

5. The Suez Crisis

This is the fifth part of our series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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The Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's general paranoia focused particularly on Jews, and now on Israel. While the 1948 war was still in progress, he ordered Czechoslovakia to cease supplying arms to Israel. In 1949 the Soviet press began an 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign – 'cosmopolitans' being a code word for Jews. Many Jews were arrested on trumped-up charges, tortured, and executed or sentenced to long terms in labour camps. In 1953 Stalin 'discovered' a fictitious plot by a group of doctors, most of them Jewish, to overthrow the Soviet regime. Mass murder of Jews was probably averted only by Stalin's own death a few weeks later, after which the new Soviet leadership disavowed the 'Doctor's Plot' and posthumously annulled the fifteen death sentences already carried out on account of it.

However, the Soviet Union continued to persecute Jews, and its foreign policy stance became violently anti-Israeli. In 1955 it began supplying large quantities of arms to Egypt and Syria. Egypt signed a treaty with Syria and Jordan placing the Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdul Nasser in command of all three armies. This was one of the high points of the pan-Arab nationalist movement, led by Nasser, which wanted to unite all Arabs into a single nation.

In July, 1956, Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, an international waterway owned by the British and French governments. Israeli ships, and ships travelling to or from Israeli ports, were banned from using the Canal. Nasser ignored the UN's perfunctory protest. He had already imposed a similar ban on another international waterway, the Straits of Tiran, thus blockading Eilat, the port that Israel was trying to develop at its southern tip.

Violent incidents on Israel's borders increased. Jordanian and Egyptian soldiers and fedayeen crossed the border and attacked both military and civilian targets. The shelling of Israeli towns and villages within range of Egyptian artillery became almost continuous.

Israel prepared for war against Egypt. It planned to lift the blockade

of Eilat by seizing and holding Sharm-el-Sheikh, a town where a large military base had been built, dominating the Straits of Tiran. It also planned to retaliate for Egypt's attacks, and impair Egypt's ability to threaten invasion, by striking at its army, now deployed on the Sinai peninsula and in the Gaza Strip.

To do all this, the IDF needed modern weapons. The United States would not supply any. Nor would any Soviet-bloc country including Czechoslovakia (which was now supplying Egypt). Nor would Britain, which still considered itself an ally of the Arab countries – now excluding Egypt. But Israel had been cultivating a relationship with France, which prided itself on its independent foreign policy and agreed to sell weapons to Israel.

Britain and France had been secretly planning to recapture the Suez Canal, despite pressure from the United States to acquiesce in the nationalisation. Now the French informed the Israelis of this plan and invited them to coordinate their own attack with it. In negotiations which, for many years afterwards, all three countries would deny ever took place, they agreed that Israel would capture the Canal, then the British and French would call for both sides to withdraw, and when Nasser refused, British and French forces would be sent in to 'protect' the Canal zone.

Israeli paratroopers landed in the west of Sinai. Israeli forces captured Gaza, and Israeli armoured columns drove westwards into Sinai and southwards towards Israel's main objective, Sharm-el-Sheikh. The following day, Britain issued an ultimatum to Israel and Egypt, saying that unless both sides withdrew to a distance of ten miles from the Canal, force would be used against them.

During the next six days, the IDF defeated the Egyptian army in Sinai in fierce fighting, capturing Sharm-el-Sheikh and most of Sinai. Complying with the British ultimatum, it halted ten miles from the Suez Canal. The Egyptians did not withdraw from the Canal, and British and French forces invaded, landing at Port Said and pushing southwards through the Canal zone.

There was an enormous international outcry, led by the United States. President Eisenhower put intense pressure on Britain and France to withdraw. They complied: their forces halted, and soon afterwards returned home in humiliation. The British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, resigned, a broken man. Eisenhower threatened Israel with UN economic sanctions and expulsion from the UN if it did not withdraw too. The Soviet Prime Minister sent a private letter to Ben-Gurion reminding him that the Soviet Union possessed missiles that could reach Israel. Israel sent a delegation to Washington, arguing that to withdraw without receiving any concessions from Egypt about future violence or blockading of international waterways would be to invite a repetition of the situation. Eisenhower was adamant about unconditional withdrawal, but he himself did make some concessions: he assured Israel that the United States would from now on keep the Straits of Tiran open, and that the international community would act 'firmly' if Egypt did not allow Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal. He also arranged for a UN Emergency Force to be deployed in Sinai and Gaza, whose

job would be 'to assure the scrupulous maintenance of the armistice agreement' – in particular, to ensure that those territories were not again used to launch fedayeen raids, artillery barrages or armed threats against Israel.

Israel withdrew. The UN Emergency Force was deployed. The fedayeen raids and other attacks from Egypt ceased. The Straits of Tiran and the Suez Canal were opened to Israeli shipping. The Suez war became a widely-cited symbol of the last gasp of Imperialism and of the futility of Western intervention in the affairs of other countries. Israel had lost 172 dead and 817 wounded.

The Egyptian authorities soon began to harass ships heading to or from Israel through the Suez Canal – delaying them and sometimes confiscating cargoes. The UN brokered a compromise under which cargoes would always be owned by the non-Israeli party to the trade, during their time of passage through the Canal. Israel agreed, under protest, to this cumbersome and illegal requirement, but the first ship to try it (the Greek ship *Astypalea*) was arrested anyway, and its cargo of 500 tons of Israeli cement was confiscated. For all practical purposes the Canal was again closed to Israel-related shipping. The 'firm action' promised by Eisenhower never materialised.

Part 6: Eleven Years of Fighting, Six Days of War

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