

The Impact of the Suez Crisis (1956) on the 'Special Relationship' between USA-UK

تأثير أزمة السويس (1956) على "العلاقة الخاصة"

بين بريطانيا والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية

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Abstract: *This work aims at analyzing the impact of the Suez Crisis (1956) on "The Special Relationship" between UK and USA. Indeed, after the Second World War (1939-1945), a close partnership was developed between the two aforementioned countries to the extent that the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill dubbed it as "The Special Relationship" in a speech he delivered in 1946. However, this fraternal association was about to be broken and turned into ashes after the tensions over the Egyptian Canal of Suez in 1956. In this regard, this work endeavours to analyse the event itself and then the effect it brought on this relationship. In other words, it sheds light on the causes, process, and impact for the relationship was about to be compromised. Finally, it attempts to extract the lesson driven from this incident. To this aim, a historical approach was adopted, and relevant sources were consulted.*

Keywords: *Special Relationship; Suez Canal; UK; USA; Cold War; Egypt; Sionist state; France; Soviet Union; Gamal Abdel Nasser.*

الملخص بالعربية: يهدف هذا العمل إلى تحليل تأثير أزمة السويس (1956) على "العلاقة الخاصة" بين المملكة المتحدة والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. في الواقع، بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية (1939-1945) نشأت شراكة وثيقة بين البلدين المذكورين إلى حد أن رئيس الوزراء البريطاني ونستون تشرشل أطلق عليها اسم "العلاقة الخاصة" في خطاب ألقاه عام 1946. ومع ذلك كانت هذه الرابطة الأخوية على وشك الانهيار، وتحولت إلى رماد بعد التوترات حول قناة السويس المصرية عام 1956. في هذا الصدد، يسعى هذا العمل إلى تحليل

الحدث نفسه، ومن ثمَّ تأثيره على هذه العلاقة، ويُلقى الضوء على أسباب وعملية وتأثير العلاقة التي كانت على وشك التعرّض للخطر، وأخيراً تحاول استخلاص العبرة المستفادة من هذه الحادثة، ولتحقيق هذا الهدف تمَّ اعتماد منهج تاريخي من خلال المصادر ذات الصلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقة الخاصة؛ قناة السويس؛ المملكة المتحدة؛ الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية؛ الحرب الباردة؛ مصر؛ فرنسا؛ الاتحاد السوفياتي؛ جمال عبد الناصر.

Introduction: The term “Special Relationship” entails the exceptional close political, diplomatic, economic, and military relations between the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It was first introduced and uttered in 1946 in a speech by Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister at that time. These two nations enjoyed what was described as “unparalleled” relationship at variant levels, namely, economic activity, military planning and execution of operations, and nuclear technology and intelligence sharing.

This sample of collaboration went through hard times and knew many ups and downs through different periods of time, but it remained as the most successful example of cooperation between states in the world at all. Indeed, The ‘Suez Crisis’ was one of the hard times the ‘special relationship’ went through, and it was, in fact, as a test to measure how strong this unique relation is between the United Kingdom and its American counterpart. This paper will investigate the surrounding factors of this incident and its implications at an international level. Moreover, it will show to what degree it did harm the “special relationship’, both Britain and America shared.

1- The Context of the Crisis: Important to know that the Suez Canal was built by a Franco-British company and was inaugurated in 1869. The majority share used to belong to the French. However, at the end of the century, it became under the British control. Meanwhile, Egypt became a British protectorate, and the canal area became a vital military zone for the British to defend the Mediterranean and the whole Middle East. Moreover, that area was an important passage for the British Oil in the Middle East; almost the two thirds were transferred from this canal.

Indeed, it was a crucial source of income and a symbol of the British Empire, joining UK with the Middle East, India, and the Pacific.¹

More important to mention, before the Second World War, the Egyptian nationalists fought against the British domination in the area, and made them suffer a big deal of time since the beginning of the 1950. In September 1952, a coup took place and brought the nationalist Egyptian figure Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser² to power. He was a military man, ambitious, and a patriot.³

Anthony Eden⁴ was the foreign secretary of Winston Churchill at that time, later Prime Minister. Evidences showed that he obviously had a different vision from the one of the Prime Minister regarding how to deal with the new Egyptian government. Churchill did not accept to negotiate with the Nationalists whereas; Eden wanted to come to a compromise with the new regime, and to retreat from the Canal Zone. As a result, Eden succeeded in imposing his vision, and the British announced in 1954 their withdrawal from the canal before June 1956. However, that did not imply that the Anglo-French company would be ceded to the Egyptians.

The Americans joined their ally decision in 1955, and borrowed Egypt 70 million dollars necessary to build a new reservoir in Aswan which would help get electric energy to develop the country. However, Foster Dulles⁵, the US secretary of state conditioned this loan with the necessity to sign a peace treaty with the Zionist state. Nasser accepted the loan, but made the Westerners furious for he used it to buy arms from the

1- Dimpleby and Reynolds, "An Ocean Apart: the Special Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century", (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 218-237.

2- Gamal Abdel Nasser(15/01/1918- 28/09/1970): Egyptian army officer, prime minister (1954-56), and then president (1956-70) of Egypt, who became a controversial leader of the Arab world, creating the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958-61), and twice fighting wars with Israel (1956, 1967).

3- Thornhill, T.M. "Britain, the United States and the Rise of an Egyptian Leader: the Politics and Diplomacy of Nasser's consolidation of Power, 1952-1954". *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXIX n° 483, 2004, 892-921.

4- Anthony Eden (12/06/1897-14/01/1977), British foreign secretary in 1935-38, 1940-45, and 1951-55 and prime minister from 1955 to 1957.

5- Foster Dulles (25/02/1888- 24/05/1959), U.S. secretary of state (1953-59) under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was the architect of many major elements of U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War with the Soviet Union after World War II.

Russians and supported every nationalist movement in the Middle East and Maghreb who wanted to liberate their countries from the French and the British. At the same time, he rejected the Anglo-American plan to fix the Arab-Israeli conflict despite the Zionist state acceptance for territorial concessions and participation in the reintegration of Palestinian refugees under the supervision of the United Kingdom and America. According to the American emissary, Robert Anderson¹, who met with Nasser in March 1956, he reported that Nasser was afraid to be assassinated if he accepted that deal, like the King Abdullah of Jordan who secretly negotiated with the Zionist state.

Eden after hearing this compared Nasser to Mussolini² and proclaimed that the new tyrant wants to rule over an empire extended from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. The Americans shared the same opinion, in fact, and the CIA with the British secret services started to prepare a plan like they did with Dr. Mosadegh in Iran in 1953, a coup d'état to oust Abdel Nasser, and Eden had his heart set on realising this idea.

2- Diplomacy and Military Preparation: It was not the British government who started hostility against Nasser, but, indeed, the Americans. On July 19, 1956, Foster Dulles invited the Egyptian Ambassador, Ahmed Hussein³, to inform him that the offer has been stalled and it is impossible now for the Americans to finance the construction of Aswan reservoir.⁴ That chequered behaviour pushed Nasser to announce one week later, on July 26, 1956, the nationalisation of the canal of Suez, the fact which drove Eden crazy and preaching for the necessity to use force against Abdel Nasser. Now, profits gained by the Egyptian exploitation will make Egypt autonomous in funding the construction of Aswan barrage⁵.

1- Robert Anderson: a close associate of U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower and a former deputy defense minister.

2- Benito Mussolini (29/07/1883-28/04/1945), Italian prime minister (1922-43) and the first of 20th-century Europe's fascist dictators.

3- Ahmed Hussein: Egypt's Ambassador to the United States in the tense years before and during the Suez crisis(1953-1958).

4- Warner, Geoffrey, "The United States and the Suez Crisis", *International Affairs*, vol. 67 n°2, 1991, 308.

5- Dumbrell, John, "A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq", Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 53.

Eden, the British Prime Minister, became more furious realising that his policy with the Egyptians led to a disaster, as the British press described and his enemies in the conservative party. The situation was critical for the British for they were dependant on the Oil of the Middle East. Thus, besides the British economic sanctions against Egypt, they moved towards planning a military intervention. On July 27, Eden wrote to Eisenhower, “My colleagues and I are convinced now that we should be ready, as a last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to reason”¹. Nevertheless, Herbert Hoover², Dulles’ assistant, wrote to inform him about a discussion with the president: “I indicated (to the president) how dangerous it was to engage in a military action on the justifications given by Eden and that, if we had to be very firm to preserve the position of the Westerners in the Middle East, I would not think that the confiscation of the Suez Canal Company was a sufficient argument to explain a military intervention. It would take another hostile deliberative act to authorize us to take such measures. Otherwise our position would be compromised. The president agrees”³.

During summer 1956, Eden focused more on convincing the Americans to get rid of Nasser through force and to replace him by a government that would be in the favour of the West. However, The Americans preferred a diplomatic way rather than aggression. Dulles convinced the British to invite all the countries which used the canal for a conference, but Eden, instead, reinforced the troops in the Mediterranean and called for some reserves.

The conference took place in August and suggested that the canal should be exploited by an international organism under the supervision of the United Nations, but Nasser abdicated that proposal sharply.⁴ Dulles suggested then that only users of the canal should manage it themselves. On October 2, he added that this suggestion is not to be imposed by the United States of America on the Egyptians. Time passed by, and Egypt

1- Warner, Geoffrey, “The United States and the Suez Crisis”, *International Affairs*, 309.

2- Herbert Charles Hoover (04/08/1903-09/07/1969); was an engineer, businessman, and politician. He served as United States Under Secretary of State from 1954 to 1957. He was the eldest son of President Herbert Hoover.

3- Ibid, 310.

4- Klug, A. and Smith, G. W, “Suez and Sterling, 1956”, *Explorations in Economic History*, vol.36 n°3, 1999, 181-203.

proved that it could alone exploit the canal and any military intervention seemed not possible.

Against this background, on October 14, The French General Maurice Challe¹ suggested to Eden a joint military action with the (Israeli) against Egypt. Later, and after a British reticence, they met with the French at Paris on 22 October, 1956 to discuss further actions. France proposed to use a Sionist state attack to pave the way for them to start a military action in the Canal, and the British should use later their bombers stationed in Malta, and Cyprus. Moreover, the three met secretly in Sevres² on October 22-24, 1956 and the Sionist state were informed to attack on the 29 through Sinai desert and to push the attack until the canal to justify the Anglo-French intervention to satisfy the Americans somehow.³ In fact, a diplomatic solution was not an option for them for it would keep Nasser as head of government, and they want him out.

The Sionist state agreed on one condition that a British air strike should take place on the Egyptian airports to avoid any attack from the enemy on their exposed cities like Tel-Aviv. This idea was impossible for the British to accept because it may destroy the excuse used by the British for their intervention with the French, which is a Sionist state threat on the Canal. The situation was fixed when the Sionist state accepted to attack first, and to give the British 36 hours to intervene. They signed what was called "Sevres Protocol"⁴. Eden suggested after for the French and the Sionists to destroy the copy of their protocol, in case of any disclosure. However, the Sionists did not, and they published it later in 1991⁵.

From the British side, Eden hid from the cabinet everything which indicated any planning for the operation with the Sionist state. As a matter of fact, The United States of America was not informed by

1- Maurice Challe is a French aviator and general, born September 5, 1905 in Pontet (Vaucluse) and died January 18, 1979 in Paris. He is part of the French delegation with Maurice Bourges-Maunoury and Christian Pineau during the tripartite secret meeting of Sèvres (Sèvres protocols) preliminary to the "Operation Musketeer" organized in reaction to the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

2- Sevres protocol took place in Paris between 21 - 24 October, 1956.

3- Dimpleby and Reynolds, "An Ocean Apart", 220-237.

4- On 24 October, 1956.

5- Shlaim, A. "The Protocol of Sevres, 1956: Anatomy of a War Plot." *International Affairs*, vol. 73 n°3, 1997, 509-530.

anything and they totally ignored what would happen. Eden thought once the attack starts, the Americans will have no other choice just to join their allies¹. Indeed, he was illusioned thinking to achieve what he did in Indochina, German rearmament and the coup d'état against Mosadegh.

3. American Attitudes and Hostilities: On October 29, the Zionists started the attack in Sinai trying to get to the Canal as an objective. The next day, France and Britain warned both the Zionists and the Egyptians, and gave them 12 hours to free the Canal Zone to be occupied by them. The Zionists accepted that, as planned secretly, whereas the Egyptians refused. On October 31, the British air forces bombed the Egyptian military airports. Eisenhower was furious and he called Eden telling him that he completely lost his mind².

On October 30, the American representative in the United Nations reached out to the Russians and asked the Security Council to stop immediately the conflict there. However, the British and the French vetoed that request. The next day Eisenhower met up with the National Security Council to explain his position. The Americans were afraid from the idea that if they stand by the Franco-British intervention, every single nation which recently had got independence would rush to the Russian's arms, and accuse them of supporting the French and British imperialism³. Eisenhower concluded that it is out of the question to support the French and the British position, and lose the whole Arabic world. On November 2, Dulles himself intervened in the General Assembly of the United Nations and got the majority of voices (64 against 5) to condemn his allies⁴.

Some historians observed that Foster Dulles, the US secretary of state never forgot Eden's attitude concerning Indochina, and his intentions to dominate world affairs. That made the relationship between them really tense⁵. Others affirmed the opposite that their relationship was restored, and some said that Foster was sick at that time, and it was President Eisenhower directly in charge of this crisis, with very hostile

1- Kunz, Diane B. "The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis", University of North Carolina Press, 1991, 94.

2- Shlaim, A. "The Protocol of Sevres", 211.

3- Boyle, G. P, "The Hungarian revolution and the Suez Crisis", *History*, vol. 90, 2005, 550-565.

4- Ibid.

5- Dimpleby and Reynolds, "An Ocean Apart", 204-205..

assistants towards the British¹.

More important to mention in the American reaction context, is that a liberal government was placed in communist Hungary which announced the retrieval from the Warsaw Pact.² It was at the same time when the Franco-British attacked Egypt; Russia entered Budapest facing a huge popular resistance. The Americans were too focused with the Western countries on the Russian aggression to make it look bad internationally, and seemed forgetting about the Suez Crisis which was going to get a wrong turn. Now, the situation took them to dissociate themselves publicly from their allies not to be accused by supporting an imperialist action, or get to be associated with the Russians.

An important fact we should shed light on here is that for some, it was obvious that the Americans had a double-standard policy regarding this crisis. At the beginning of August, the Americans doubted about a military intervention, and Eisenhower sent Dulles to London to gain time for his next election, and he did not want to look like someone who supports a colonial war. On August 2, Dulles mentioned that he understood their allies' position, and he said that they could count on the moral support and sympathy of the Americans. When Eden wanted to show him the British plan and preparations, he seemed to prefer not to get in touch with their plans. Dulles seemed at ease to get the British promise that he would be invited to attend the conference of the countries which used the canal on August 21-23. Later, a delegation, under the leadership of Robert Menzies³, the Australian Prime Minister got to Egypt to get Nasser's approval regarding the conference.

Dulles declared to the national Security Council on August 30, that if Nasser refuses the delegation proposals, it would be difficult for them to stand against the British and the French's will to use force because if they could not succeed with that, it would make them lose their status as great powers. However, the same day, he did confide to Eisenhower that he was against a military action which would drive the Middle East and Africa against them, and would push them to approach the Soviets. The

1- Ovendale, Ritchie, "*Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth century*", London: Macmillan Press, 1988, 114.

2- Warsaw Pact was the equivalent of NATO for countries under the control of Russia.

3- Sir Robert Gordon Menzies (20/12/1894- 15/05/1978), statesman who, as prime minister of Australia (1939-41, 1949-66), strengthened military ties with the United States and fostered industrial growth and immigration from Europe.

next month while Harold Macmillan¹, Chancellor of Exchequer, visited the United States of America, he was told by Dulles that nothing should be done which would affect the next election. Macmillan did not give too much attention to his recommendation and he barely mentioned it to the cabinet. According to Ovendale, perhaps Macmillan did that on purpose to get Eden's place².

Moreover, at the beginning of October, the CIA delivered Eisenhower a plan to get rid of Nasser similar to what they did in Iran for Mosadegh. However, the president refused it thinking that the situation would be different in the Arabic world, and they would never be against the Western countries. Against that background, one could easily deduce that the Americans were on the same page with the allies and that was shown in the previous American encouragements, but it seemed like they were trying to gain more time for their benefit, the fact which explains their warnings not to do anything before the elections.

4. The End of the Crisis: On November 4, both the Egyptians and the Zionists accepted cease-fire, before the Franco-British forces got to the canal. The next day, British and French parachutes landed on Port Said, the Northern entry of the canal. This move got the Russians threaten to intervene there, the Americans exercised severe pressure, and the United Nations followed with sanctions against both countries. At that moment, on November 6, Eden informed his French ally that his country would accept cease-fire. That decision was really surprising, even more for the Americans which deep inside, they wished their allies got rid of Nasser forever.

Eisenhower felt relieved for the British decision, and he invited Eden to Washington to inform him that the United States would not restore its contact with Britain and France until they retrieve from Egypt to be replaced by a United Nations' force to maintain peace and order in the area³. Furthermore, the Suez Crisis caused the loss of British currency

1- Maurice Harold Macmillan, 1st Earl of Stockton, Viscount Macmillan of Ovenden, (10/02/1894- 29/12/1986), British politician who was prime minister from January 1957 to October 1963.

2- Ovendale, Ritchie, "*Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth century*", London: Macmillan Press, 1988, 118.

3- Dimpleby and Reynolds, "An Ocean Apart", 224-236.



value in the market¹, and the British became in need, once again, for an American loan. The latter made it clear that no aid would be given if Britain and France disobey the United Nations' orders.

Some explained that the failure of the Franco-British operation (called the musketeers) was due to the American blockade, from the beginning, of the British money at the International Monetary Fund (IMF)² which put them in tatters and a helpless situation to defend their currency. At the end of the month, the cabinet broke down, and before the end of this year, the last British soldier left the Canal.

5. The Suez Crisis' lesson: The Suez crisis was kind of a big shock for politicians and public opinion. It somehow, marked the end of the British illusions and pretensions. Until that crisis, Britain believed it is a great power equal to the United States and Russia. It is certain that it had a huge sphere of influence throughout the world, the Commonwealth, Africa, Asia, and the Middle-East, but this crisis shattered the empire³ and showed that all of this was for nothing. The lack of financial means, and the weak status of its currency, put that country under the mercy of the United States of America. The British were disillusioned concerning 'the special relationship' they enjoyed with America. Through time, they managed to keep it going and their conflict were never public, and they always succeeded to find a way out to solve their disputes secretly (China, Korea, Indochina, and Iran), and presented a united front; but not this time.

The 'special relationship' was harshly wounded at this incident which pushed the British to lose, somehow, faith in it and started to think more about developing their relation with Europe. Some scholars like Dimpleby and Reynolds considered this humiliation from a condescending America, as a fuel for the British to look more for a continental Europe. On January 8, 1957, a memorandum was introduced to the cabinet by high delegates in the foreign office, in which they cited

1- Klug, A. and Smith, G. W, "Suez and Sterling, 1956", *Explorations in Economic History*, vol.36 n°3, 1999, 190.203.

2- International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN) specialized agency, founded at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 to secure international monetary cooperation, to stabilize currency exchange rates, and to expand international liquidity (access to hard currencies).

33- Martel, G., "Decolonisation after the Suez: Retreat or Rationalisation". *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. vol.46 n°3, 2000, 403-417.

out: “Two great powers, America and Russia, infinitely surpass all the others... we should join our resources to those of our European allies so that Western Europe, as a whole, can become a nuclear power comparable to the United States and to the soviet union”.

That clearly showed that Britain was disappointed from its American ally to the point they started to think to lean towards Europe and develop a nuclear power equal to the American and the Russian ones to negotiate on international affairs from the same level. The memorandum also focused on other matters apart from the nuclear domain, it was mentioned that: “The Suez crisis has made it clear that the conditions of the Anglo-American relationship must change. It is doubtful that the United States is now willing to grant us, alone, the privileged status of principal ally that we had during the war. We could therefore be better able to influence them if we were part of an association of powers whose political weight would be greater than that which we alone weighed”¹.

The future of Great Britain lies neither in its commonwealth, nor in the ‘special relationship’ it enjoyed with the United States of America, but in the role it can play in a united Europe, and that was the harsh lesson they learnt from the Suez Crisis. Eden resigned directly for health problems, and Macmillan succeeded him to lead a country going through hard times and disarray.

6. CONCLUSION: In the Suez Crisis, the Americans went public opposing their ally, exercising control on it for its financial dependence, and imposing its will in world affairs. This crisis actually marked the transitional period of power from British imperialism to US hegemony over the Arabic world. Its effect was disastrous on the ‘Special relationship’ Great Britain shared with America to the extent it was about to break the tights between the two states. Indeed, it was a turning point which announced the end of Britain’s role as a great power in the world as the United States of America and the Soviet Russia took a more powerful stand in the international arena. In fact, Egypt emerged victorious and Gamal Abdel Nasser became a powerful hero among the nationalist movements in the Arabic world. The sour humiliation the Prime minister Eden felt at that time, led him to resign in January 1957 and it became evident that it is high time for the British to start questioning the ‘special relationship’, trying to find a role and look more

1- Dimpleby D. &D. Reynolds, “*An Ocean Apart*”, 219-220.

for Europe as a potential partner than elsewhere.

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