

**THE UNITED STATES  
AND THE SUEZ CRISIS\***

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**Résumé**

Le présent travail est consacré à la politique américaine de "containment" destinée à réduire à la fois l'influence du communisme international et le rôle grandissant du Président Nasser au Moyen Orient. La réaction égyptienne à cette politique a donné lieu à la nationalisation du canal de Suez et la construction du barrage d'Aswan. Ce qui a provoqué un malentendu politique entre les U.S.A. et ses alliés la Grande Bretagne et Israël dans leur gestion de la crise de Suez.

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper is devoted to the American policy of containment which aimed at reducing the influence of international communism and President Nasser's extending role in the Middle East. The Egyptian reaction to such a policy led to the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the building of the Aswan Dam. This brought about a political misunderstanding between the U.S.A. and its allies Great Britain and Israel when dealing with the Suez crisis.*

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## Introduction

Alexandria, Egypt, Thursday, 26 July 1956. 100,000 Egyptians jammed a floodlit Liberation square. At 7:41 P.M. President Gamal Abdul Nasser stepped Forward onto the Balcony of the Bourse and began to speak. Speaking in colloquial Arabic, waxing alternately bitter and humorous, he told the immense throng of Egypt's long struggle for strength and dignity, for ezza wa karama. He spoke of the need for Arab unity, of the struggle against Western imperialism and its stalking horse, Israel. He reviewed Egypt's efforts to obtain weapons for its defence from the West, and then revealed for the first time in public that the "Czech arms deal" of September 1955 had been, in fact, with the Russians. He described the events which had led, just one week earlier, to America's withdrawal of its offer to assist financing of Egypt's major development project, a High Dam on the Nile at Aswan. Then he launched into a history of the Suez Canal. "I began," he said, "to look at Mr. Black [President of the World Bank] sitting in his chair and I imagined I was sitting in front of Ferdinand de Lesseps."<sup>i</sup>

De Lesseps Nasser repeated, thirteen times more. Unknown to the huge crowd before him or to the millions of Egyptians, Arabs, and foreign monitors listening to the broadcast, invoking the name of the Suez Canal's builder was a signal. In Cairo, Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez the code word galvanized picked teams of men into action. As Nasser began reading a decree nationalizing the Universal Company of the Suez Maritime Canal, they moved in on the Company's offices and smoothly took over. Just after midnight Washington learned of Nassers's action in a telegram from Ambassador Henry Byroade: "Nasser in two and half hour speech billed as 'answer to American and British conspiracies against Egypt' announced nationalization [of the] Suez Canal Company, said High Dam would be built with LE 35 million yearly net income from canal and read details [of] Nationalization Decree...Speech...was wildly applauded throughout."<sup>ii</sup> The clash long building between the Egypt of Gamal Abdul Nasser and the West now had a name: the Suez Crisis.

Nasser's dramatic action was a riposte to an American announcement a week before. On Thursday, 19 July 1956, Egypt's Ambassador to the United States, Dr. Ahmed Hussein, had called on Secretary of State John Foster Dulles at his office. Three days earlier, in London, Hussein had told reporters that Egypt had decided to accept the Anglo-American-World Bank offer of December 1955 to help finance construction of the Aswan High Dam. Dulles told a surprised Hussein that while the United States realized how important the project was to Egypt's economic development, current circumstances made it not feasible for the U.S. to take part; therefore, America had to withdraw its offer. The Secretary then read the official statement which was released to the press as a glum Hussein emerged from the State Department. It explained that "Developments in the preceding seven months have not been favourable to the success of the project...Agreement by the riparian states has not been achieved, and the ability of Egypt to devote adequate resources to assure the project's success has become more uncertain than at the time the offer was made."<sup>iii</sup>

The next week Time magazine lauded this "victory for the West" by running a cartoon of the old chess master Dulles saying "checkmate" to a spluttering Nasser. The renege itself was billed as a calculated move to chastise a Third World leader trying to play both sides of the Cold War and saddle the Soviet Union with a hugely expensive foreign aid project that it was thought Moscow could not afford. This celebration was premature, however, for on 26 July Nasser revealed his own gambit in his address at Alexandria.

## The Ides of March

The Aswan renege was no spur of the moment decision carried out by Dulles acting on his own. Rather it publicly confirmed a policy shift towards Nasser's Egypt which had begun five months earlier. In a memorandum submitted 14 March 1956, Roger Wilkins, Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs, wrote that American policy in the Middle East during the previous three years had followed three principal lines : 1) a political line, intended to produce a settlement between the Arab states and Israel by first bringing the Israelis and Egyptians together ; 2) an economic line, through which the U.S. contributed about \$75 million annually to economic development projects, \$22 million to "Arab refugee" relief, and stood ready to support major regional projects including the Johnston Plan for harnessing the Jordan River and Egypt's plan for High Dam at Aswan ; 3) a military line that supported "Northern Tier Collective Security" which during 1955 had developed into the British-led Baghdad Pact including Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. "During the past year," said the author, "the United States has, in general, looked to Egypt under Prime Minister Nasser to take leadership in meeting in the major problems in the Near East." Unfortunately, Nasser

failed to move toward a settlement with Israel; he is now delaying on talking the initiative with respect to the Johnston Plan and has raised a number of serious objections with respect to the provisions of the proposed Aswan Dam agreements; he has inaugurated a series of bilateral military pacts with Syria and Saudi Arabia because of opposition to the Baghdad Pact; he set aside the offer of American arms from the U.S. and made an agreement with Czechoslovakia ; his radio and press are now speaking strongly against the U.S. and other Western countries.

In view of this indictment, he suggested "there seems little likelihood the U.S. will be able to work with Nasser in the foreseeable future. The U.S. will therefore have to consider other means for obtaining U.S. objectives in the Near East."<sup>iv</sup>

Wilkins invoked the basic American assessment of the situation in the Middle East, which had been spelled out in NSC 5428, approved by President Eisenhower on 23 July 1954. This document warned that "Current conditions and trends in the Near East are inimical to Western interests. The nations of the Near East are determined to assert their independence and are suspicious of outside interest in their affairs." European influence was in sharp decline, "with distrust and hatred replacing the former colonial subservience," and some of this

animosity towards "the United Kingdom and France has devolved upon the United States, as an ally of both. Even more important, the Arab nations are incensed by what they believe to be our pro-Israel policy." The outlook for the future was bleak: "In the Near East the current danger to the security of the free world arises not so much from the threat of direct Soviet military attack as from a continuation of the present unfavourable trends. Unless these trends are reversed, the Near East may well be lost to the West within the next few years." Preventing the loss of the Middle East "will require increasing responsibility, initiative, and leadership by the United States in the area." Since Britain still retained substantial "interest, experience, and security positions" the U.S. would try to act in concert where practicable, but reserved the right to act alone or with others. "It is important to the settlement of outstanding political disputes," declared NSC 5428, "that the United States convince the Arab states that it is capable of acting independently of other Western states and Israel."

Wilkins' memorandum recapitulated American objectives as defined by NSC 5428: access by the U.S. and its allies to the "resources, the strategic positions, and the passage rights of the area" and "denial of such resources and strategic positions to the Soviet bloc"; support of "stable, viable, friendly governments" that were "capable of withstanding communist-inspired subversion from within, and willing to resist communist aggression"; "settlement of major issues between the Arab States and Israel as a foundation for establishing peace and order in the area"; "reversal of the anti-American trends of Arab opinion," and "prevention of the extension of soviet influence" into the region. With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, U.S. objectives were "to deter an armed attack by Israel or by the Arab States, and if an armed attack should occur to force the attacking state to relinquish any territory seized" as well as "to reduce current Arab-Israeli tensions and promote an eventual clear-cut peace between the Arab States and Israel," and "to alleviate the Arab refugee problem."<sup>vi</sup> NSC 5428's assessment of the situation and statement of objectives were to govern American policy throughout 1955 and 1956, including the climatic events of the Suez Crisis.

All of these objectives had been adversely affected by Nasser's attitudes and actions, wrote Wilkins. The most serious of Nasser's transgressions were the acquisition of arms from the Soviet bloc and "proving to be the main stumbling block" to efforts to promote an Arab-Israeli settlement. Faced with Nasser's refusal to cooperate with what the U.S. deemed constructive measures, the question was what to do. His memorandum proposed a Plan of Action, which was to emerge at the end of the month as the Omega Plan. Before any decision, however, he advised discussions with British, whose cooperation would enhance its prospects for success but, he noted, whose opposition might undermine American plans.<sup>vii</sup>

"The British," Wilkins acknowledged, "continue to hold highly important assets in the area" including treaty relationships with Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt.<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, for forty years the answer to the Eastern Question had been a British one. From 1916, when Britain promoted the Arab Revolt against Ottoman Turkish rule, until 1956, she was the paramount power in the region. Between the World Wars, Britain's answer to the classic Eastern Question had

been to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with an improvised "empire by treaty" built on the assent of local rulers to the concessions and military bases needed to protect British interests and to maintain order. After the Second World War, the treaty empire retreated before assertive local nationalism, while Britain's need for the area's cheap oil, paid for in sterling and shipped through the Suez Canal, grew apace. Thus the British dilemma: imperial power was waning at precisely the moment Middle Eastern resources and bases became most valuable. London sought to find an alternative system of agreements to preserve its interests, and to co-opt the U.S. for its purposes under the banner of anti-Communism. The apparent convergence of British interests with U.S. hopes to include the Middle East in a global network of pacts to contain the Soviet Union seemed to offer the opportunity to prolong Britain's "moment in the Middle East."<sup>ix</sup>

At the beginning of 1956, as Wilkins recognized, Britain was still the primary power in the region, with protectorates over the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf; a naval base at Aden; rear bases in Libya, Cyprus, and Malta; air squadrons stationed in Iraq; and a virtual client state in Jordan, whose Arab Legion was funded by British subsidies and led by British officers. America continued in a supporting role. Throughout the previous year, London had pursued two objectives: to replace its bilateral treaties with Iraq and Jordan with multilateral mutual defence arrangements, which would look less "imperialist," and to work towards a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both policies vitally, and contradictorily, affected the position of Egypt, with whom relations had been given a promising new start by the conclusion of the Suez Base Evacuation Agreement in October 1954, ending more than seventy years of British occupation. Britain's determination to maintain its status as premium mobile in the Middle East also complicated the attainment of American objectives, and were ultimately to push the U.S. to the forefront.

## From Alpha to Omega

Project Alpha was the codename for a major peace-making effort, initiated by Britain and developed in partnership with the U.S., to broker an Arab-Israeli settlement. Pursued between January 1955 and March 1956, its aim was to use an Egyptian-Israeli agreement to strengthen the position of the West, particularly that of Britain, and prevent Soviet penetration of the Middle East. Planning began in December 1954, when Evelyn Shuckburgh, the Foreign Office Undersecretary for Middle East Affairs, was assigned to work with Francis Russel of the U.S. State Department. The Anglo-American goal was defined as a non-belligerency agreement or an over-all settlement, perhaps short of full peace, between Israel and Egypt, based primarily on Israeli territorial concessions in the Negev and repatriation of some "Arab refugees" with compensation for those resettled elsewhere. The powers offered to guarantee the settlement and end the Arab boycott and blockade of Israel, and promised Nasser, as additional incentives, substantial economic and military assistance.

Egypt was viewed as the key to Alpha on the Arab side, in the expectation that if it could be induced to accept a settlement the rest of Arab

states must eventually follow. Hence an early step involved enlisting Nasser, who was given some of the details in April 1955. It was kept secret from the Israelis. A public hint at the settlement formula was offered by Dulles in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations on 26 August 1955. Eden was more explicit in his Guildhall speech of 9 November 1955, suggesting Israel accept a territorial compromise between the "1947 and other United Nations resolutions" and existing armistice demarcation lines, and offering himself as a mediator. Israel's leaders, for whom territorial concessions were anathema, vehemently rejected Eden's proposal. Nasser welcomed the plan, but demanded Israel cede the Negev below Beersheba. A compromise formula giving Egypt a land bridge to Jordan by Israel ceding two triangles of Negev territory while still keeping its link to Eilat was rejected by both sides. Alpha was a non-starter, only rousing Israel's suspicions that she was to be manipulated into unilateral concessions to preserve Britain's position with the Arabs. Nonetheless, the two powers plodded on seeking a settlement until March 1956.

Running parallel with Alpha, Britain pursued the creation of a regional collective security system under its leadership as the means of preserving its position in Iraq. A Turkish-Iraqi pact agreed in Baghdad in February 1955 became the cornerstone; in early April Britain joined the Baghdad Pact by a special arrangement with Iraq that superseded the Anglo-Iraqi alliance of 1932. In developing the Baghdad Pact in close association with the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al-Said, and later trying to induce Jordan to join it, Britain alienated the very Egyptian leadership that the Alpha Project required. Nasser, furious at the promotion of Iraq as a rival for regional Arab leadership, responded with vitriolic attacks by Radio Cairo, accusing Nuri of dividing the Arab world and serving as an agent of imperialism. Playing on the themes of pan-Arab unity, anti-imperialism, and neutralism brought Nasser formidable influence with the Arab masses throughout the region, and raised the spectre that Egypt, leading a union of Arab states, aspired to replace Britain as the premium mobile within the region.

The concept of a "Northern Tier" collective security pact had been the brainchild of Dulles in 1953, but, as he told Congressional leaders in April 1956, he was irked by the way it had been exploited by the British for their own purposes in the area. The U.K. has a great interest in Iraq, both because of its oil and military bases. U.K. adherence to the Pact provided a new basis for their relationship with Iraq, which previously had been covered by treaties, which were expiring. The U.K. has used the Baghdad Pact to build up the Iraqi and to try to spread Iraqi and British influence to the south. The British pushed the Pact rapidly and in some instances without consulting the U.S.... The U.S. has not consented to join the Pact, in spite of British pressure, for a variety of reasons, but primarily because the Pact is not now chiefly an instrument for collective defence against the Soviet Union but has become an instrument of Arab intrigue. The Iraqi are using their position in the Pact in their efforts to build up influence in the Arab world, and to challenge Egyptian leadership. It might be necessary for the United States at some future time to join the Pact in order to prevent its collapse, but at the moment we do not wish to do so because of the many extraneous elements involved in it.

As result of "a number of British mistakes in the area," concluded the Secretary; "we are most reluctant to publicly identify ourselves in the area with the U.K."<sup>xii</sup>

Egypt's campaign against the Baghdad Pact, which was advertised as anti-Soviet, also attracted the attention of Moscow. When Egypt failed to acquire arms from the West, Nasser turned to the Eastern bloc, and on 27 September 1955, announced that Egypt had signed a "commercial agreement" with Czechoslovakia for a supply of weapons. The Czech Arms Deal -- actually with the Soviet Union, as Nasser revealed during his Suez nationalization speech--was the first in a chain of events, which culminated in the Suez Crisis. With it, Moscow vaulted over the Northern Tier and established a position of influence in the heart of the Middle East. It also marked the end of the West's monopoly of supplying arms to the Middle Eastern states. Israel was propelled into a desperate search for compensating arms supplies and attempting to trap Nasser into a war before Egyptian forces could absorb their new Soviet bloc equipment.<sup>xiii</sup> Indeed, Israel was the first of the parties later to be involved in the Suez Crisis to resolve that "Nasser must be destroyed."<sup>xiii</sup>

Assessing the effect of the Czech arms deal, a Special National Intelligence Estimate of 12 October 1955, representing the consensus of all U.S. intelligence agencies, judged that it would "complicate if not block the achievement of two major U.S. objectives in the Middle East: an Arab-Israeli settlement and the creation of effective regional defence arrangements against Communism." The arms deal would encourage neutralist tendencies in Egypt and the region, and offer opportunities for communist political penetration. Although the Nasser regime was believed to remain "determined to avoid close political alignment with the Soviets," there was the risk that "increasing military and economic dependence on the Bloc might eventually deprive it of some of its freedom to choose its orientation."<sup>xiv</sup>

Dulles believed Nasser sought to emulate Yugoslavia and play both sides of the Cold War, but unlike Tito he was "a babe in the woods" when it came to dealing with Communist penetration.<sup>xv</sup> A joint U.S. and British position paper was developed by Dulles and Britain's Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan in which the powers agreed "We should not write off Egypt or drive her into Russia's arms" but take time to see if Nasser is "ready to mend his fences with the West and avoid further involvement with the Soviet bloc." The two powers would refrain from punitive measures and keep in contact over such issues as Egypt's interest in assistance to build the Aswan High Dam. "The object," they concurred, "would be to reach a point at which Egypt would be willing to turn away from Russia as a source of arms, to limit arms purchases to her economic capacity, to give support to the Jordan Waters Plan, and to agree to open negotiations for a settlement with Israel." In this event, "we would offer to supply Egypt with her reasonable arms requirements, assist in financing the High Dam, bring influence on Israel to agree to a just settlement, and help Egypt play a role of leadership in the Arab world." However, their paper concluded, "If all this fails and Egypt is clearly lost to Western influence," other policies would have to be considered.<sup>xvi</sup>

Even as the West moved to win Nasser back, rumours surfaced of a Soviet offer to finance the High Dam at Aswan.<sup>xvii</sup> Eden, wanting to prevent further Russian penetration of the Middle East and Africa, argued that the West should support the project instead, and he urged Washington to put up World Bank and U.S. government funds to build the dam. The National Security Council debated the issue on 1 December at Camp David. Treasury Secretary George Humphrey worried about both the long-term costs and the effect it would have of virtually handing over the economy of Egypt to its government; he warned that the result "could not be more Communist if it had been the deliberate attempt of the United States to do so." Dulles countered that "what really worried him was the fear that Egypt would turn down our proposal and accept a Soviet counter-proposal." Then invoking Alpha, Dulles added that implicit in the proposal "would be the fact that the Egyptians were going to reach some genuine understanding with Israel" because the Egyptians "could never undertake so large and costly an enterprise as this and simultaneously carry on a great armament competition or a war with Israel." Eisenhower, countering Humphrey with an analogy to between Aswan and the Hoover Dam, backed Dulles, and approved U.S. participation.<sup>xviii</sup>

On 16 December 1955, a tentative agreement was announced whereby the United States and Britain would jointly finance the first phase of construction, and assistance would be provided by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the World Bank) for the second phase. The Bank's President Eugene Black visited Cairo early in 1956 and reached substantial agreement with Nasser regarding financing of the second stage. But the Egyptians made counterproposals to the U.S.- U.K. offer, insisting on stronger commitments from the two powers to finance the whole project rather than simply the first part of it. Negotiations stalled on this point for several months until the standoff was overtaken by other events.

In the course of the NSC debate, Dulles had linked funding for the Aswan High Dam to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. In November 1955 the U.S. launched an ultra-secret peace mission of its own, independent of the British. The Gamma Project was the codename for an American effort at mediation using former Under Secretary of Defence Robert Anderson to Egypt and Israel as intermediary. In January and March 1956 Anderson shuttled between Cairo and Tel Aviv to try to breathe some life into the Alpha Project. Nasser continued to demand a piece of the Negev desert to provide territorial contiguity between Egypt and Jordan and insisted that the Palestinian Arab refugees be given a choice between repatriation to Israel or resettlement with financial compensation. Ben-Gurion remained adamantly opposed to ceding any territory, rejected repatriation for refugees, and insisted on direct talks with Nasser. Nasser balked at such an encounter, fearing that if news leaked out it would throw the Arab world into turmoil and make him a target for assassination.<sup>xix</sup>

Anderson reported the failure of Gamma from Cairo on 6 March. Nasser, he reported, not only did not think any settlement could be achieved in the foreseeable future but that "he does not want to sponsor any settlement of a controversial issue under either his personal leadership or the leadership of



Egypt. This he fears would endanger his prestige in the Arab world."<sup>xx</sup> Eisenhower blamed both parties. He faulted Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion for stonewalling on territorial and demographic issues: "[The Israelis] are completely adamant in their attitude of making no concessions whatsoever in order to obtain peace." However, Ben-Gurion's professed willingness to meet Nasser softened the appearance of intransigence, and shifted the onus on to Nasser, who in Eisenhower's view "proved to be a complete stumbling bloc" because of his ambition "to be acknowledged as the political leader of the Arab world."<sup>xxi</sup> The failure of the Anderson mission aborted Alpha, which quietly disappeared from the diplomatic agenda by the end of March 1956. It also prompted an agonizing reappraisal of the American policy that had encouraged Nasser's Egypt to assume leadership of the Arab world.

Disillusioned with Nasser, American policy now shifted to containing Egypt and Egyptian influence in the Middle East. On 8 March Hoover cabled Dulles at a SEATO conference in Karachi that the U.S. must henceforth proceed "on premise [that] Nasser will not cooperate at present in seeking Arab-Israeli settlement and is in effect working against West in concentrating on establishment [of a] 'non-identified', at best, bloc [of] nations under Egyptian domination. We are studying measures which might be taken against Egypt itself and against Egyptian influence in the area."<sup>xxii</sup> This was the genesis of a package of policies code-named Omega which Dulles presented for Eisenhower's approval on 28 March.

The new American approach, said Dulles, was intended "to let Colonel Nasser realize that he cannot cooperate as he is doing with the Soviet Union and at the same time enjoy most favoured nation treatment from the United States. We would want for the time being to avoid any open break which would throw Nasser irrevocably into a Soviet satellite status and we would like to leave Nasser a bridge back to good relations with the West if he so desires."<sup>xxiii</sup> Attached was a list diplomatic moves that would be coordinated with London: in regards to Egypt, current negotiations on the Aswan High Dam would be stalled short of conclusion, arms shipments would continue to be blocked by denial of export licenses, and action would be delayed on humanitarian aid under PL 480 and CARE. Iraq would be given expanded radio facilities to counter Cairo's "Voice of the Arabs," the U.S. would increase support for the Baghdad Pact without actually joining, and Britain would be encouraged to maintain its treaty with Jordan. Efforts would be made to strengthen pro-Western elements against Egyptian influence in Ethiopia, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen. The U.S. would seek to dissuade Israel from any "precipitate steps that would bring about hostilities" that would endanger "the whole Western position in the Near East to the direct advantage of the Soviets" but would still not supply major arms to Israel; however, the U.S. would be sympathetic if other Western states such as Canada and France sold "limited quantities of defensive arms to Israel."<sup>xxiv</sup> In a cryptic section largely deleted from the published documents Dulles called for planning "more drastic action" if these measures did not have desired effect.<sup>xxv</sup>

Eisenhower approved Omega, adding a special emphasis to the need not simply to deflate Nasser, but to develop an alternative:

I suggested to the State Department that we begin to build up some other individual as a prospective leader of the Arab world---in the thought that mutually antagonistic personal ambitions might disrupt the aggressive plans that Nasser is evidently developing. My own choice of such a rival is king Saudi... Arabia is a country that contains the holy places of the Moslem world, and the Saudi Arabians are considered to be the most deeply religious of all the Arab groups. Consequently, the King could be built up, possibly, as a spiritual leader. Once this was accomplished we might begin to urge his right to political leadership.<sup>xxxx</sup>

Implementation was assigned to a task force dubbed the "Omega Group," headed by Raymond Hare, who was to replace Byroade as Ambassador to Egypt in September.

### Delenda est Nasser

Paralleling American disenchantment with Nasser, the British Government had also soured on the notion that it was possible to work with Nasser. Intelligence revelations played a decisive part. Beginning in November 1955, Eden began to receive a series of reports from the Secret Intelligence Service (M16) about Nasser's tilt towards the Soviets. The source of these reports, twenty-five by the end of March 1956, was a member of Nasser's entourage who had been recruited by an agent dubbed "Lucky Break." Evelyn Shuckburgh noted in his diary the effect of these reports: 28 November: "terrific scare that the Egyptians are going to give the Aswan Dam project to the Russians. It begins to look as if Nasser is even more unreliable than he seemed, and may even be consciously handing over his country to Communism," and, on 29 November: "tremendous hullabaloo over Saturday night about the Egyptians: PM and Foreign Secretary had come up to London... telegrams had gone to Washington, special message to Eisenhower and Nasser; and indeed the evidence that Nasser is playing closely with the Russians is very disquieting--unless it has been planted on us."<sup>xxxxxi</sup>

As the reports accumulated, Britain moved during the first three months of 1956 from disillusionment with Nasser to active hostility. By the end of January, Eden was comparing "Nasser with Mussolini and said his object was to be Caesar from the Gulf to the Atlantic, and to kick us out of it all."<sup>xxxxxii</sup> On 1 March came the decisive event: King Hussein abruptly dismissed Major-General John Bagot Glubb, for twenty-five years chief of Staff of the Arab Legion, Jordan's army. Eden instantly attributed this move to Nasser's machinations, and resolved from that moment to get rid of him. When Minister of State Anthony Nutting sent the Prime Minister a proposal for limiting Nasser's influence by political means, Eden exploded, "What's all this nonsense about isolating Nasser? I want him destroyed, can't you understand? I want him removed."<sup>xxxxxiii</sup> Later Nutting amended his account, stating that Eden had said "murdered" rather than "destroyed."<sup>xxxxxv</sup>

At the Cabinet meeting of 6 March, the same day Anderson reported the breakdown of Gamma, Eden stated that it was now time to persuade the United

States to support a policy of "greater firmness toward Egypt"; to abandon hopes that Egypt could be induced to make a settlement with Israel (Alpha); and to shift attention to Iraq, which, if its position was strengthened—either by building up the Baghdad Pact or reducing Egypt's influence—might be able to make progress towards a settlement.<sup>xxxii</sup>

"Lucky Break" reports continued to accumulate until Edan was able to send Eisenhower what he was convinced was proof positive of Nasser's perfidy. On 15 March he cabled: "Dear Friend: I send you herewith a most secret note of Egyptian intentions of whose authenticity we are entirely confident" which confirmed "the wide range of Egyptian ambitions against the Saudis, as well as Iraq and Jordan":

March 12, 1956

EGYPTIAN PLANS FOR A UNITED ARAB STATES  
(January, 1956)

We have absolutely reliable information that at the Conference of Egyptian Ambassadors and Ministers to the Arab States, which ended in Cairo on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1956, it was agreed that the following policy should be adopted by Egypt in her relations with the other Arab States:

- a) The ultimate aim was to form United Arab States with no Customs, a common educational and economic system and an Arab Currency Bank, which would control the financial affairs of all the Arab States.
- b) This United Arab States must consist of Republics amongst whom Egypt would naturally play the leading part.
- c) To this end the following steps were necessary:
  - i) The unseating of Nuri al-Sa'id, the Iraqi Prime Minister, and the frustration of the Baghdad Pact.
  - ii) The overthrow of the Hashemite families in Iraq and Jordan.
  - iii) The overthrow of the monarchy in Libya and the establishing of purely Arab republics in Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco. If this could be done, Egypt could strengthen her claim to be an Arab State rather than an African country outside the Arab orbit.
  - iv) Whilst Saudi Arabia would be encouraged to partake in Egyptian moves against Iraq and Jordan, the long term policy was first to isolate Saudi Arabia as the only remaining Monarchy in the Eastern Arab States and then to remove King Saudi. To this latter end

Egypt was already in touch with many of the more powerful sheiks in Arabia.

- d) This anti-monarchical policy was receiving full support from the U.S.S.R., which was sending so-called 'technicians' to help in the organization of intelligence services throughout the Arab World .
- e) In order to implement this policy, Egypt was despatching educational missions to all the Arab States. Several of the personnel of each mission had been trained as intelligence agents before their departure. Their general instructions were to recruit refugees and dissidents and to establish contact with anti-Government movements, but the direction of their activities was the responsibility of the Egyptian Ambassador or Minister to the Arab State in which they were operating .<sup>xxxii</sup>

For Eden, Nasser's grand design for an Egyptian solution to the Eastern Question was the final straw: "Nasser must be got rid of," he told Foreign Office advisers, "[I]t is either him or us."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Eisenhower, however, responded cautiously, thanking Eden for "a most interesting report... Assuming that the information contained is completely authentic, it seems to me to give a clue of how we--your Government and ours--might operate with the greatest chance of frustrating Soviet designs in the region."<sup>xxxiv</sup> Evidently Washington knew something of the stress, which these disquieting developments put upon Eden. Dulles told Senator Walter George, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that Canadian "Foreign Minister Pearson was concerned about Sir Anthony Eden and felt that he was exhibiting some of the traits his father had shown."<sup>1</sup>

The Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, had been making the diplomatic rounds in the Middle East in early March and, in fact, had been at dinner with Nasser when Glubb was dismissed. He, too, surmised Nasser had prompted Hussein's move, and upon his return to London, reported to the Cabinet on 21 March that Britain had to realign her policy in the Middle East to counter Nasser and buttress her friends. He proposed that the Baghdad Pact be strengthened, with the U.S. again pressed to join ; that Iraq and Jordan should be drawn closer together ; that Saudi Arabia should be detached from Egyptian influence; and that "we should seek to establish in Syria a government more friendly to the West." Actions aimed directly at Nasser should include withholding military supplies, withdrawing from the Aswan High Dam project, and implementing monetary measures. Coordination with Washington would, of course, be required. To all this the Cabinet agreed, and the decision communicated to Washington.<sup>2</sup> Britain had taken its first strategic decision on the road to Suez : to attempt to change the governments of Egypt and Syria, and regroup the Arab states around Iraq.

Behind the scenes, officials in Whitehall began talking of "when war comes" rather than "if war comes." By the end of March 1956, an apocalyptic mood pervaded MI6, the British secret service. The Deputy Director, George Kennedy Young, confided to an American intelligence colleague, Wilbur Crane Eveland, that "Britain is now prepared to fight its last battle ; no matter what the cost, we will win" and sketched a three-step plan for covert action : first, a revolt in Syria to neutralize leftist forces and install a pro-Iraqi government, then exploitation of rivalries among the Saudi royal family to bring about the fall of King Saudi, and finally the overthrow of Nasser. Britain would take the lead, and the risks, including "the possibility that Nasser might close the canal."<sup>3</sup>

The Cabinet's approval of covert action in Syria and efforts to draw Iraq and Jordan closer together, amounted to an endorsement of the idea of Fertile Crescent unity, an old ambition of Nuri, who dreamed of uniting Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> It had become an attractive option in the immediate aftermath of the Czech arms deal. On 5 October, Macmillan, then Foreign Secretary, and Shuckburgh had conceived a "Machiavellian scheme" to strengthen the Baghdad Pact by bringing about the merger of Syria with Iraq. Shuckburgh wrote that "we might even get the USA into the Baghdad Pact in these conditions and really build up a serious Northern Tier." Two days later, the British ambassador in Syria boasted that he could "bring about the merger of Syria with Iraq any time we like if given enough money."<sup>5</sup> Unifying the Fertile Crescent might also promote an Arab-Israeli settlement. Iraq alone lacked the strength to take the lead towards a settlement, which was why Egypt had been the focal point of Alpha, but a unified Fertile Crescent under Iraqi direction might be sufficiently strong to do so. The idea was actively studied until Lloyd, who replaced Macmillan as Foreign Secretary in December 1955, proposed in to the Cabinet after Glubb's dismissal.

Containing Israel was necessary corollary to building up Iraq. To protect Jordan, which Britain saw as an outpost of Iraq, a military contingency plan code-named Cordage was developed to deal with Israeli aggression. Conceding that Israeli forces could overrun Jordan in forty-eight hours, it was essentially a plan to force Israel to disgorge its conquests. Worked up during 1955, and refined during the first half of 1956, it envisioned a British bomber offensive to neutralize the Israeli air force, the imposition of a naval blockade, commando raids along the coast and the seizure of Eilat as a bargaining counter ; six months might be required before Israel capitulated. Cordage was updated through October 1956, when a series of Israeli reprisal raids seemed to presage an Israeli invasion of Jordan.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Finally, Britain's hardening line towards Egypt was reflected in thinking that the Suez Canal should not be allowed to revert to Egyptian control when the company's concession expired in 1968. The Cabinet's Suez Canal Committee noted the increasing "Egyptianization" of what "technically was an Egyptian company" and warned that legally British position was "fundamentally weak and that of the Egyptian Government conversely strong." The Committee, fearing that when Egypt acquired full control would raise tolls and possibly discriminate against British shipping recommended that since the canal needed enlargement, Britain should use an offer of financial aid as a bargaining counter to negotiate a new convention internationalizing the canal. Britain's goal of internationalising the canal and Egypt's determination to recover sovereignty meant that a Suez Crisis was likely sometime in the future : that it occurred in July 1956 was the result of the U.S. and U.K. strategy adopted in March to stall on the Aswan High Dam negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

Thus by the end of March 1956 both the British and American governments had come to conclusion that it was time to substitute coercion for conciliation in their relations with Nasser's Egypt. There were, however, crucial differences. The Americans, annoyed that Nasser had become "rather full of himself," aimed to deflate him, but the British, in Eden's word, wanted him "destroyed."<sup>8</sup> This nuance was to widen into a major rift once the Suez Crisis was underway. Furthermore, the British wanted to elevate Iraq as the leading Arab state, and extend its influence over neighbouring states in the Fertile Crescent. The Americans in contrast proposed to build up Saudi Arabia, which clashed with British plans to bring down King Saudi as well as bolster Hashemite Iraq. The British were determined on extreme measures, going so far as to consider redrawing the map of the region in a manner not seen since the end of the First World War. The Americans, on the other hand, thought the British were acting jittery and that the U.S. had better steer clear of public identification with British policies, which risked alienating the whole region.<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>a</sup> Nasser's speech is reproduced in full in Muhammad Khalil, The Arab States and the Arab League: A Documentary Record. II. International Affairs (Beirut, 1962), pp.742-771. For Egyptian versions of events, see Mohamed H. Heikal, Cutting the Lion's Tail: Suez Through Egyptian Eyes (London, 1986) a translation of Milafat al-Suways (The Suez Files) (Cairo, 1986) but lacking the hundreds of pages of documents appended to the Arabic edition, and Mahmoud Fawzi, Suez 1956: An Egyptian Perspective (London, 1986).

- <sup>b</sup> U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, XV (Washington, D.C., 1989), pp. 906-908. Henceforth FRUS, XV.
- <sup>c</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bulletin, 19 July 1956, p. 188.
- <sup>d</sup> Wilkins memo, 14 March 1956, FRUS, XV, pp. 352-353.
- <sup>e</sup> U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, The Near and Middle East, IX, Part I, (Washington, D.C., 1986), NSC 5428: United States Objectives and Policies with Respect to the Near East, 23 July 1954, pp. 525-526.
- <sup>f</sup> Ibid. pp.528, 534; Wilkins memo, FRUS, XV, p.355
- <sup>g</sup> Wilkins memo, FRUS, XV pp. 352-353
- <sup>h</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>i</sup> See M.A. Fitzsimons, Empire by Treaty ( Notre Dame, 1964), and Elizabeth Monroe, Britain's Moment in the Middle East ( London, 1963).
- <sup>j</sup> The original concept appears in « Notes on the Arab-Israeli Dispute » 15 December 1954, [Public Record Office] [Foreign Office Records] 371/111095; the Alpha plan in FO 371/115866. The American origins are in FRUS, IX, pp.1683-1741; FRUS, XV, covering 1955 is filled with Alpha documents. See also Evelyn Shuckburgh, Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951-1956( London, 1986), pp.210-345; Shimon Shamir, « The Collapse of Project Alpha », in Wm. Roger Louis And Roger Owen (ads), Suez 1956: The Crisis and Its Consequences ( Oxford, 1989) pp. 73-100. An Egyptian account of this secret diplomacy is Muhammad Tawil, La'bat al-Uman wa-'Abdal-Nasser ( The Game of Nations and Abdel Nasser (Cairo, 1986).
- <sup>k</sup> O'Connor Memorandum, 10 April 1956, FRUS, XV, pp.506-507.
- <sup>l</sup> Mordechai Bar-On, The Gates of Gaza: Israel's Road to Suez and Back. 1955-1957(New -York, 1994), pp.1-5, 38-55.
- <sup>m</sup> Lawson telegram reporting Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett's comment, 14 October 1956, FRUS, XV, p.590.
- <sup>n</sup> SNIE -30-3-55, Probable Consequences of the Egyptian Arms Deal with the Soviet Bloc, 12 October 1955, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, XIV, (Washington, D.C. 1989), p. 579.
- <sup>o</sup> Russell memo, 26 October 1955 FRUS, XIV, p. 655.
- <sup>p</sup> Dulles telegram, 10 November 1955, FRUS, XIV, pp. 730-731
- <sup>q</sup> Eden to Eisenhower, PM's telegram 314/55, 26 November 1955 PREM 11/1177.
- <sup>r</sup> Gleason memo, 1December 1955, FRUS, XIV. Pp. 813-817.
- <sup>s</sup> For an Egyptian version of Gamma, see Heikal, Cutting the Lion's Tail, pp. 91-94, 232-234.
- <sup>t</sup> Anderson to Dulles, 6 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.310.
- <sup>v</sup> Eisenhower Diary, 13 March 1956 FRUS, XV, p.342.
- <sup>w</sup> Hoover to Dulles, 8 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.326.
- <sup>x</sup> Dulles to Eisenhower, 28 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.419.
- <sup>y</sup> Ibid., pp.419-420.
- <sup>z</sup> Ibid., p. 421
- <sup>aa</sup> Eisenhower diary, 28 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.425

- <sup>aa</sup> Shuckburgh, Descent to Suez, pp.305-306; Eden to Eisenhower telegram, 27 November 1956, FRUS, XIV, pp.808-809.
- <sup>bb</sup> Shuckburgh, Descent to Suez, p.327.
- <sup>cc</sup> Anthony Nutting, No End of a Lesson (London, 1967), p.34
- <sup>dd</sup> Brian Lapping, End of Empire (New York, 1985), p.262.
- <sup>ee</sup> [Cabinet Minutes] (56), 19<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 6 March 1956, [Public Record Office], [Cabinet Records] 128/30.
- <sup>ff</sup> Eden to Eisenhower, 15 March 1956, PREM 11/1177. Only the cover letter was declassified by the Public Record Office; however, the text is reproduced in FRUS, XV, pp.364-365.
- <sup>gg</sup> Shuckburgh, Descent to Suez, p.346.
- <sup>hh</sup> Eisenhower to Eden, 20 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.365.
- <sup>ii</sup> Mac Arthur memo, 30 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p.433.
- <sup>jj</sup> CM(56), 24<sup>th</sup> conclusions, 21 March 1956, CAB 128/30. Note From the British Ambassador (Makins) to Secretary of State Dulles, 21 March 1956, FRUS, XV, pp.383-387.
- <sup>kk</sup> Wilbur Crane Eveland Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East (New York, 1980), 170-171.
- <sup>ll</sup> Michael Eppel, "Nuri al-Sa'id and 'Abdallah's Ambitions in Syria", in Asher Susser/Aryeh Shmuelevitz (eds.), The Hashemites in the Modern Arab World (London, 1995), pp. 152-161.
- <sup>mmm</sup> Shuckburgh, Descent to Suez, pp. 289-290.
- <sup>nn</sup> Annex to JP ( 56 ) 74 ( Final ), [ Public Record Office ] AIR [ Ministry Records ] 8/2073; Stuart Cohen, ' A Still Stranger Aspect of Suez: British Operational Plans to Attack Israel ', The International History Review, X(1988), 261-281.
- <sup>oo</sup> Suez Canal: note by the chairman of the Suez Canal Committee, Middle East] (Official Committee)] (5)'15, 29 March 1956, CAB 134/1298; and The Suez Canal: future policy: note by joint secretaries, ME (o) (56) 25, 30 May 1956, CAB 134/1298.
- <sup>pp</sup> MacArthur memo, 30 March 1956, FRUS, XV, p. 431.
- <sup>qq</sup> O'Connor memo, 10 April 1956, FRUS, XV, p. 507.