

# Historical Security Council – Research Report II

## Addressing the Issue of Israel's Invasion of the Sinai Peninsula (1956)

This Security Council session takes place on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1956 and delegates are thus expected to respect and stay within this time frame.

### Introduction to the Topic:

The invasion of the Sinai Peninsula by Israel, in 1956, which escalated into the Suez Crisis, marks a critical moment in modern history. This crisis emerged from a combination of territorial disputes, colonial interests, and the rise of nationalist movements. On October 29<sup>th</sup> of 1956, Israeli forces initiated a military operation, codenamed “Operation Kadesh”, to invade the Sinai Peninsula, an area under Egyptian control. Israel aimed to secure access to vital trade routes, eliminate perceived threats from Egypt, and challenge the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The operation was part of a broader strategy, involving not just Israel, but also Britain and France, both of whom had significant interests in the Suez Canal. This collaboration among the three nations is now known as the Tripartite Aggression.

The Israelis struck first on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1956, and, two days later, British and French military forces joined them. Originally, forces from the three countries were set to strike at once, but the British and French troops were delayed. Behind schedule but ultimately successful, the British and French troops landed at Port Said and Port Fuad (Figure 1.1.) and took control of the area around the Suez Canal. However, their hesitation gave the Soviet Union, also confronted with a growing anti-Soviet crisis in Hungary, time to respond.

The invasion progressed rapidly with Israeli forces advancing through key locations in the Sinai Peninsula, including the capture of strategic areas such as the Mitla Pass. The operation resulted in the defeat of Egyptian forces, with significant casualties on both sides. Ten Israeli brigades invaded Egypt and advanced toward the canal, routing Egyptian forces. Britain and France, following their plan, demanded that Israeli and Egyptian troops withdraw from the canal, and they announced that they would intervene to enforce a cease-fire ordered by the United Nations. However, the delay in their actions allowed the Soviets, eager to exploit Arab nationalism and gain a foothold in the Middle East, to respond.

The Soviets had been supplying arms from Czechoslovakia to the Egyptian government since 1955 and, eventually, helped Egypt construct the Aswan Dam on the Nile River after the United States refused to support the project. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev railed against the invasion and

threatened to rain down nuclear missiles on Western Europe if the triple Israeli-French-British force did not withdraw, intensifying the tensions of the crisis.



**Figure 1.1** – Map of the Suez Canal, (The Economist, July 2006)

### **Background Information:**

Egypt and Israeli relations have never been aligned. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948, just ten minutes before the midnight deadline, Israel declared statehood, and the United States recognized the state of Israel. This marked the beginning of ethnic cleansing of Palestinian inhabitants from the area it captured, an event the Palestinians refer to as the "Nakba" (Catastrophe). In response, Egypt, alongside the armies of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, launched defensive operations in 1948. This conflict concluded with Egypt signing the 1949 Armistice Agreement, which was where they formally ended the hostilities of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and demarcated the Green Line, which separated Arab-controlled territory.

In 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser rose to power in Egypt. He sought to create a greater pan-Arab force by uniting Egypt and Syria into a single political entity known as the United Arab Republic, integrating their militaries as part of his vision for pan-Arab unity.

In reaction to Egypt's strengthening relations with communist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain decided to withdraw their promised funding for Egypt's construction of the Aswan High Dam on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1956. In response to the American and British

decision, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company and imposed martial law in the canal zone, claiming that the dam's construction would be funded within five years by tolls collected from ships using the canal. As a way of preventing petroleum exports from the Persian Gulf to Western Europe, Britain and France feared that Nasser would block the canal.

When diplomatic efforts to settle the crisis failed, Britain and France secretly prepared military action to regain control of the canal and, if possible, to depose of Nasser. They found a ready ally in Israel, whose hostility toward Egypt had been exacerbated by Nasser's blockage of the Straits of Tīrān (at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba) and the numerous raids by Egyptian-supported commandos into Israel during 1955–56.

### **Recent Developments:**

The Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula began on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1956, when Israeli paratroopers performed an airborne assault aiming to gain control of the chokepoint Mitla pass, one of the few points in the hard-to-navigate terrain which would give the soldiers a strategic and military advantage. At the same time, ground forces advanced from the Negev Desert (bordering the Sinai Peninsula and Israel), crossing over into Egyptian territory aiming to secure strategic points for further movements. The operation shone a light on the Israeli troops' military capacities and the importance of their rapid movement and organized assaults, given that they managed to repel Egyptian resistance and capture their desired strategic points, – Sharm El Sheikh and the Straits of Tiran – thus achieving their primary military objectives within a matter of days.

Israel's objective with the territories of Sharm El Sheikh and the Straits of Tiran was simply to control access to the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's only maritime route to the Red Sea and key trading partners in Asia and East Africa. Since Egyptian forces stationed at Sharm El Sheikh would be able to block the Straits of Tiran, thus imposing a maritime blockade on Israeli shipping, securing said territory and reopening the Straits was a vital objective for Israel to ensure its primary economic flow and freedom of navigation – crucial for the country's trade and strategic interests.

### **Focus of the debate:**

Delegates should consider the following key issues:

- Ensuring the sovereignty of Egypt while addressing Israel's security concerns and avoiding the further escalation of hostilities in the region.
- Protecting international trade through the Suez Canal, which is vital for global commerce, and finding ways to prevent future conflicts over control of the canal.

- Evaluating the actions of Britain and France, who intervened under the guise of a peacekeeping mission but had clear objectives related to the Suez Canal and regional stability. Delegates should assess how these actions align with international law and the principles of the United Nations.

## Parties Involved:

**Britain:** A key colonial power with significant economic and strategic interests in the Suez Canal, Britain opposed Nasser's actions and sought military intervention to regain control of the canal.

**Canada:** Canada, under Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, played a pivotal role in the diplomatic resolution of the crisis, proposing the idea of a peacekeeping force, which helped defuse tensions.

**Egypt:** Led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, seeking to assert control over the vital waterway and challenge Western influence in the region.

**France:** A former colonial power in the region, France had co-built the Suez Canal and was concerned about Nasser's growing influence and collaborated with Britain and Israel in the military intervention.

**Israel:** Facing hostilities from Egypt, joined Britain and France in the invasion, aiming to weaken Nasser's military and improve its security along the border.

**Jordan:** Though not directly involved in the military conflict, Jordan was a key Arab ally of Egypt and supported Nasser politically, contributing to the broader Arab solidarity against Western intervention.

**Saudi Arabia:** Saudi Arabia strongly opposed the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt, supporting Nasser diplomatically and providing financial aid to Egypt.

**Soviet Union:** The USSR supported Egypt, viewing the intervention as a manifestation of Western imperialism, and threatened to escalate the conflict if necessary.

**The Arab League:** Comprising several Arab nations, the Arab League supported Egypt's position against the tripartite invasion, condemning the military actions and calling for regional solidarity.

**United States:** Despite being an ally of Britain and France, the U.S. opposed the military intervention, pressuring for a ceasefire to prevent further escalation and maintain its global standing during the Cold War.

## Past UN Actions and Possible Solutions:

- A Security Council meeting was held on October 30<sup>th</sup>, where a ceasefire was proposed and supported by the USA and the USSR, but vetoed by France and Britain.
- Under the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, the matter was then referred to the General Assembly, which met in an emergency special session from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of November.
- The Assembly called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of all foreign forces from occupied territories on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November.
- On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November the Assembly established the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities, as well as facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli, British, and French troops, and act as a buffer between Egypt and Israel.
- UNEF forces were deployed to the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip starting in November 1956.

Possible solutions could be focused on securing Egypt's sovereignty while addressing Israel's security concerns, ensuring the freedom of international trade through the Suez Canal, and preventing the escalation of hostilities. Furthermore, the following examples ensue:

- Guaranteeing no hostile actions will be committed by Sinai or Egypt by providing Israel with formal security guarantees through UN resolutions.
- Creating a border monitoring commission to prevent future cross-border conflicts or insurgent activities between Egypt and Israel.
- Securing freedom of navigation for all parties passing through the Suez Canal, by placing it under the temporary supervision of a neutral international group, such as the International Maritime Organization or UN.
- Negotiating a ceasefire agreement between the two parties – to be monitored by a neutral party.

## Glossary and Key Terms:

**Aswan High Dam:** A large dam in Egypt, originally funded by the U.S. and Britain, which became the center of international controversy after Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal.

**Ceasefire:** A temporary suspension of hostilities.

**Chokepoint:** a strategic narrow route providing passage through or to another region.

**Gulf of Aqaba:** A body of water that is critical for Israel's access to the Red Sea, directly impacted by Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran.

**Nationalization:** The process by which private assets are taken into state ownership.

**Operation Kadesh:** The Israeli military operation launched on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1956, during the Suez Crisis.

**Straits of Tiran:** A narrow waterway connecting the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea, vital for Israeli shipping and trade.

**Suez Canal:** A man-made waterway that connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, crucial for global maritime trade.

**Suez Canal Company:** French-based corporation that managed the Suez Canal from its opening in 1869 until its nationalization by Egypt in 1956.

**Tripartite Aggression:** The coordinated military intervention by Israel, Britain, and France during the Suez Crisis.

**Veto:** The power to reject a proposal, as used by the United Kingdom and France in the UN Security Council.

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