

The Sinai War and Suez Crisis, 1956-7

By Motti Golani

(July 2010)

The short history of the state of [Israel](#) is replete with wars. Israel was established in 1948 in the midst of a war between Israel and the surrounding [Arab](#) countries, and this war was followed by a few more 'rounds' in the decades that followed. One of the lesser known Arab-Israeli wars was the [Sinai War](#). On October 29, 1956, Israel attacked Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula, and the air forces of Britain and France joined the offensive two days later on October 31. On November 5, British and French ground forces landed on the banks of the Suez Canal and started to follow it southward. In concert, Israel completed its conquest of the Sinai Peninsula without its army, the I.D.F., ever reaching the Canal. On November 7, the major superpowers of the era – the [United States](#) and the [Soviet Union](#) – issued two separate ultimatums forcing Britain and France respectively to halt their attempted seizure of the Suez Canal and, with this, the episode appeared to come to an end. British and French forces left Egypt in December 1956, and Israel completed its withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in March 1957.

In Israeli collective memory, the [Sinai War](#) has all but disappeared, nestled between two other wars that, on the face of things, appear to have been more important: [\[1\]](#) the 1948 War during which the state of Israel was established, and the [Six-Day War of 1967](#), which resulted in dramatic territorial changes that radically transformed the nature of Israel's relations with the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries. In British memory, French memory, and the memory of other involved parties, the Sinai War has blended into the final wars of the two declining empires and the abundance of other Cold War related events that took place during the period. Nonetheless, the Sinai War has great historic significance that memory has been unable to preserve. This is true both on the international level and in the cases of Israel and Egypt respectively. Although this short article focuses primarily on the war from the perspective of Israel, the discussion will be contextualized within the histories of the other parties involved in the war, including: the international community, primarily the two superpowers of the period, the US and the USSR; Britain and France, which were directly involved in the war; and Egypt, where the war took place and against which the war was fought.

The Sinai War was fought within the historical framework of the Cold War, which was at its height in the mid-1950s. [WWII](#) had resulted in two opposing international blocs. One was led by the United States and consisted of the U.S. and its allies, and was typically referred to as 'the Western World' or 'the free world.' Britain and France were two secondary powers within this bloc who, as a result of the remains of their glorious imperial pasts, saw themselves as equal members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was established in 1949 on the basis of the old WWII alliance. [British](#) and [French](#) self-perceptions, and the role of the two countries within NATO, played an important role in the

Home

The Library

About Us

Bookstore

Contact Info

Feedback

Glossary

Israel & the States

Links

News

Publications

Search

Sponsorship

Virtual Israel Experience

© 2010 AICE

outbreak of the war in October 1956 and the developments that followed.

The second bloc, which was an even more direct product of WWII, was led by the Soviet Union. This bloc consisted primarily of the [Eastern European](#) countries that the Soviets had first liberated from [Nazi](#) occupation and subsequently forced to establish communist regimes. In addition to these countries, the Soviet bloc also included countries located adjacent to the border of the Soviet Union, as well as countries ruled by local communist parties.

[China](#) and [Yugoslavia](#) were exceptions in that although they were ruled by communist parties, they developed their own independent policies and, in 1955, even established a third, 'Non-Aligned' bloc. This group was joined by Egypt and a number of the new developing countries of Asia and Africa that emerged with the collapse of the old empires. In addition to other countries that had not been clearly classified as belonging to one bloc or the other, the members of this bloc were actively courted and pressured by the two dominant superpowers. From this perspective, the world of the 1950s can be seen as a vast playing field, no part of which could be left outside the influence of one of the two blocs because it might come under the influence of the opposing one.^[2] The non-conventional weapons possessed by the two superpowers cast a menacing shadow over the Cold War period, to the point that in many cases the superpowers preferred sending smaller countries to the front lines in their stead. Through a series of conventional regional wars, and in some cases by preventing such wars, the two superpowers worked to advance their interests.

Without the above brief description of the Cold War, it is impossible to understand the [Sinai War](#), the factors that sparked it and influenced the way it was conducted and concluded, and its outcome. The Sinai War must be understood as the climax of one of the most important crises in the history of the Cold War: the Suez Crisis, which erupted in July 1956 and concluded in March 1957. The Suez Crisis brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of confrontation and resulted in a rare act of American-Soviet collaboration aimed at halting the Anglo-French-Israeli action against [Egypt](#). This unusual display of cooperation stemmed from the unique nature of the Suez Crisis, which reflected a hitherto unprecedented crisis within NATO as Britain and France worked together to invade Egypt against the explicit position of the United States. The rift that resulted threatened the existence of NATO. The crisis was fueled by considerations that the parties regarded as critical at the time, as well as the complex feelings of people who had recently been leaders of first-rank superpowers but who in the political and military realities of 1956 were simply no longer as important. On the political level and, most importantly, on the level of consciousness, many people in Britain and France had not yet accepted the new realities, and the leaders of these two countries were no exception.

In the 1950s, [British](#) and [French](#) interests in Egypt remained a central element of the international and regional policy of both countries. In addition, Egypt had long been in the midst of an important process of exploring its relations with both Cold War blocs. The Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954, which stipulated a British withdrawal from the Suez Canal by the summer of 1956, greatly intensified the superpowers' interest in Egypt. After all, the Suez Canal was considered one of the most important strategic assets in the region, and the country itself was located on the border of Africa and Asia. After [WWII](#), Egypt, like other young countries in the Middle East, was in the process of trying to find its internal national character and its place in the international arena. Egypt's failed invasion of Palestine in 1948 and the imminent British withdrawal greatly weakened the country's old, corrupt monarchic regime. In July 1952, a 'Free Officers' coup seized control of the government and, within two years, Gamal Abdul Nasser, a young, ambitious leader, with both nationalist and pan-Arab tendencies, had become the President of Egypt. [Nasser](#) sought a neutral place for Egypt in the international arena, between the two Cold War blocs. This approach was based on the assumption that the independence of such a status would enable post-colonial Egypt to

position itself in a manner that would be beneficial to its security and its unstable economy. Nasser also believed that such a policy would enable Egypt to play a central role in the Arab world and beyond. This explains Egypt's energetic participation in the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955, which declared the establishment of the bloc of unaligned countries. It also explains why the Egyptian president refused to join the American inspired anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact that was established the same year. He did not, however, refuse the financial assistance of the International Monetary Fund or the United States in an ambitious project aimed at expanding the agricultural area of the Nile Valley, which was to culminate in the construction of the High Dam at Aswan in the country's south, in Upper Egypt.

Nasser's policy at that time, however, was to balance ties with East and West, and he decided to acquire an unprecedented quantity of weapons from communist [Czechoslovakia](#). This angered the Western powers, especially the staunchly anti-communist [Eisenhower Administration](#), which viewed the arms deal as creating an opportunity for Soviet penetration of the [Middle East](#), which until that point had been exclusively under the sphere of influence of the United States and its allies: Britain and France.

America wasted no time in exerting its own pressure. The Eisenhower administration informed Egypt that if it did not back out of the arms deal with Czechoslovakia, Washington would withdraw its commitment to help fund the construction of the Aswan Dam. Nasser, however, was not willing to consider this option, and on July 19, 1956 the United States announced that it would not be funding the dam and the International Monetary Fund followed suit. Egypt's reaction was swift. One month earlier, on June 13, 1956, the last British soldier had left the Suez Canal under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954, and Egypt now enjoyed exclusive control of the Canal. On July 26, at a mass rally in Alexandria marking the anniversary of the coup, Nasser announced that in response to the American decision, his government had resolved to nationalize the Suez Canal Company. This was the company that had dug the Canal during the 1850s and that had maintained it ever since. The Egyptian decision to nationalize this company, which was traded primarily on the London and Paris stock exchanges, marked the beginning of the Suez Crisis, which culminated in the Sinai War.

Egypt's actions were not without legal basis, as governments are permitted to nationalize corporations operating on their soil and the Suez Canal – from beginning to end – is located in Egyptian territory. Despite the Egyptian decision, traffic in the Canal continued as normal and, in the short term, the economic impact of Nasser's decision was limited. By nationalizing the Canal Company, [Nasser](#) had sought a symbolic act of protest and opposition to the United States and the West that would ultimately have a positive impact on the Western nations' treatment of Egypt, but that would not force [Egypt](#) to sever its new ties with the Soviet Union. It also turns out that Nasser was not the only one who saw his actions in this light. Washington also believed that Nasser should be allowed to blow off some steam while the political and economic pressure on him continued. In stark contrast, London and Paris regarded nationalization of the Canal Company as an act with tremendous immediate significance.

Washington viewed the events through the lens of the Cold War, or the premise that instability and war anywhere in the world, and particularly in regions in which the West was dominant, provided an opportunity for Soviet penetration. For this reason, [President Eisenhower](#) asked Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to respond to the Egyptian declaration with moderation to prevent it from becoming a weapon in the hands of the Egyptian president. In London and Paris, however, Nasser's actions were viewed through the interpretive lens of the final war of imperialism, in which the necessary withdrawal from former colonial territories must be accompanied by actions to safeguard economic and security interests that were still of critical importance. Britain's withdrawal from the Suez Canal, and the guarantees it demanded from Egypt to safeguard free passage through the

Canal by other means, offered a good example of this approach. The developments must also be considered against the backdrop of trade with the East as a whole and the transport of oil in particular, as well as Cold War defense interests and the prospects of a third world war. The United States shared these interests as well, but attempted to secure them through methods it regarded as more modern and up to date than the classical imperialist model employed by Britain and France, which held that a local leader who behaves improperly should be removed from power as soon as possible.

The first party to react was Britain. The day after Nasser's nationalization declaration, [British Prime Minister Anthony Eden](#) announced that the declaration was unacceptable and that his government intended on returning British troops to the Suez Canal to restore order there. This was an extreme response, both in that it was issued immediately and in the content it reflected. It was based on the current British situation assessment and the personality of the British Prime Minister. Britain, which had only recently extricated itself from the serious economic crisis that resulted in WWII, viewed the oil coming from the Persian Gulf as a necessary precondition for its economic prosperity and, according to some senior members of the British leadership, for its very survival. Britain's withdrawal from Palestine in 1948 and its declining status in the [Arab](#) world prevented it from transporting oil via the land pipeline to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Transporting oil around Africa by means of giant tankers was likely to prove economically disastrous, and the Suez Canal remained critically important for Britain. Because Britain's domestic political and economic circumstances and international status prevented it from maintaining a military force in the Suez Canal, the British government had demanded that the withdrawal agreement stipulate that Britain (which served as the point of origin or the point of destination of thirty percent of the maritime traffic travelling through the Canal) retain a special status in the Canal and the right to defend the Canal from harm. Eden and his colleagues regarded Nasser's declaration as precisely such an instance.

The British leadership during the mid-1950s was, in effect, chasing the ghost of its mighty empire. By this time, it the central parts of the empire were no longer under their control and Britain was losing its tenuous hold over its few remaining colonial territories. Nonetheless, the British political elite, and many others at the time, had been raised on a typically imperialistic spirit at the tail end of the Victorian period, and the empire's weakening after World War I, and collapse after [World War II](#), did not necessarily change their fundamental formative worldview. In this context, Eden undertook to teach Nasser an imperialist lesson. Since April 1955, the British Prime Minister had been leading a government that had been established by his political patron Winston Churchill, who resigned before the end of his term. For far too long, Eden had been impatiently waiting in the wings for Churchill's departure, and by the time the latter finally vacated his position, Eden was ill, growing older, and the prisoner of his formative past, which sometimes overpowered his better judgment. To a certain degree, Eden had built his political image on his opposition to the Munich Pact of 1938 as Foreign Secretary. Now, in 1955, he was determined, as he put it, to not to let another Hitler grow dangerously powerful, even if his name was Nasser.

Although the Americans did not accept Eden's approach, the French did. France had experienced a number of disappointments after WWII, including the 1954 defeat in Vietnam, which in 1956 was still fresh in their minds. More important in the context of the Canal was the fact that, in 1956, France was in the midst of a gradually intensifying war in Algeria. The Algerian rebellion against French rule that had erupted in November 1954 refused to die out, and more and more French soldiers were being sent back in vain to the territory that the French leadership still regarded as part of metropolitan France. In 1956, the French were actively engaged in searching for the main source of support for the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), which was leading the rebellion in Algeria, and reached the conclusion that it was Nasser.

Nasser's pan-Arab and pan-African rhetoric - in conjunction with his attitude toward the West, his recent arms deal with Czechoslovakia, the refuge he had afforded a number of leaders of the rebellion, and the fact that the rebel's radio station were transmitting from Cairo - all caused France to suspect that Nasser was providing the rebels with an ongoing supply of weapons and aid. Here too, the desired solution of removing Nasser from power must be understood as stemming in spirit from the imperial past. For this reason, when Britain called on France to join the effort to 'restore order' to the Suez Canal, the invitation fell on attentive ears in Paris.

Between August and October 1956, the West conducted two parallel campaigns with regard to the Suez Crisis: a public one led by the United States (by means of the conference of the "Canal-Using Nations" and the institutions of the U.N.); and a covert one, which was also a major concern of the United States, which involved preparations for an Anglo-French invasion of Egypt. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had announced that it would fund the construction of the large dam at Aswan, demonstrating that the poverty of millions of its own people would not stop the Kremlin from providing aid to other countries in which it had political interest.

It was difficult for Eden to act in light of the unwavering opposition of the United States, and the inclusion of France in the plan did not sway Eisenhower from his position. Eden was also having trouble mobilizing support at home. From the beginning of the crisis, his vengeful approach to Egypt met with resistance within the opposition and within Eden's own party, including government ministers and, most importantly, the Secretary of War. Eden could not even find support from his legal advisors, who explained to him that he had no legal pretext for war against Egypt. The mobilization of reserve forces, which began in August and dragged on due to Britain's political and operative inability to move against Egypt (which stemmed primarily from the fact that in 1956, the British military was not prepared for a long-range amphibious operation), further intensified internal unrest in Britain. In this context, the Prime Minister sunk deeper and deeper into a campaign of half truths and lies that brought him to the verge of undemocratic action.

The French, in contrast, were better prepared for a war with Egypt. France already had forces mobilized for a war in North Africa and it could count on public support by framing its campaign to defend the Suez Canal as part of the same war. However, Paris was also deterred by the intensity of the United States' determination to prevent war. The two superpowers of yesterday were therefore in need of a pretext that could serve as an overpowering reason to go to war or, as they phrased it, to "impose peace" along the Suez Canal. It was at this point during the Suez Crisis that Israel entered the picture. Although officials in London and Paris had already discussed the possibility that Israel might provide them with a pretext for attacking the Suez Canal, it was still not clear how this could happen, which led to a series of negotiations with Israeli representatives were conducted in this spirit.

Initially, Israel was not involved in the Suez Crisis. Furthermore, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister and Defense Minister at the time, was pleased by the fact that the crisis had assumed the form of a conflict between Egypt and the West. Israel was greatly concerned by Britain's withdrawal from Egypt. From Israel's perspective, the completion of the British withdrawal from the Suez Canal in June 1956 left Israel exposed to a possible Egyptian threat, which was looking increasingly menacing now that Nasser had emerged as the spokesperson of the Arab world and a growing number of voices were calling on him to lead an all-Arab war aimed at eradicating Israel. As we have seen, Nasser's large arms deal with Czechoslovakia greatly intensified Israel's fear of an Egyptian attack or an all-Arab attack similar to the one launched in 1948. As early as 1955, Israel decided not to actively insist on its right of free passage through the Suez Canal, even though the Egyptian prohibition was ostensibly a *casus belli*, or a justification for war. Israel, authorities in Jerusalem assessed,

had neither the military and operative capability nor the international backing necessary to undertake action to ensure its rights in the Canal^[3] In this context, Ben-Gurion was enamored by the idea of Israel's work being carried out by others.

The problem was that by 1956, Ben-Gurion - Israel's founding father - was no longer omnipotent. His curious retirement to Sde-Boker in late 1953 ushered to the center of Israel's political stage two contradictory figures, between whom the struggle was only settled in the summer of 1956. Ben-Gurion had no choice but to support the rising star that had emerged victorious from this domestic Israeli political struggle, particularly after he had been the one who ultimately helped the victor overpower his adversary.

The first figure was Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, Ben-Gurion's long-time colleague in the *Mapai* party who took over as Prime Minister upon Ben-Gurion's resignation in late 1953. Sharett espoused a policy that was politically moderate but that also called for maintaining Israel's military strength. It was a policy based on an optimistic analysis of the outcome of the 1948 War, which held that after their defeat, the Arab countries would eventually be forced to accept the existence of Israel and perhaps even reach a peace agreement. For this reason, Sharett reasoned, Israel should not pour fuel on the fire and should instead maintain its strength, defend itself when there is no other choice, and certainly not initiate military action before peace or acquiescence was achieved. In his capacity as Prime Minister, Sharett acquired political power that could not be ignored. Even after Ben-Gurion returned to the Defense Ministry in February 1955 and the Prime Minister's Office in November of the same year, Sharett was still capable of mobilizing support within the government for his struggle against military and political activism.

The second figure was Lieutenant General Moshe Dayan, whose political power was also on the rise following Ben-Gurion's resignation and temporary retirement. One of the last things Ben-Gurion did in December 1953 before retiring to Sde-Boker was to appoint Dayan as the Chief of General Staff of the I.D.F. Although he was a uniformed officer in a democratically structured country, Dayan was very much a product of the culture of the newly established state of Israel, in which the relationship between the army and the elected civilian government had not yet taken proper form. Dayan also belonged to Israel's ruling party *Mapai*, and was known to be particularly close to Ben-Gurion, who trusted his judgment and even admired him to a certain degree. For many members of Ben-Gurion's generation, who had immigrated to Israel between 1904 and 1923 (during the waves of immigration referred to by Israeli and Zionist historiography as the "second *aliyah*" and the "third *aliyah*"), Dayan represented the embodiment of the 'new Jew' or the *Sabra*. He was rough, aggressive, independent, and devoid of the anxieties of those who immigrated to Israel from the Diaspora.

Dayan's political approach was the opposite of Sharett's. From his perspective, if Israel wanted to remain in existence, it had to initiate a 'second round' of fighting, or another war to follow the one it had fought in 1948. Dayan accepted the approach of Ben-Gurion, Sharett, and others who held that there could be no 'final battle' for Israel, because the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be settled by military victory. Dayan also understood that a new round of warfare would inevitably set the stage for the one to follow, unless it was followed by a peace treaty that was beneficial to all parties. Because Israel was gradually losing the deterrence it had acquired with the victory of 1948-9, Dayan believed, it was necessary to launch a war immediately, preferably against the most powerful of Israel's enemies: Egypt. The aim of the war would be to induce Egypt and the other Arab countries that would undoubtedly follow to sign a peace treaty with Israel. According to Dayan, this peace treaty would expand Israel's difficult-to-defend borders, help the young country solve its water problem, and, most importantly, lift the threat of war. Like Sharett, Dayan understood well that Israel's population, which was made up mostly of immigrants who had recently arrived in the

country, was living in an unacceptable state of constant fear of war that seriously hampered its ability to maintain political and economic stability and to ensure its defense. Thus, the argument between Dayan and Sharett had not to do with the goal but rather with the method of achieving it.

Dayan not only voiced his opinion within internal discussions of the I.D.F. General Staff but also openly confronted Prime Minister Sharett and even worked to bring Ben-Gurion back into the government. He was only saved from being stripped of his command by the fact that he always made sure to carry out Sharett's instructions and kept his actual actions of dissent limited to threats of resignation. However, things changed after Ben-Gurion returned to the government in February 1955.^[4] Initially as defense minister and subsequently as prime minister, Israel's 'founding father' provided support for Dayan and his philosophy of defense. Ben-Gurion adopted the C.G.S.'s premise that Israel had no choice but to pursue another war, although he opposed Dayan's aggressiveness and regarded the prospect of another war as much more risky than Dayan did. In any event, the struggle between Sharett's approach and Dayan's approach had to be settled. Dayan attempted to push Israel into war with Egypt by intensifying Israel's response to Palestinian terrorist attacks originating in Egypt and Jordan, but Sharett frustrated his efforts. When the Egyptians closed the Straits of Tiran (which control the passage from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea) to Israeli shipping, Dayan and Ben-Gurion legitimately argued that the action was a *casus belli*, and it was decided to seize the Straits on the assumption that such an action could potentially evolve into a war. Although other factors prevented Israel from taking this action as well (see below), the blame was placed on Sharett. In June 1956, former Prime Minister Sharett was removed from the Foreign Ministry, thus eliminating the main obstacle to Dayan's approach. It also so happened that at the very same time, the Israeli government was in the midst of a process that would eventually result in Israel's cooperation with France and Britain in the Suez Crisis.

In the autumn of 1955, Israel's attempt to open the Straits of Tiran by using military force was halted by the announcement of the Egyptian-Czechoslovakian arms deal. Ben-Gurion immediately informed his government and the I.D.F. that until Israel achieved a 'counter arms deal,' it would take no action that could evolve into a war, neither military nor otherwise. Dayan understood the situation all too well, and with the help of Shimon Peres, the director-general of the Defense Ministry and another last-minute appointment made by Ben-Gurion in late 1953, Dayan forged a linkage between Israeli and French interests. Together, Dayan and Peres convinced the French to supply Israel with weapons based on the premise that both countries had a common enemy: Nasser's Egypt. As Ben-Gurion's representatives, and with Sharett out of the way, Dayan and Peres signed a secret agreement with France on June 26, 1956. According to the agreement (which was known as the "Vermars Agreement"), France would supply Israel with high quality weapons for air and ground warfare and, in exchange, Israel would assist the French war against the rebellion in Algeria with intelligence and, if need be, direct military action against Egyptian targets.^[5] On July 12, a secret Israeli-French headquarters was established in Paris and, on July 24, Israel received its first arms shipment from France -- the Suez Crisis erupted just two days later, on July 26.

The timing of the crisis could not have been better for those in favor of an Israel-initiated war. Dayan helped Ben-Gurion overcome his hesitations, and when France asked Israel to consider possible military action against Egypt in light of the crisis evolving around the Suez Canal, Israel could not have refused even if it wanted to. Major General Meir Amit, head of the I.D.F. General Staff Branch, and subsequently Director-General Peres, C.G.S. Dayan, and Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir were all sent for talks to coordinate with the French government and the commanders of the French military.

In August and September 1956, after it became clear that the Anglo-French war effort had

run into some snags, the British reminded their French allies that they could expect a contribution from their ally in the Middle East to the war then evolving against Egypt. At that time, officials in Paris and London were already discussing the possibility of Israel providing a pretext for the two European allies to invade the Suez Canal region. Once the French realized that not only could Israel do so but that it possessed impressive military capabilities, Ben-Gurion received a secret invitation to come to Paris. The consultations took place on October 22-24, 1956, in a villa in Sevres, a quiet suburb of Paris. There, Ben-Gurion met not only with French Prime Minister Guy Mollet and the French government ministers whose portfolios related to the issue, but, to his surprise, also with British Foreign Minister Selwyn Lloyd, who entered one of the meetings unexpectedly. At that point in time, Israeli-British relations were still in the shadow of the struggle waged by Palestine's organized Jewish community against Britain's Palestine policy after WWII and of the former Mandate power's antagonism toward Israel during its first years of statehood. The atmosphere was tense, and Ben-Gurion suspected the British Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of intending to push the Israelis into the Egyptian arena, to take advantage of the operation as a pretext for war in Egypt, and then to abandon them. To the dismay of the French, the talks with the British concluded with no agreement.

Dayan found the way out of the crisis by proposing the idea of "starting the war from the end." According to his proposal, "Israel would stir up dust" along the Suez Canal by landing a small military force there. In response, Britain and France would issue simultaneous separate ultimatums to Israel and Egypt warning that if both countries did not withdraw its military forces to at least 10 miles from the Suez Canal within 12 hours, the two European powers would intervene to "restore peace" to the Canal Zone. According to the script developed by Dayan, Israel would comply immediately, whereas it was reasonable to assume that the Egyptians would not. The French accepted the plan, and French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau was dispatched to the private residence of the British prime minister to inform him of "the Dayan Plan." After the Prime Minister approved the plan as well, Britain dispatched two senior representatives to Sevres. On October 24, 1956, Britain, France, and Israel signed the tripartite "Sevres Agreement," which later came to be known as "the Collusion."

To ensure Israeli interests, the Sevres Agreement stipulated that the French navy would secure Israel's coastline and French pilots in French planes would be stationed in Israel, which was still unable to make use of most of the jet planes it had purchased from France. Meanwhile, the British would temporarily lift its planned naval siege on Israel in the event that Israel attacked [Jordan](#), which was a British ally with a signed defense agreement with the European power. The British even warned King Hussein that Jordanian forces were not to attack Israel from the east if Israel was to get involved in a war to the west. Equally as important, it was concluded that after its symbolic operation by the Suez Canal – for 36 hours, beginning at the end of the 12 hour ultimatum - Israel would take no further action until it was clear that the British and French air forces were operating effectively against Egypt. Only then, in parallel to an Anglo-French landing of ground forces at the Suez Canal, would the [I.D.F.](#) invade the Sinai Peninsula to pursue Israeli interests. The Israeli objective was to seize the route to the Straits of Tiran along the eastern coast of the Sinai Peninsula and the Straits themselves, as well as conquer the northern Sinai Peninsula, which was aimed at securing Israel's southern border and acquiring a bargaining chip for subsequent peace negotiations with Egypt.^[6]

[Israel](#) fulfilled its obligations as delineated in the "Sevres Agreement." On October 29, 1956, an Israeli paratrooper battalion was dropped approximately 40 miles east of the Suez Canal. Israel explained the action to a surprised United States, as well as to the Israeli public which had not been expecting such a move, by framing it as a broad retaliatory operation against terrorist actions originating across the Egyptian border.^[7] The stunned Egyptians, who had

thinned out their forces in the Sinai Peninsula, as most of their attention was now focused on the threat of a possible Anglo-French invasion north of the Suez Canal, were hard pressed to respond. The ultimatum was issued, Israel announced that it would abide by its terms as planned, and Egypt, as expected, refused to do so. Still, the 12 hour ultimatum passed, and the British Royal Air Force, which was supposed to attack first, failed to do so. Although, in retrospect, the delay was caused by weather problems, at the time it served to confirm Ben-Gurion's fears regarding malicious Britain intentions. For this reason, Dayan chose not to inform the Israeli Prime Minister of the mishap. He also did not inform Ben-Gurion of the fact that the commander of the Israeli Southern Command – who was in command of the forces that were about to invade the Sinai Peninsula and had not been informed of the details of the 'Sevres Agreement' – allowed his troops to invade prior to the onset of the British air attack on Egypt, in fear that [Ben-Gurion](#) would order him to pull all I.D.F. forces back to the Israeli border.

In the end, Britain launched its air attack against Egypt on October 31, prompting Israel to accelerate its military action and, on November 6, to complete its conquest of the Sinai Peninsula, including the Straits of Tiran and, as agreed, without the Suez Canal. The small delegation of the Egyptian army in the Peninsula, which had not yet managed to put into operation the small portion of the Czechoslovakian arms deal that had been received by that point, offered significant resistance at a number of locations but were quickly forced to retreat in face of the clear advantage of the [I.D.F.](#), which was backed by direct French support and indirect British support from the air and the sea. In this way, the I.D.F. was engaged primarily in fighting the sand: the tough sandy terrain of the Sinai desert, and the sand of the international political hourglass.

The landing of Anglo-French ground forces took much longer than planned. The experienced [British](#) and [French](#) forces worked to overcome a series of difficult logistical problems that were exacerbated by the mounting political pressure on the two countries. It was only on November 5 that the joint forces managed to land in Egypt (“Operation Musketeer”). In a combined air and sea operation, French forces landed at Port Fuad at the northeastern entrance to the Suez Canal, while at the same time and in the same manner, British forces landed at [Port Said](#) at the northwestern entrance to the Canal. Despite the fact that the British were returning to an arena which they had vacated only months earlier and the French military was fully mobilized and in the midst of an active war, the operation progressed slowly. The main reason was the extensive coordination among the forces required by such a complex international, multi-service landing operation: coordination efforts between the French and the British on all levels; direct coordination efforts between France and Israel; and indirect British-Israeli coordination facilitated by the French. Because of the delay, the invading forces had only reached Qantara on the banks of the Suez Canal, approximately 13 miles from the northern entrance to the Canal itself, by the time the United States and the Soviet Union began to intensify political pressure (separately, of course) for an end to the fighting. On November 7, two days after their landing in Egypt, the British and French governments announced the completion of their operations in Egypt and, by December 21, 1956, the last British and French soldiers had left Egypt. In reality, however, the situation in the Canal Zone had not changed, Nasser remained in power, and the extent of the fiasco was clear.

The similar reactions from Moscow and Washington were motivated by different factors. Both superpowers demanded that Britain, France, and Israel immediately cease their invasion of Egypt and withdraw their troops. The Soviets, whose relations with Egypt had grown much closer since [Nasser](#) seized power in Cairo, were concerned about the possible removal of their young Egyptian ally, which proved to be a justifiable concern in light of the aims of the tripartite invasion. Moscow was also not prepared on an operative level for a military confrontation with Britain and France, not to mention the United States. The Warsaw Pact

(the Eastern response to NATO) was only established in 1955 and, in mid-1956, the Soviet Union was still busy subjugating its "allies" in [Eastern Europe](#), where the reverberations of the Soviet invasion of Poland and Hungary could still be felt.

For its part, the United States could not consider foreign military involvement so soon after the Korean War. Officials also worried about sustaining Arab good will, which they needed to maintain the anti-Soviet alliance system they constructed in the [Middle East](#). But more important than these factors were Washington's apprehensions regarding a possible rift in NATO, and a military confrontation with Britain and France was of course out of the question. Therefore, the White House was pervaded by the anger and insult of a betrayed government whose allies had acted behind its back. Clearly, the two superpowers also feared an escalation that could reach the point of nuclear confrontation. This fear overshadowed every war that broke out during the Cold War era, especially wars involving countries such as Britain and France, who already possessed non-conventional capabilities.

The frontline position of Britain and France in the confrontation with the two superpowers eased the situation somewhat for Israel, which was regarded merely as an appendage to the two primary allies. For this reason, in contrast to the French and British governments, the Israeli government was able to bargain with the United States and the [UN](#) prior to Israel's March 1957 withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. These negotiations would not have been possible had [Ben-Gurion](#) not informed the United States as early as November 7 1956, that he was willing, in principle, to withdraw from the entire Sinai Peninsula. After sending this message, Israel tried to insist on three terms for withdrawal: 1) UN control of the [Gaza Strip](#), which since 1949 had been under Egyptian military rule; 2) continued Israeli control of the route to the Straits of Tiran via the eastern coast of the Sinai Peninsula; and 3) international guarantees for free maritime traffic in the Bay of Aqaba. Israel's strength was limited, however, and it was forced to compromise, but not without a serious internal debate and demonstrations staged by left-wing and right-wing Israeli opponents of the withdrawal. It was agreed that the UN would control the Gaza Strip, and the UN did in fact enter the Strip, followed by Egypt. Israel was compelled to withdraw from the entire Sinai Peninsula and to make due with an American guarantee of free maritime travel in the Bay of Aqaba.

[Israel](#) was very resistant to a full withdrawal from Sinai and ultimately pulled back only after [Eisenhower](#) made draconian threats. The president was personally offended because the attack took place a week before the presidential election, his allies didn't consult him, and the war potentially could expand into a wider conflict that might have involved the Soviets. Eisenhower said he was committed to aiding whoever was the victim of aggression. He believed that if force were permitted to settle a political dispute like Suez, then the future of the United Nations was in danger. After his reelection, he began immediately to pressure Israel to withdraw from the territory they had captured in the Sinai to avoid angering the Arabs because they might embargo oil. Eisenhower went on television to criticize Israel's failure to withdraw from the territory it captured in the Sinai War and warned that he would impose sanctions if it failed to comply. To pressure Israel to withdraw from the Sinai, Eisenhower escalated his threats to the point where he was prepared to cut off all economic aid, to lift the tax-exempt status of the United Jewish Appeal and to apply sanctions on Israel. Members of Congress opposed the threats, and said they would prevent them from being enforced, but Israel could not risk a breach with the power that Ben-Gurion wanted to be its most important ally.

With the conclusion of the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in March 1957, the Suez Crisis came to an end. The crisis, and the war that marked its climax in October November 1956, had important historical ramifications. The status of the [Soviet Union](#) in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular increased substantially. In addition, Nasser was able to present the episode as an historic Egyptian victory and as *his* victory, which was

not an unfounded claim. Nasser had been attacked by a powerful coalition and had ended up losing neither territory nor economic capability (the work at Aswan continued with Soviet funding). Furthermore, the Suez Canal Company remained nationalized and devoid of any British presence, which now would clearly never be restored. In addition, Nasser humiliated the French, and in this way provided indirect aid to the rebellion in Algeria. [Nasser](#) also prevented Israel from making territorial gains and his status in the Arab world increased significantly.

The Soviet Union's expanding influence in Egypt, and the region as a whole, following the war had serious repercussions for Western interests. The most serious consequence was the fall of the pro-Western Hashemite regime in Iraq in 1958, which was accompanied by the undermining of the regimes in [Jordan](#) and [Lebanon](#) and the establishment of the Soviet inspired Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic. The backing of the Soviets also provided Nasser the confidence and the military hardware that encouraged him to become entangled in a war in Yemen and to provoke another war against Israel in 1967.

Although the Suez Crisis was one of the reasons that France was forced to withdraw from [Algeria](#) in 1962, its reverberations in France could also be felt years earlier. For example, the Suez Crisis accelerated the end of the Fourth Republic in 1958, the return to power of Charles de Gaulle, and the establishment of the Fifth Republic, which is still in existence today.

In Britain, the Prime Minister was removed from office and went into self-imposed exile, never returning to politics. After the war, Britain also lost the little status it still retained in the [Middle East](#), as the Hashemite dynasty was expelled from Iraq and as the United States replaced England as Jordan's main ally. But the most important long-term impact of the Suez Crisis in general, and the Sinai War in particular, was the important role it played in drawing the curtain on the era of imperialism in public consciousness and the consciousness of decision makers. The end of the British and the French empires would be felt more markedly during the following decade.

Israel, like Egypt, was also a significant beneficiary of the war, first and foremost in the international arena. The White House was profoundly impressed by Israel's military capabilities, as well as by its immediate principal positive response in November 7, to the U.S. president's demand to withdraw its forces to avoid compromising the interests of the West. The Israeli government's ability to implement its decision to withdraw, despite considerable domestic opposition, was an indication of the country's democratic strength. Relations between [Israel and the United States](#), which until then had been formal and, at times, had verged on true hostility, grew increasingly close. The U.S., which had started to doubt the possibility of forging a regional anti-Soviet alliance, moved more and more in the direction of bilateral relations, primarily with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Paradoxically, the Sinai War played a central role in laying the foundation for the special relationship between Israel and the United States that began to take shape in the mid-1960s and that is well known today.

Equally as surprising, or so it seemed at the time, was the slowly but steadily improving relationship between Israel and Britain. The two countries "delivered the goods" for one other during the war, and the departure of Eden - whom Israel had regarded as an antagonist - and, more importantly, Britain's new self-conception as a country that was no longer an imperial power, enabled the two nations to revert to the close ties that were reminiscent of the pre-WWII British-Zionist alliance.

Less surprising was Israel's alliance with the French, which was significantly bolstered by the war. With a degree of defiance toward the United States that grew less relevant with the passage of time, France continued its economic and military support of [Israel](#). This included

assisting Israel in its establishment of the nuclear reactor in Dimona. French-Israeli relations also withstood the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth French Republic, and remained intact until the eve of the Six-Day War.

In Africa and East Asia, the region of influence of the bloc of non-aligned nations of which [Egypt](#) was a member, the war actually resulted in warmer relations with Israel, which was now perceived as a small country capable of defending itself. During the two decades that followed, Israel became an important provider of agricultural and military knowledge for a large number of countries in the region. All of these factors had significant influence on Israel's prosperity, primarily during the decade following the war, but also in the years to come.

Within Israel, the Sinai War slowed the decline of Ben-Gurion and his Mapai party, which achieved an unprecedented victory in the general elections of 1959. The outcome of the war supported the doctrine that military achievement does not bring an end to war and that territorial considerations are not the only measure of wartime victory. In fact, some circles within Israeli politics continue to espouse this conception today. Dayan's influence also increased, and his approach - which was based on the use of force - became Israel's policy of choice at least until the [Yom Kippur War of 1973](#). Most importantly, the military victory gave Israelis a sense of security for the first time. Previously, they had felt as if the country was on the verge of destruction.

Instead of understanding each of the wars fought between Israel and its neighbors between 1948 and 1973 as separate, unrelated wars, we would be wiser to understand them together, as a series of secondary campaigns, or as one twenty-five year war fought in the same arena, under similar conditions, and between the same parties: the War of Independence, the Sinai War, the war for water in the north in the 1960s, the Six-Day War, the War of Attrition, and the Yom Kippur War. From an historical perspective, the "Sinai War" marked the point at which Israel's existence and survival was no longer in question.

Further reading:

1. Mordechai Bar-On, *The Gates of Gaza*, 1994.
2. Motti Golani, *Israel in Search of A War*, 1998.
3. Kith Kyle, *Suez*, 1991 (2003).
4. William R. Louis, Roger Owen (Eds.), *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences*, 1989.
5. Simon C. Smith, *Reassessing Suez 1956*, 2008.

[1] This is reflected in the fact that the term 'Sinai Operation,' which was intentionally used at the time to portray the event as an 'operation' instead of a 'war,' remains deeply ingrained in Israeli collective memory.

[2] From the American perspective, this conception was known as 'containment' and was formulated in 1947 by George Kennan of the U.S. State Department.

[3] In September 1954, the Israeli vessel *Bat Galim* was sent to test whether the Egyptians would enforce their decision to deny Israeli ships the right to pass through the Canal. The crew was arrested and later released, and the ship was confiscated. As a result, Israel received international sympathy, but nothing more.

[4] Ben-Gurion returned to the government after Pinhas Lavon, his replacement as Defense Minister, was removed from office. Lavon was removed in the wake of a failed attempt to

disrupt British-Egyptians relations by means of a series of symbolic attacks against Western cultural sites throughout Egypt. The overall aim of the attacks was to make it more difficult to reach a British-Egyptian agreement that would result in the British withdrawal from the Suez Canal. The episode was nicknamed *Esek Habish* (the unfortunate affair).

[5] For this purpose, France asked Israel to plan an attack against anti-French radio transmission sites in Egypt and Syria.

[6] The possibility of an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty was not without foundation. In 1956, Eisenhower envoy Robert Anderson shuttled back and forth between Jerusalem and Cairo a number of times. During the talks, Nasser indicated that there was no real problem between Egypt and Israel, but that making peace with Israel would cost him his life.

[7] On the eve of the war, in order to mislead the United States and the Israeli public, the I.D.F. massed troops as if it were about to attack Jordan to the east and not Egypt to the southwest.

Prof. Motti Golani is an historian of Mandate Palestine and the State of Israel at the University of Haifa in Israel. He wrote on Jerusalem and Zionism, Sinai War of 1956, on Israel – Power and Memory and on the End of the British Mandate for Palestine. He is now working on a biography of Chaim Weizmann and on the Israeli narratives on the 1948 War of Independence.

[Table of Contents](#)

Copyright 2010 The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise