

Colonialism, Nationalism and the Cold War: Road to the Suez War in 1956

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Introduction

The decade of the 1950s was the period in which the Cold War globalized and the tension of the East-West relations mounted to a climax. In Europe, the Cold War came to be structurized by West-Germany's entry into NATO and the creation of the Warsaw Pact as its rival. The Cold War spread through Asia, and a 'hot war' broke out on the Korean Peninsula which was followed by the military conflict in the Taiwan Straits. Battles were in progress in Indochina, Malaya and even in Africa between the European colonialist powers and 'the communists'. We can find some historical cases in which the nationalists fighting against the colonial power felt sympathy towards socialism and got close to socialist states. On the other hand, it was common for the European colonial powers, especially after the Second World War, to interpret the resistance against colonial rule as 'disorder' or 'emergency', to label the anti-colonialist movements as 'communism' and to suppress them ruthlessly by military force. ¹

The subject of this paper concerns the last phase of British imperialism the climax of which was the Suez War in 1956. It is wrong to understand the dispute between Britain and Egypt which led to the Suez War in the context of the Cold War. It was a conflict separate

from the 'Cold War', revolving around the conflict between colonialization and nationalism and intertwined with regional disputes such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the conflict between Egypt and Iraq concerning initiatives in the Arab world, and the competition between Britain and the United States for influence in the Middle East. However, as the global Cold War progressed, this Middle East dispute became interconnected with the 'Cold War' in many ways, and 'Cold War rhetoric' was brought into the dispute by the political leaders of Britain, the United States, and Iraq. The aim of this paper is to examine Britain's Middle East policies from the late 1940s to the middle of 1950s and to analyze the interconnection between the colonialism-nationalism conflict and the 'Cold War'.

I British Policy in the Middle East and the Arab Nationalism

1

After the Second World War, the fundamental objective of British external policy was to preserve 'world-power status' along with the United States and the Soviet Union. At the end of the Second World War, Sir Orme Sargent, who was soon to become Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, assessed Britain's position within the future constellation of great powers and argued:

[But] the fact remains that in the minds of our big partners, especially in that of the United States, there is a feeling that Great Britain is now a secondary Power and can be treated as

such, and that in the long run all will be well if they — the United States and the Soviet Union — as the two supreme World Powers of the future, understand one another. It is this misconception which it must be our policy to combat. ²

The essential factors for guaranteeing world-power status were considered to be preservation of (1) the 'special relationship with the United States and (2) the British Empire in the Middle East. The British Chiefs of Staff crystallized this point:

Today, we are still a world power, shouldering many and heavy responsibilities. We believe the privileged position that we, in contrast to the other European nations, enjoy with the United States and the attention which she now pays to our strategic and other opinions, and to our requirements, is directly due to our hold on the Middle East and all that this involves. ³

However, a British presence in the Middle East was not insisted upon based on confidence in her power to defend the area. The difficulties which Britain experienced since then arose from the gap between the political desire to dominate the area and the power to realize it.

The Foreign Secretary of the Labour government, Ernest Bevin, was determined to maintain control over 'the vital Imperial connection' through bilateral treaties based on an 'equal partnership' with Middle Eastern states which would guarantee Britain the right to re-occupy and to use the bases in the area in case of war or emergency. ⁴ Yet, after the Second World War the tide of nationalism rose against colonialism in the Middle East and the decline of British influence was

becoming more obvious year by year.

At the end of 1945, the Egyptian government made a formal proposal to the British to negotiate the revision of the 1936 Treaty. Under this treaty, the British had the right to station a garrison at the huge military bases on the west side of the Suez Canal and, in case of emergency, to use all facilities including ports, aerodromes and communication stations in Egypt. At the end of the Second World War, the Canal base, at which were stationed more than 200,000 British troops, was seen by the Egyptian people as a symbol of Egyptian subordination to Britain and the withdrawal of the British troops became an issue of national importance.⁵ Yet, the policy makers in London underestimated the rising force of nationalism in Egypt. Ex-Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, who negotiated the 1936 Treaty with Egypt, referring to the fact that 'the United States continues to use bases in British territory in the West Indies', argued that he regarded as entirely unjustified the suggestion that the 1936 Treaty 'inflicted humiliation upon Egypt' or 'was derogatory to Egyptian sovereign status'. He said that 'the security of the Canal zone is, at one and the same time, an Egyptian interest and a British Imperial interest'.⁶

In October 1946, Bevin and the Egyptian Prime Minister Sidky Pasha reached an agreement which stated the gradual withdrawal of British troops and the establishment of a Joint Defence Board. Although the British right to reoccupy the bases was not guaranteed in writing, Sidky confirmed it orally. However, 'the Bevin-Sidky Protocol' failed because of the conflict between Britain and Egypt over the sovereignty of Sudan.

The Iraqi government, pressured by the Iraq's nationalist movement, requested the negotiations with Britain concerning the revision

of the 1930 Treaty, and the two governments signed a new treaty at Portsmouth in January of 1948. Yet, the Iraqi nationalists were not satisfied with the new treaty which subordinated Iraq to Britain just as the previous treaty did. In the face of furious public protests, the pro-British Iraqi government fell and the Portsmouth Treaty became a dead letter.

Bevin's secretary Sir Pearson Dixon wrote in retrospect about the negotiation with Egypt that 'we couldn't have done better than this', and argued as follows:

The days are past when we could treat Egypt *de haut en bas*, and act as a great Power using a little Power's territory for our own purposes as and when we judged our interests required it....If we wanted to maintain our old position of treating Egypt as a dependency or quasi-colony, we could only do so by the exercise of force, and we no longer have the force or the wish to act that way. ⁷

However, Bevin and the Labour government had not yet understood the strength of Arab nationalism. The British government unilaterally declared the continuation of the old treaties and announced that British troops would remain at the bases in Egypt and Iraq. ⁸

2

In the past, Britain was able to maintain its dominant status in the Middle East by demonstrating to client states the 'benefits of the Empire' which included guarantees of security and of economic and military aid. However, it was now impossible to share the 'benefits of

the Empire' with them. Therefore, the British government tried to use the struggle with 'a new common enemy', namely Soviet Russia and Communism, to legitimize the new treaties. This strategy was an attempt to pull the Middle Eastern nations into a 'new Allied structure' to oppose 'a new common enemy' and to convert the existing British bases in the Middle East into 'an Allied base within the Allied Middle East Command'. It was also an attempt to maintain the military presence of Britain under the veil of 'Allied cooperation'. The plan to establish the Middle East Command, the name of which was changed later to Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO), was pressed forward through consultation with the United States. The immediate aim of the British government was to persuade the Egyptians to offer the bases to 'the Allies'.⁹ Every military plan relating to Egypt was preceded by 'Allied' after this time. Yet, as even the British Chiefs of Staff Committee acknowledged, 'it would not be easy to make a plausible case to convince the Egyptians that the Middle East base was primarily an Allied Base', because 'almost all the troops in the Middle East would be British'.¹⁰

Under the Conservative government led by Winston S. Churchill who came back to power in 1951, the negotiations with the Egyptians over the Suez base continued with difficulty. In the winter of 1951/1952, there were many anti-British movements by Egyptian people which developed into military clashes between the British army and guerrillas. Sir Pearson Dixon, then as an Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, observed the predicament in Egypt quite objectively. He wrote:

Thinking over our difficulties in Egypt, it seems to me

that the essential difficulty arises from the very obvious fact that we lack power. The Egyptians know this, and that accounts for their intransigence.

On a strictly realistic view we ought to recognize that our lack of power must limit what we can do, and should lead us to a policy of surrender or near surrender imposed by necessity. ¹¹

Prime Minister Churchill, confronted with the increasing strains in Anglo-Egyptian relations and decreasing British influence in the Middle East, was said to have viciously attacked the Egyptians, crying: 'Tell them that if we have any more of their cheek we will set the Jews on them and drive them into the gutter, from which they should never have emerged'. ¹² In contrast, Foreign Secretary Eden recognized that 'there is no chance of securing Egyptian agreement at present to the stationing of land forces of other nations in Egypt in times of peace'. He tried to persuade Churchill, who stubbornly opposed the 'scuttle' from the Suez Canal zone, that it would be more beneficial for Britain to accept the retreat in principle and then to conclude a collective defence treaty which would include the offer of the bases by the Egyptians. He wrote the following to Churchill:

The plain fact is that we are no longer in a position to impose our will upon Egypt, regardless of the cost in men, money, and international goodwill both throughout the Middle East and the rest of the world. If I cannot impose my will, I must negotiate. ¹³

In June 1952, Eden argued at a cabinet meeting to recognize the fact that 'rigorous maintenance of the presently-accepted policies

of Her Majesty's Government' has gone 'beyond the resources of the country', and he proposed a reduction of British obligations in the Middle East and South-East Asia by constructing an 'international defence organization' in which the United States would participate.¹⁴ However, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles found during his visit to the Middle Eastern countries in May of 1953 that the idea of MEDO as a multilateral defence organization in the Middle East was 'out of date' and 'definitely out of focus'. His perception was due to the fact that the Egyptian leaders told Dulles that MEDO was a 'perpetuation of occupation' by British troops 'under another name' and that they rejected cooperation for establishing the organization.¹⁵ In addition, Dulles believed 'that we must abandon our preconceived idea of making Egypt the key country in building the foundations for a military defence of the Middle East'.¹⁶ During the summer of 1953, the British government also abandoned the concept of MEDO based on Egypt as the key.¹⁷ The base negotiations with Egypt were to be conducted separately from MEDO.

Until the autumn of 1952, the British government converted their Middle Eastern strategy from the 'Inner Ring' defence strategy based on Egypt to the 'Outer Ring' strategy based on Iraq and Jordan.¹⁸ Eden and the British military planners decided to begin the negotiations with the Egyptians on the premise that this 'Outer Ring' strategy would be used and that a withdrawal from the Suez Base would be unavoidable. Eden persuaded Churchill by saying that 'in the second half of the 20th century, we cannot hope to maintain our position in the Middle East by the methods of the last century'. Referring to the fact that 'the tide of nationalism is rising fast' in the Middle East, he argued that 'if we are to maintain our influence in this area, future

policy must be designed to harness these movements rather than to struggle against them'.¹⁹

In January 1954, the British Chiefs of Staff were convinced that 'to obtain an agreement' and 'to secure Egyptian co-operation' in the future seemed to be 'preferable from the military point of view'. They believed that the withdrawal from the Suez Base without any Egyptian co-operation and with 'increased terrorist activity' by Egyptian people 'would be regarded as a victory for Egypt and would prejudice our chance of obtaining satisfactory agreement with the other Arab states'.²⁰ Churchill, who was the last cabinet member to accept the withdrawal, gave in to Eden in June of 1954, and the Anglo-Egyptian Suez Base Agreement was signed in October. The British garrison in the Suez Canal Zone was to be completely evacuated by June in 1956.

II Conflict around the Baghdad Pact and the Road to the Suez Crisis

1

The British government accepted the evacuation of the British garrison from the Suez Base in peace-time, but they regarded maintaining a military presence in the Middle East as vital for both strategic and political reasons. In the summer of 1953, the military planners of the British Ministry of War argued that 'the withdrawal of all combat forces from the Middle East would finally convince the world that Britain is no longer a great power and we should be classed with the French'. They enumerated such serious results of withdrawal as an abrogation of the Anglo-Iraq Treaty, a loss of British influence upon

Jordan, and a decline of its position in the Persian Gulf.²¹ Therefore, under the policy of withdrawal from the Canal zone, efforts aimed at maintaining a presence in the Middle East were directed towards the strengthening of military cooperation with Iraq and Jordan.

The Jordanian government was very enthusiastic over strengthening military co-operation with Britain. But there was a difference between the motives of the two governments. The Jordanian government wanted to strengthen the military co-operation because of the increasing tension with Israel on the border, while the British intended it as a step to make multilateral defence treaty against 'communism'. The British government acknowledged the 'grave potential danger' that 'if we moved British forces into Jordan they might become involved in hostilities between Jordan and Israel'.²² Yet they could not avoid sending an armoured squadron to Jordan. The Chiefs of Staff recommended that the government should reinforce the British army in Jordan and reconfirm the treaty obligation with Jordan to support them in case of hostilities with Israel.²³ Two years later, this commitment to Jordan constituted one of the motives for British government to engage in the 'collusion' with Israel regarding the Suez Canal military operation.

After his visit to the Middle Eastern countries in 1953, Dulles told the British government of his thinking regarding the area. He said to Lord Salisbury, who visited Washington in July 1953 as the Acting British Foreign Secretary, that 'the Arab States nearest to Israel and the Suez and those which had had more recent experiences with colonialism were not preoccupied with the threat from Soviet Russia' and 'were immediately concerned with other problems, such as getting the British out of the Suez Base, getting the French out of Tunisia, the friction between Saudi Arabia and the British over Buraimi,

the refugee problem and the subject of Israel'.²⁴ An Egyptian record shows that Gamal Abdul Nasser, who had a meeting with Dulles as a prominent political leader of the Egyptian government, told Dulles the following:

I must tell you in all frankness that I can't see myself waking up one morning to find that the Soviet Union is our enemy. We don't know them. They are thousands of miles away from us. We have never had any quarrel with them. I would become the laughing-stock of my people if I told them they now had an entirely new enemy, many thousands of miles away, and they must forget about the British enemy occupying their territory. Nobody would take me seriously if I forgot about the British.²⁵

The Egyptian political leaders never accepted the 'Cold War rhetoric' because they had insight into the fact that 'the defence of the Free World' was just a cover for colonialism.

Referring to his experience, Dulles informed the British government of the 'change of thinking on the US side' regarding the Middle Eastern policy. According to Dulles, in contrast to the Egyptians, 'the northern countries', specifically Turkey, Syria, and Iraq 'took a more realistic view of the situation'. Therefore, Dulles said that 'the building of strength in the northern area' seemed to offer greater hope for a Middle East defence organization against 'the Soviet threat'. This was Dulles's 'Northern Tier' project.²⁶

The Northern Tier defence project started under American influence as an 'indigenous initiative' by the local countries towards military cooperation. The United States, probably because of the special

relationship with Israel, tried to avoid direct commitment to the military defence of the Middle East, and chose a policy of supporting indigenous efforts by the Middle Eastern countries. British Foreign Secretary Eden criticized this US project of Middle Eastern defence as 'positively harmful'. According to Eden, the biggest problem with the State Department's policy was that it explicitly excluded participation of 'the West (and Britain in particular)' from the defence organization.²⁷ The British government wanted a military alliance in which 'the Western Powers' participated and had substantial control.

It was worrying for the British as well to see the Americans increasing their influence in the area by means of economic and military aid. British ambassador in Washington Sir Roger Makins wrote that he did not think the Americans were 'consciously' trying to substitute their influence for ours in the Middle East, but whether it would happen as the inevitable outcome of the present trends of events would 'depend largely on our own efforts'.²⁸ The British government, expecting to recapture the leadership in organizing the Middle East defence system from the United States, closely watched the activities of the ambitious pro-British Iraqi political leader Nuri al-Said.²⁹

It was a major problem for both the British and Iraqi governments to revise the mutual defence treaty which was to expire in 1957. Nuri proposed to make a multilateral regional defence treaty system of the NATO type as an alternative to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930.³⁰ It was a lucky windfall for the British government. Eden expected that Nuri 'should find some acceptable political "umbrella" of Middle East defence under which we can secure revision of Anglo-Iraqi Treaty on satisfactory terms'.³¹ In opening discussions with the Iraqi government, the British government planned to secure, as 'our essential stra-

tegic needs', the right of immediate use in war of the air bases at Habbaniya and Shaiba, the Royal Air Force squadron's regular visit to these bases in peace time, and free use of transit and staging facilities in Iraq. In short it was the revival of the Portsmouth Treaty which collapsed in 1948.³² On 22 February 1955, the British and Iraqi governments reached an agreement on the principles of the treaty. After this agreement was confirmed, Turkey and Iraq signed the mutual defence pact (the Baghdad Pact). Article 5 of the Pact prepared the way for Britain to join it.³³

2

On 20 February 1955, British Foreign Secretary Eden, who was soon to become Prime Minister, and Egyptian Prime Minister Gamal Abdul Nasser had a meeting at the British embassy in Cairo. On this occasion, Eden stressed the importance of the Middle Eastern defence arrangement against Soviet Russia and the essential need for the Baghdad Pact. Regarding this issue, Nasser emphasized the difference between Nuri and himself. Nasser told Eden that the top priority for Arab people was to create a united front against Israel and he expressed his opposition to the idea of the Baghdad Pact, saying that he would oppose the domination by the foreign countries under the pretence of regional defence. Eden and the Foreign Office thought that his 'jealousy' of Nuri and 'a frustrated desire to lead the Arab world' played a part in Nasser's hostility to the Baghdad Pact, and did not seriously consider the effect of the Pact on Anglo-Egyptian relations.³⁴ The Turco-Iraqi Pact was signed in Baghdad four days after the Eden-Nasser conversation and Britain entered the Pact on 5 April.

In entering into the Baghdad Pact, Eden sent a message to

Nasser and promised that British Government would not put any pressure on other states to join the pact.³⁵ But it was almost impossible for Egypt and Britain to compromise on this pact. For Nasser, the Baghdad Pact was a very harmful creation which would not only leave the door open for the West, especially for Britain, to intervene in the regional affairs of the Arab world, but also would threaten the position of Egypt and the Arab countries in the unfinished struggle with Britain over the Suez Canal and in the life and death struggle with Israel. Most of all, Nasser was afraid that if the countries bordering Israel (Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon) were forced to join the Baghdad Pact, Egypt would be isolated and compelled to confront Israel without being able to secure a supply of arms from any country.³⁶

Four days after the Baghdad Pact had been signed, an event occurred which increased Nasser's anxiety at a stroke and ended all hope of reconciliation between Egypt and the members of the Baghdad Pact. The armed forces of Israel made a large-scale raid upon the Egyptian army camp in the Gaza Strip on the border of the two countries. This incident increased Nasser's need for strengthening unity among Arab nations and preparation of arms for the fight against Israel. On 6 March, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia published two joint communiques which stated the three governments' agreement on setting up an Arab defence and economic cooperation pact, and declared a rejection of the Turkish-Iraqi alliance and any other alliance with a non-Arab state.³⁷ Nasser asked the Western Powers in vain for a supply of arms and was forced to make an arms deal with the Soviet government.

The Baghdad Pact had the appearance of a defence organisation because of British participation but it was a long way from a real military alliance. For Britain, the attitude of the United States was what

was most unsatisfactory. The American entry into the Pact was considered essential to give it at least the appearance of 'an alliance against Soviet Russia and communism'. Yet, the government of the United States, because of its relation with Israel, and because of the ever-present opposition of the Jewish lobby in Congress, was very cautious about entering into military arrangements with Arab countries. A top secret paper of the US State Department stated 'the United States Position' with respect to the Baghdad Pact as follows:

Under existing circumstances, the United States does not think it wise to adhere or otherwise formally associate itself with the Pact, particularly because this would adversely affect our influence in bringing about a reduction in Arab-Israeli tensions.³⁸

The increased tension resulting from the Gaza raid exacerbated the cautious attitude of the United States. The State Department concluded that the Arab-Israeli problem should be the first consideration and that it would be better to distance the United States from the Baghdad Pact as much as possible.³⁹

The British government shared with the United States the perception that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict was essential. In the spring of 1955, the two governments launched a comprehensive project code-named 'Alpha' aimed at settling the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁴⁰ Furthermore, at the end of that year, the two governments tried to appease the Egyptians in order to persuade them to make peace with Israel in spite of the fact that the Egyptian government had officially announced an arms deal with Czechoslovakia. In dealing with the Egyptians, the financing of the High Aswan Dam project was thought to be

'a trump card'.⁴¹ However, on the border between Egypt and Israel, events which went against the aims of the 'Alpha' project continued to occur. In addition, the British government developed a policy at the end of that year which looked, at least to Egyptian eyes, to be completely inconsistent with 'Alpha'. This was the policy aimed at expanding the Baghdad Pact.

Still stunned by the Egyptian arms deal with Czechoslovakia, the British government thought that in order 'to protect our vital oil interests in the Middle East', it had become more important to strengthen the Northern Tier defence arrangement. The British planned to 'offset' the Egyptian arms deal 'by completing the chain of protection across the route to the oil' through the entry of Turkey, Iran and Jordan into the Baghdad Pact.⁴² The British government knew that the enlargement of the Baghdad Pact 'should be attacking Nasser on his most sensitive point'.⁴³ However, they dared to induce Jordan to adhere promptly to the Pact. Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan argued for the special importance of the Jordanian adherence to the Pact:

The Baghdad Pact was a major element in our policy for safeguarding our interests. Its success or failure would be largely judged by whether we were able to secure the adherence of Jordan. If Jordan did not join, it was doubtful if Iraq would be content to remain as the one Arab State which was party to the Pact. If, however, Jordan adhered and if, as was likely, the Lebanon followed suit, a substantial part of the Arab world would have been brought into the Pact and isolated from Egypt and from Soviet influence.⁴⁴

Sir Gerald Templer, the Chief of Imperial General Staff, was sent to Amman to persuade the young Jordanian King Hussein to join the Baghdad Pact. But the mission was a complete failure. The visit of the general gave rise to a large demonstration of Jordanian people against the Pact and the King Hussein announced immediately the suspension of negotiations regarding Jordan's entry. In addition, the high-handed manoeuvre of the Templer mission aroused Egyptian antipathy.

In the wake of the Templer mission, an unexpected event occurred which decidedly hardened Eden's attitude toward Nasser. On 1 March 1956, King Hussein dismissed Sir John Glubb who had long been the commander of Jordan's army, the Arab Legion. Immediately after the event, which Eden believed was Nasser's doing, he came to regard Nasser as 'our enemy' and 'began to look around for means of destroying him.'⁴⁵ On 5 March, Eden wrote to the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and tried to persuade him to break with Nasser using the following rhetoric.

There is no doubt that the Russians are resolved to liquidate the Baghdad Pact. In this undertaking Nasser is supporting them and I suspect that his relations with the Soviets are much closer than he admits to us. Recent events in Jordan are part of this pattern.⁴⁶

Around the same time, the US government also gave up on Nasser, who had not made any move to reconcile Egypt with Israel, and changed its policy to one of support for the Baghdad Pact, accepting Eden's rhetoric in the mean time.⁴⁷ Yet, the State Department

decided not to keep in step publicly with the British concerning the Middle East.⁴⁸ From the experience of his visit to the Middle East in 1953, Dulles knew that the main obstacle for improvement of relations between the United States and the Arab countries was, in addition to the Israel problem, the fact that Arab people 'felt bitter against the US for helping the UK'. Facing the critical attitude of the Egyptian leaders toward Britain, Dulles explained that 'the US is not ashamed of its close ties of alliance with the UK', but 'the US has no intention to back the UK in "imperialism" or "colonialism"'.⁴⁹

III Colonialism, Nationalism and the United States

1

On 26 July 1956 Nasser, then as the Egyptian President, declared the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in which the British government and British and French financial interests had major stakes. Nasser's declaration was a political riposte to the British and the US withdrawal of a loan offer for financing the Aswan High Dam, and was his challenge not only to British economic interests but also to Britain's prestige both in the Middle East and in the whole world.

Initial reaction in Britain was one of almost universal outrage, and the British government decided immediately that 'our essential interests in this area must, if necessary, be safeguarded by military action' and 'our immediate objective was to bring about the down fall of the present Egyptian Government'.⁵⁰ On the same day Eden telegraphed to the US President Eisenhower and told that 'my colleague

and I are convinced that we must be ready, in the last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses', and that he had instructed the Chiefs of Staff to prepare a military plan'.⁵¹ But Eisenhower felt that 'the British were out of date in thinking of this as a mode of action', and the US government decided on their policy to try to stop the war.⁵² Eden, intending to fill the gap between the two governments, tried to persuade the President using 'Cold War rhetoric'. He wrote to Eisenhower:

I have no doubt that the Bear is using Nasser, with or without his knowledge, to further his immediate aims. These are, I think, first to dislodge the West from the Middle East, and second to get a foothold in Africa so as to dominate that Continent in turn.⁵³

In addition, Eden, referring to Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, stressed 'our duty' to prevent 'the opening gambit in a planned campaign designed by Nasser to expel all Western influence and interests from Arab countries'.⁵⁴ But Eisenhower and Dulles repeatedly informed the British of their opposition to the use of force against Egypt.

In the middle of October 1956 the British government decided to carry out the military operations against Egypt in collusion with France and Israel. It meant that not only they would run their course without any consent of the US government but they would do so while deceiving the Americans who were opposed to the military action. Eisenhower and Dulles were naturally furious to be double-crossed and agreed that the action by the British and the French was 'pretty rough' and 'utterly unacceptable'.⁵⁵ Eisenhower said that 'those who

began this operation should be left to work out their own oil problems' and ordered to reject the oil supply to the British government.⁵⁶ The US government acknowledged that 'our position is completely free with regard to the UN action now that the French and the British have in fact invaded' and confirmed that 'we must be careful not to appear to condone what the French and the British have done'.⁵⁷

2

Britain's greatest miscalculation in the Suez War was that it did not foresee that the United States would directly oppose British and French aggression towards Egypt and take the initiative in drafting a United Nations recommendation for an immediate ceasefire and an unconditional withdrawal. From the time it decided upon a policy of military intervention soon after Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company until the beginning of its military operations at the end of October, the British government, while having misgivings about critical position of the United States regarding military intervention, did not at any time assume that the United States would be hostile towards its policy.

Of course, British policy makers acknowledged the conflict with the United States over 'colonialism'. Sir Roger Makins, the British ambassador in Washington, wrote to Eden about the American anti-colonialism commenting that 'this deep seated feeling about colonialism, which is common to so many Americans, occasionally welling up inside Foster[Dulles] like lava in a dormant volcano'.⁵⁸ Within the British government, there were officials who took notice of this anti-colonial logic and felt that the United States was the greatest threat to British interests in the Middle East. However, most officials expected

that Anglo-American cooperation based on 'anti-Sovietism' and 'Cold War rhetoric' would be the overriding factor. Yet, in the Middle East, this 'Cold War rhetoric' did not function as successfully as it did in Europe because the shadow of the Cold War was not so dark in the Middle East and also because the Middle East was a place in which the interests of the United States and Britain conflicted. The US government argued that old-style colonialism would become fertile ground for the expansion of Soviet power in the Middle East and criticised the policies of Britain and France using the reverse side of 'Cold War rhetoric'. According to a memorandum of the National Security Council meeting on 1 November 1956, at which discussions regarding the United States' position towards the British and French military operations took place, Dulles argued as follows:

For many years now the United States has been walking a tight-rope between the effort to maintain our old and valued relations with our British and French allies on the one hand, and on the other trying to assure ourselves of the friendship and understanding of the newly independent countries who have escaped from colonialism. It seems to [me] Secretary Dulles that in view of the overwhelming Asian and African pressure upon us, we could not walk this tightrope much longer. Unless we now assert and maintain this leadership, all of these newly independent countries will turn from us to the USSR. We will be looked upon as forever tied to British and French colonialist policies.⁵⁹

Based on this logic, Dulles parted company with the colonial

powers and took leadership in the UN struggle against the use of force. Raymond A. Hare, the American ambassador in Cairo, reported to the State Department that 'great pleasure expressed at higher government levels' in Egypt and 'especial praise regarding US role' was 'so effusive in fact as to be almost embarrassing'. According to the Ambassador, 'US has suddenly emerged as a real champion of the right'.⁶⁰

Eisenhower and Dulles were clearly critical of the possibility and legitimacy of a solution to the Suez problem based on military force and repeatedly communicated their intention not to support Britain and France in their military operations. However, US State Department documents show that within the US government there were those who recognized the importance of overthrowing Nasser and who believed that, even though the US military was not directly connected, the United States should at least support the Anglo-French military operations. These documents also tell us that if the British and French armies that attacked the Suez Canal zone were successful in overthrowing the Nasser regime, the United States was prepared to accept that situation.⁶¹

Going back to the end of March 1956, Dulles assumed that 'more drastic action' would be necessary as the 'third step' in a hardline policy against Nasser.⁶² After this time, if Nasser rose as the champion of Arab nationalism while increasing his contact with the Soviet Union, overthrowing him was definitely a political goal of Eisenhower and Dulles. The US government was worried that, since the Suez Canal problem did not warrant military intervention, it would lose influence in both the Arab world and in the international community in general and, thus, did not want to conspire in the military operations of Britain and France. Therefore, if Britain and France were to take the 'drastic

action' of overthrowing Nasser without the United States, the US government planned to make clear publicly its opposition to military intervention while secretly accepting the situation created by Anglo-French military operations. When Eisenhower visited Dulles's room in Walter Reed Hospital on 11 November, the Secretary of State said to the President:

The British having gone in should not have stopped until they had toppled Nasser. As it was they now had the worst of both possible worlds. They had received all the onus of making the move and at the same time had not accomplished their major purpose.⁶³

When Britain and France had abandoned any hope of US support and had rushed into military operations based on 'collusion', the US government, in light of the Soviet Union's hands being full in trying to control the confused situation in Eastern Europe, completely deserted its Cold War allies. When Britain admitted defeat and the US government acknowledged that it has suddenly emerged as a real champion of the right in the Arab world,⁶⁴ there appeared on the American side a desire to revive Anglo-American relations based on 'the rhetoric of the Cold War'. Eisenhower wrote the following in December of 1956 to Dulles who was attending a meeting of the NATO Council in Paris.

I am sure that they (our NATO friends) know that we regard Nasser as an evil influence. I think also we have made it abundantly clear that while we share in general the British and French opinions of Nasser, we insisted that they chose a bad

time and incident on which to launch corrective measures.

Most important of all, I hope that our friends in Europe will see the necessity, as we see it, of beginning confidentially and on a staff level to develop policies and plans whereby the West can work together in making the Middle East secure from Communist penetration.⁶⁵

This NATO meeting offered an opportunity for revival of the 'special relationship' to stand against 'Communist penetration' in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The catalyst for confrontation over the Suez bases and the canal which led Britain and Egypt into a decisive political battle was the Baghdad Pact. The Baghdad Pact was a device which on the surface was a means of 'opposition to the Communist threat' but in reality was aimed at forming an alliance in the Middle East that was dependent on Britain and the United States and at prolonging the presence of Western troops within Arab territories. Britain attempted to dissolve the conflict between nationalism and colonialism and to push aside the Arab-Israel problem and their responsibility for it by 'the rhetoric of the Cold War'. However, their aim was not compatible with Nasser, the self-appointed champion of Arab nationalism.

The British government realized that Britain's status as 'a world power' and its 'privileged position' in the Middle East depended upon the Anglo-American relationship.⁶⁶ The 'Cold War' was rhetoric used

in order to gain US support for Britain's traditional position in the Middle East. Britain relied upon this 'Cold War rhetoric' and while taking a hostile stance towards Egypt committed itself to the Baghdad Pact. As a result, Britain, facing a worsening situation, became increasingly in need of US support. Yet, the condition for the Anglo-American 'special relationship' to function in the Middle East, namely common interests and a 'common enemy' ceased to exist. Actually, in light of the United States' failure to support MEDO and the Baghdad Pact and the US government's 'betrayal' regarding 'Suez', there existed below the surface a dispute between the United States and Britain over the redivision of spheres of influence in the Middle East.⁶⁷

Eden's 'Cold War rhetoric' not only clouded his understanding concerning Arab nationalism and colonialism but also clouded Britain's perception of the seriousness of its conflict with the United States over spheres of influence.

Notes

- * The files kept in the Public Record Office, Kew, London, which have been used for this paper are designated CAB, DEFE, FO and PREM.
- 1 See, Robert Holland (ed.), *Emergencies and Disorder in the European Empires after 1945* (London, 1994).
- 2 Memo. by Sir Orme Sargent, 'Stocktaking after VE-Day', 11 July 1945, in *Documents on British Policy Overseas* (Her Majesty's Stationary Office), Series I, Volume I, No.102.
- 3 Memo. by Chiefs of Staff Committee, C.O.S.(49)381, 10 November 1949, DEFE5/8. See also, the report by the Ministry of War, 'Middle East Garrison', 25 June 1953, FO371/102834/JE1197/9.
- 4 See, Memo. by Bevin, C.P.(46)219, 5 June 1946, CAB129/10; C.M.(46)57, 6 June 1946, CAB128/7. See also, Wm. Roger Louis, *British Empire in the Middle*

East: Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Postwar Imperialism, (Oxford, 1984), pp.17-19.

- 5 Louis, *op. cit.*, pp.124-125.
- 6 *Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons, Official Report*, Fifth Series, Vol. 423, cols.701-708. (24 May 1946).
- 7 Pearson Dixon, *Double Diploma: The Life of Sir Pearson Dixon, Don and Diplomat* (London, 1968), p.232.
- 8 C.M.79(50), 30 November 1950, CAB128/18.
- 9 Memo. by Eden, C.(52)32, 11 February 1952, CAB129/49. C.C.17(52), 14 February 1952, CAB128/24. C.O.S.(51)127th Meeting, 8 August 1951; C.O.S.(51)142nd Meeting, 10 September 1951, DEFE4/46. From Acheson to the Embassy in the U. K., 21 June 1952, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (United States Government Printing Office), 1952-1954, Vol.IX, No.77, [Hereafter written as *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, No.77].
- 10 C.O.S.(51)127th Meeting, 8 August 1951, DEFE4/46.
- 11 Memo. by Dixon, 23 January 1952, FO371/96920/JE105/G.
- 12 Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951-56* (London, 1986), p.29.
- 13 From Eden to Churchill, 10 March 1952, PREM11/91.
- 14 Memo. by Eden, C.(52) 202, 18 June 1952, CAB129/53.
- 15 *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, Part 1, Nos.3, 4, 5, 7.
- 16 Memo. of Discussion at the Meeting of N.S.C., 1 June 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, Part 1, No.137.
- 17 Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the US and the UK, 11 July, 13 July, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, V, pp.1631-1640, 1676-1686.
- 18 Report by the British Defense Co-ordination Committee, C.O.S.(52)519, 18 September 1952, DEFE5/41.
- 19 Memo. by Eden, C.(53)65, 16 February 1953, CAB129/59.
- 20 Memo. by Chiefs of Staff, C.(54)9, 9 January 1954, CAB129/65.
- 21 Report by the Ministry of War, 'Middle East Garrison', 25 June 1953, FO371/102834/JE1197/9.
- 22 C.C.67(53), 17 November 1953, CAB128/26. Memo. by Eden, C.(53)318, 13 November 1953, CAB129/64.
- 23 C.O.S.(54)92nd Meeting, 27 August 1954, DEFE4/72.
- 24 First Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the US and the UK, 11 July 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, V, Part 2, p.1638.

- 25 Mohamed H. Heikal, *Cutting the Lion's Tail: Suez: Through Egyptian Eyes* (London, 1986), p.39.
- 26 First Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the US and the UK, 11 July 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, V, Part 2, p.1638.
- 27 Memo. by Eden, C.(54)4, 5 January 1954, CAB129/65.
- 28 Letter from Makins, C.(54)53, 25 January 1954, CAB129/66.
- 29 The Earl of Avon, *Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden: Full Circle* (London, 1960), pp.219-20. From Baghdad to Foreign Office, 1 September 1954; Foreign Office to Baghdad, 13 September 1954, FO371/110791/V1076/8,17.
- 30 Falla to Troutbeck, 24 September 1954; Memo by Falla, 1 October 1954; Foreign Office to Baghdad, 6 October 1954, FO371/110791/V1076/36,43.
- 31 Foreign Office to Baghdad, 6 October 1954, FO371/110791/V1076/43. See also, C.C.37(54), 2 June 1954, CAB128/27. Memo. by Eden, C.(55)70, 14 March 1954, CAB129/74.
- 32 C.C.37(54), 2 June 1954, CAB128/27. Memo. by Eden, C.(55)70, 14 March 1954, CAB129/74.
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- 35 Eden to Stevenson, 4 April 1955, FO371/113591/JE1022/4.
- 36 Heikal, *op. cit.*, pp.67-68. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Oxford, 1994), p.25.
- 37 Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World: The Struggle over the Baghdad Pact* (Leiden,1995), pp.128-130.
- 38 Department of State Position Paper, 11 July 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XII, No.56.
- 39 David R. Devereux, *The Formation of British Defense Policy towards the Middle East, 1948-56* (London, 1990), p.167.
- 40 C.M.15(55), 16 June 1955, CAB128/29. Memo. by Macmillan, C.P.(55)35, 11 June 1955, CAB129/75.
- 41 C.M.36(55), 20 October 1955, CAB128/29.
- 42 C.M.36(55), 20 October 1955, CAB128/29.
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- 44 D.C.(55)16th Meeting, 2 December 1955, CAB131/16.
- 45 Shuckburgh, *op. cit.*, pp.341-345. Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez* (London, 1984), pp.28-29.
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- 47 See, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XV, Nos.177, 192, 208.
- 48 Memo. of a Conversation, 10 April 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XV, No.265.
- 49 Memo. of a Conversation, 11 May 1953, 12 May 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, Nos.4, 5.
- 50 C.M.54(56), 27 July 1956, CAB128/30. Egypt Committee, E.C.(56)2nd Meeting, 28 July 1956, CAB134/1216.
- 51 From Eden to Eisenhower, 27 July 1956, PREM11/1098. *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.5.
- 52 Memo. of a Conference in White House, 31 July 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.34.
- 53 From Eden to Eisenhower, 27 August 1956, PREM11/1177.
- 54 From Eden to Eisenhower, 6 September 1956, PREM11/1177.
- 55 Memo. of a Telephone Conversation, 30 October 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.427.
- 56 Memo. of a Conference in White House, 30 October 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.435.
- 57 Memo. of a Conference in White House, 5 November 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.500.
- 58 Makins to Eden, 4 October 1956, PREM11/1174.
- 59 Memo. of Discussion at the Meeting of the N.S.C., 1 November 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.455.
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- 62 Memo. from the Secretary of State to the President, 28 March 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XV, No.223.
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- 64 See, note 60.

65 From the President to the Secretary of State, 12 December 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, XVI, No.650.

66 John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Oxford, 1991), p.68.

67 See, Louis, *op. cit.*, pp.258-260. Richard H. Ulman, 'America, Britain, and the Soviet Threat in Historical and Present Perspective', in Wm. Roger Louis & H. Bull (eds.), *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations Since 1945* (Oxford, 1984), pp.103-104, 108.

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