

Suez Crisis of 1956 - 1957

The Suez Crisis was an invasion of Egypt by Israel, Britain and France with the objective of regaining control of the Suez Canal that had been nationalized by the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The crisis ended when the invaders withdrew under pressure from the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Nations.

The Suez Crisis is an important topic in the world history segment of the IAS Exam.

Why was the Suez Canal important?

Under the supervision of French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Suez Canal opened in 1869, about ten years of construction. The 193-kilometre long canal separated Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula and Africa from Asia. Before the construction of the canal, ships traversing from Asia to Europe and vice-versa had to circumnavigate around the Cape of Good Hope in the southern tip of Africa to reach either continent. The Suez Canal cut this journey by about 8900 kms.

The canal enabled direct connection to the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean trade routes easily available, allowing goods to be shipped between Europe and Asia more directly. The Suez Canal's value to international trade made it a source of conflict among Egypt's neighbours and by the time of the Cold War in the 1950s the world's superpowers would also show an interest in the canal

Nationalization of the Suez Canal

The main catalyst of the Suez Crisis was the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in July 1965. The canal was under the joint control of the French and the British governments through which Middle-Eastern oil would be transported through the canal.

Nasser's decision to nationalise the canal was mainly economic as he sought to gain additional funding for the construction of the Aswan Dam when funding by the Soviet Union, proved to be inadequate.

The move to nationalize the canal naturally antagonised the French and the British. Despite Nasser promising fair compensation to the former owners of the canal, the British and the French made a plan with the Israelis to take back the canal from Egyptian control. Along with fighting for the economic value, each country had a personal score to settle with Egypt, specifically with Nasser.

France was furious at Egypt's support of Algerian rebels who were fighting against French colonial authority. Britain was outraged at the loss of its influence following Nasser's pan-Arab policy, while Israel had sporadic border clashes with the Egyptian army from time to time. Plus, the Egyptian leader's disdain towards the existence of Israel did not help matters.

The outbreak of the Suez Crisis

The Israeli army struck first on October 29, 1956, with the British and French forces joining suit later. The original plan was to strike at once but transportation issues of the French and British troops had caused a delay. Nevertheless, the offensive was successful with Port Said and Port Fuad falling to the British and French forces while the Sinai peninsula was effectively under Israeli control. The joint offensive saw the Egyptian forces lose complete control of the canal area and it would seem that the canal would be lost, but Nasser rallied his country's army and fought on.

The delay in the offensive had given the Soviet Union, allies of the Egyptians, time to respond. The Soviet Union eager to gain influence in the middle east supplied arms and ammunition to the Egyptian army. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev threw in his weight at a United Nations Security Council meeting convened to mitigate the crisis. He went as far as threatening to rain nuclear missiles on Western Europe should the Israeli-French-British force not withdraw in time.

The response of the United States was measured. President Dwight Eisenhower censured the Soviets for their reckless talk of nuclear conflict. But he did warn that should the British, French and the Israelis not withdraw from the Suez Canal, his government would impose economic sanctions on all three.

This worked and the British and French forces withdrew by December 1956 while the side of the canal towards the Sinai would be held by the Israelis until March 1957.

The Suez Crisis marked the first use of a United Nations peacekeeping force. The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was an armed group dispatched to the area to supervise the end of hostilities and the withdrawal of the three occupying forces.

The aftermath of the Suez Crisis

In the eyes of the world, the crisis and its aftermath signalled the end of Britain and France as superpowers as their influence weakened with the United States and the Soviet Union taking on a more active role in affairs. As the seat of empires of the past, Britain had agreed to the withdrawal of its army by a mere threat of an economic sanction by one of its former colonies. The significance of this was not lost on many contemporary historians.

British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, would resign two months after the withdrawal of British troops from the region. French relations with the United States would be strained through the

next few decades and they would find even less support when it came to maintaining their colonies in Africa and Asia.

The crisis may also have hastened decolonisation, as many of the remaining British and French colonies gained independence over the next few years.

The Suez Crisis made Nasser a powerful hero in the growing Arab and Egyptian nationalist movements. Israel, while it did not gain the right to utilize the canal, was once again granted rights to ship goods along the Straits of Tiran. But since no definite peace settlement was reached between Egypt and Israel, both the nations would be in a state of war with each other. This would culminate in the Six-Day war of 1967.