles and President Eisenhower, July 28, 1958, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, Vol. XII, 113.

<sup>130</sup> Memorandum of Discussion at the 374<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, July 31, 1958, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, Vol. XII, 126

<sup>131</sup> Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, 535.

aggression against Iran, the Government of the United States of American...will take such appropriate action, including the use of armed forces,...in order to assist the Government of Iran at its request.”<sup>132</sup> Additionally, the United States “[reaffirmed] that it [would] continue economic assistance as may be mutually agreed upon...in order to assist the Government of Iran in the preservation of its national independence and integrity and in the effective promotion of its economic development.”<sup>133</sup> Simultaneously, the United States concluded identical defensive treaties with Turkey and Pakistan. With this the United States, though still pleading mere observer status in the Pact, had effectively assumed control over this Britain’s heretofore most important Middle East defensive alliance, which thereafter ceased to be known as the Baghdad Pact and instead adopted a name more in keeping with American convention, CENTO.

Thus, there was a distinct difference between how British responsibilities evolved in and around the Persian Gulf and throughout the rest of the region. After Suez the United States began to step up its involvement in regional defense organizations, such as the Baghdad Pact, in an attempt to curb any efforts by the Soviet Union to expand its influence in the region. This was a policy largely influenced by the prevailing American strategy at the time towards the U.S.S.R., namely that of “containment.” The United States hoped, however, that economic assistance would be sufficient to ensure the Baghdad Pact’s success at restraining Communist encroachment.

When it proved not to be, as evinced by the post-*coup* Iraqi government’s overtures toward Moscow, the United States realized a deepening of its commitment to

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<sup>132</sup> Iranian-United States Agreement for Cooperation In Promoting The Security And Defense Of The Members Of The Baghdad Pact Organization, Signed at Ankara, March 5, 1959, *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1959* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1963), 1021

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 1022

the integrity of these countries and of their governments was necessary. This was largely a corollary of Eisenhower's January 1957 commitment to supply American armed forces to prop up, at a country's request, their régimes against Communist antagonists who sought to overthrow them. The defensive agreements the United States signed with Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan in March 1959 and the United States increased involvement in the Baghdad Pact—now CENTO—were expressions of this renewed commitment.

Though initially reticent to assume any greater sort of military responsibility in the region, when necessary the United States preferred to take responsibility for a preexisting British construction than to carve out new instances of Western influence, as the American relationship with the Baghdad Pact shows. That the imperialist indictment oft levied against the United States was so damning has much to do with this. Still, it must be remembered that the United States wished to do as little of this as it had to. Trying to sound out American intentions vis-à-vis Britain post-Suez, the Pakistani Prime Minister, Huseyn Suhrawardy, explained to Dulles how “he thought it was important to re-establish the prestige and the influence of the UK in the Middle East, and that he assumed that this was in accord with US policy and that we had no desire to push out the British.”<sup>134</sup> Dulles responded by “[assuring] him that this was the case, that [the United States] had constantly refrained from making [its] presence felt in the Middle East under circumstances which could be interpreted as indicating a rivalry with the UK.”<sup>135</sup>

Rivalry with the United Kingdom there really was not. In the years following the Suez Crisis there was rather a great deal of Anglo-American collaboration throughout the region, faced as both countries were with strong interests in the region's oil wealth and in

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<sup>134</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation Between Secretary of State Dulles and Prime Minister Suhrawardy, Department of State, Washington, July 10, 1957, 4 p.m., *FRUS 1955-1957*, Vol. XII, 556.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

preventing the spread of Communism throughout the region. There were, admittedly, moments of disagreement. However, the Suez debacle had made very clear that in a showdown with the United States the United Kingdom would lose, so there really was no point in allowing a disagreement to reach similar proportions. Consequently, both sides worked diligently to ensure that the lines of communication stayed open so as to avoid a similar disaster. Britain's policy in the Middle East post-Suez demonstrates that British leaders had learned they could much more easily accomplish their goals in the region through discussion with the United States than by attempting to act independently. If there was a transfer of power at Suez it was this: the United Kingdom would not act in the region without consultation—and certainly not over the objection of—the United States. However, after the misadventure of Suez the American leadership came around to the realization that the British position in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf, was one of value to the United States. While the United States ideological opposition to unvarnished imperialism would persist, the American leadership found Britain's imperial presence a very useful and convenient shield to its own very real imperial meddling.

## **V. Conclusion**

Much of the misunderstanding over the Suez Crisis can be explained by the secretive nature of diplomacy. Whereas the Anglo-French action to retake the Suez Canal stirred up globally very vocal protests, Britain's actions afterwards tended to be far less brazen. There was, in short, a change of tone: Britain sought to pursue its foreign policy



aims behind closed doors and under the aegis of American leadership, which after Suez became very accommodating.

The British leadership was also of course very eager to forget the Suez episode, which had proven a great embarrassment. The crisis itself had only lasted a mere ten days, and the Conservative government in the United Kingdom did not want to see Eden's mistake lead to their collapse. Eden subsequently fell on his sword, and the responsibility of leading Britain forward then fell on Macmillan.

Macmillan shared Eden's and many in the Cabinet's belief that Britain had been mistreated and misled by the United States, particularly by Dulles, throughout the crisis. His position is understandable, and his anger probably is justifiable. Dulles and Eisenhower's efforts at resolving the crisis in a manner satisfactory to Britain left a lot to be desired, and on numerous occasions Dulles did appear to indicate, albeit indirectly, that the United States would not forcefully oppose Britain's involvement in using military force to unseat Nasser and reoccupy the Canal. Moreover, it seems clear that Eisenhower ought to have known that Britain and France were planning to attack Egypt imminently by at least 28 October, a day before the Israelis were to launch the first part of the coordinated assault, Operation Kadesh. There were also very large inconsistencies, which Eden makes sure to highlight, with respect to American attitudes toward armed overthrow of governments sympathetic to Communism, e.g. the CIA's orchestration of the 1954 Guatemalan *coup d'état* to preemptively prevent Soviet infiltration.<sup>136</sup> Eden also took offense with what he perceived to be asymmetrical policies pursued by the United

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<sup>136</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 634.

States towards their own canal at Panama and what was effectively Britain and France's at Suez.<sup>137</sup>

Fortunately, Macmillan, unlike Eden, was able to suppress whatever resentment he felt towards the United States quickly after the crisis. Instead of allowing these wounds to fester, he let them heal. No doubt the fact that he had not, like Eden, spent his whole political life in Churchill's shadow helped him in this respect significantly: unlike Eden, he did not live under the incessant pressure of wondering how he compared with his herculean mentor. By rapidly closing the book on Suez, Macmillan ended a painful chapter in Britain's history. However, in moving to quickly forget this episode, he lost control of the narrative, which ended up being monopolized by those who only saw a Britain restrained by the United States and not the Britain that vigorously pursued its interests outside of the public eye. After Suez Britain continued to work to ensure a reliable supply of petroleum products from the Middle East and to prevent the expansion of its chief enemy, international Communism, in the region. These were the foreign policy objectives Britain held prior to Suez, though now they were pursued through slightly different means.

The Suez Crisis was really an aberration in the post-war Anglo-American relationship. The strategy of economic coercion Eisenhower employed to force his "ally" to submit to his will was not indicative of the tack the United States would follow in its dealings with the United Kingdom afterwards. Instead, the post-Suez Anglo-American relationship in the Middle East was predicated on a policy that appreciated each state's regional comparative advantage and sought to mold its strategy around that. The paper prepared pursuant to the decision reached at Bermuda to undertake a comprehensive

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<sup>137</sup> Eden, *Full Circle*, 485.

assessment of the potential challenges to the reliable flow of Middle Eastern oil to Western Europe is a good example of this: it identifies the main sources of Middle Eastern oil (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf Sheikhdoms), and it then divides them into areas in which the United Kingdom is best positioned to ensure the West's continued access and those in which the United States holds an advantage. Likewise, when after the Iraqi *coup* the United States sought to deepen its involvement in the defense of the so-called Northern Tier states (Turkey, Iran and Pakistan), it based its defensive alliance on a pre-existing British framework, the Baghdad Pact, which it eventually transformed into CENTO.

Those like Kissinger who interpret the Suez Crisis as an emancipatory moment for the United States, whence America no longer felt or heeded any obligation towards its traditional European allies, are wrong. The United States clearly worked in the wake of the crisis to ensure that Britain's concerns—which increasingly it shared—were looked after. There was, yes, an expansion of American involvement in the Middle East after the Suez episode: with British influence receding in Jordan, Iraq and Egypt there developed a vacuum that the United States opted to fill rather than let the Soviet Union do so. However, Britain still exercised *de jure* suzerainty over many of the key oil-producing states in and outside the Persian Gulf, and this supplied Britain with an important base from which it could continue to influence events in the region, which Smith rightly highlights.

The events in Egypt from 29 October to 7 November 1956 had a large impact on the development of the Anglo-American alliance, insofar as they strengthened the level of cooperation between these two powers and led to a framework whereby Britain could

address its petroleum needs and continue its effort to defend the region from the Soviet Union. There was not a wholesale transfer of all regional responsibilities previously held by the United Kingdom to the United States. Great Britain continued to play an important role in the region based off her longstanding relationships in and around the Persian Gulf that proved resilient despite the Suez episode and Nasser's persistent propaganda exhorting Arabs everywhere to drive out British influence from every corner of the Middle East. Though Eden had miscalculated when he decided to invade Egypt, Macmillan skillfully repaired the damage his action had caused. Their relationship repaired, the United States and the United Kingdom would thereafter approach issues arising in the Middle East with bilateral negotiation instead of the independent, uncoordinated policy that doomed Operation Musketeer.

Such a policy, as it turned out, boded well for British and American interests in petroleum security and preventing Communist expansion in the Middle East that predominated in the minds of both countries' statesmen post 1956. Together, Britain and the United States could achieve far more than alone. Eisenhower's opinion of Anglo-French actions in autumn 1956 was undoubtedly prejudiced by the acknowledged American aim of ending the British Empire, just as Eden's decision to intervene was motivated by his desire to preserve what residual British imperial influence remained. Ironically, though Eden lost his bid to reassert European control over the Suez Canal, he won in his larger goal to preserve British influence in the region. What happened after Suez was a consolidation of British interests in the region: in losing out in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, Britain lost the section of its sphere of influence that would have proven unsustainable to maintain. Instead British imperial interests coalesced around the

countries where British influence was not only the most secure but those where British control generated the greatest returns in terms of petroleum control and Communist defense for the United Kingdom as well as for its now-restored ally, the United States.

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