

The Suez Canal in British Defence Policy according to British Documents (1882-1956)

İngiliz Belgelerine Göre İngiliz Savunma Politikasında Süveyş Kanalı (1882-1956)

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"If the Suez Canal is our back door to the East, it is the front door to Europe of Australia, New Zealand and India. If you like to mix your metaphors it is, in fact, the swing-door of the British Empire, which has got to keep continually revolving if our communications are to be what they should"

Anthony Eden

House Commons, 23 December 1929

Abstract

Despite strong British opposition, construction of the Suez Canal was begun in 1859 and it was opened to traffic in 1869. Financially, it was not an immediate success, and its shares only rose to above the expected level for the first time in 1875, when the Khedive Ismail sold his holdings of Canal shares to the British Government. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 galvanised the other European powers into negotiating some form of international control for the Canal. Therefore, the Convention signed at Istanbul in 1888. Moreover, at the end of the First World War, the *de facto* position of Britain as the protecting power in Egypt was recognised by the defeated powers who had been signatories of the Convention. Article 8 of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 and the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954 further clarified Britain's position in relation to the Canal. Being a wealthy foreign enterprise, the Suez Canal Company was a natural target for

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Egyptian nationalists. Therefore, in July 1956, President Nasser nationalised the Company. An American initiative to solve the problem created by the nationalisation of the Canal led to the formation of a Suez Canal Users' Association, with the participation of the principal Western nations using the Canal. It was designed to defend the Users' interests against arbitrary action by Egypt. However, the Association appeared to have no useful function to perform, once an agreement was reached between the Company and Egypt in 1958.

This paper is based upon a range of primary and secondary sources. Much of the material for this study was gathered from the National Archives, the United Kingdom. All references to sources prefixed by FO refer to documents held at the National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office (PRO).

Keywords: Suez Canal, First World War, Britain, Turkey, Egypt

Özet

Güçlü İngiliz muhalefetine rağmen, Süveyş Kanalı'nın inşasına 1859'da başlandı ve 1869'da Kanal trafiğe açıldı. Fakat Kanal finansal olarak ilk başlarda başarılı değildi. Hisseleri ilk kez 1875'te beklenen seviyenin üzerine çıktı. Ancak 1875'de Hidiv İsmail Kanal hisselerini İngiltere Hükümetine sattı. İngiltere 1882'de Mısır'ı işgal etti ve Kanalı kullanan diğer Avrupalı güçleri Kanal'dan geçişi düzenleyecek bir tür uluslararası kontrol mekanizmasının kurulması için toplantıya çağırdı. Bunun sonucunda 1888 yılında İstanbul'da bir sözleşme imzalandı. Böylece, Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın sonunda, İngiltere'nin Mısır'daki fiili konumu, Sözleşmeyi imzalayan ve Savaş'tan yenik çıkan güçler tarafından tanındı. 1936 İngiltere-Mısır Antlaşması'nın 8. maddesi ve 1954 İngiltere-Mısır Anlaşması İngiltere'nin Kanal ile ilgili konumunu daha da netleştirdi. Zengin bir yabancı girişim olan Süveyş Kanal Şirketi, Mısır milliyetçileri için doğal bir hedefti. Bu nedenle, Temmuz 1956'da Başkan Nasır Şirketi kamulaştırdı. Kanalın millileştirilmesinin yarattığı sorunu çözmek için Amerika, Kanal'ı kullanan başlıca Batılı devletlerin katılımıyla Süveyş Kanal Kullanıcıları Birliği'nin kurulmasını sağladı. Bu Birlik, Mısır'ın keyfi eylemlerine karşı Kanal'ı kullanan ülkelerin çıkarlarını korumak için tasarlanmıştı. Ancak, 1958'de Şirket ile Mısır Hükümeti arasında bir anlaşmaya varıldığında, bu Birliğin bir işlevi kalmadı.

Bu makalenin hazırlanmasında ana ve ikincil kaynaklar kullanıldı. Kaynakların çoğu İngiltere National Archive'den temin edilen belgelerden oluşmaktadır. Çalışmada referans olarak FO kodlamasıyla kullanılan belgeler daha önce the Public Record Office (PRO) olarak tanımlanan the National Archives katologlarında yer almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Süveyş Kanalı, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, İngiltere, Türkiye, Mısır

Introduction

The strategic importance of the Middle East is large because of its international waterways: the Turkish Straits, the Suez Canal and the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. Indeed, many political conflicts in this area have revolved around these narrow stretches of water. In fact, the Middle Eastern question in the nineteenth century was essentially a rivalry over the canal in the latter part of the century. The Canal brought Egypt into the arena of major world politics, for economic and military reasons¹

The economic significance of these waterways is obvious. The Turkish Straits have been a vital trade route between the Black Sea shores and the Mediterranean since ancient times. The prosperity of many Mediterranean states has been largely dependent upon its ability to trade with the Black Sea hinterland. Conversely, the Straits have also played an important role in the foreign trade of Russia ever since the latter obtained an outlet to the Black Sea. The commercial significance of the opening of the Suez Canal, as mentioned earlier, goes without saying.²

The military importance of these waterways has always been noteworthy, and much military and naval planning of both World Wars centred on these narrow passages. During the Second World War, Germany and Italy made a major effort to seize the Suez Canal in a series of offensives toward Egypt; and Britain was ready to make sacrifices in other areas of the war to defend the Canal. Similarly, supplying the Soviet Union with arms and equipment was complicated for the Allies by the closure of the Straits by Turkey and by German air bases in the Balkans. In the present day, given the development of aviation and modern weapons, the question arises of whether or not these old plans and calculations are obsolete. Events following the Second World War have revealed that, during war, who is in actual control of Turkish Straits and of the Suez Canal is of paramount importance. As far as peacetime is concerned, it can be asserted that control of these waterways may prove decisive regarding both the political independence of Turkey and the diplomatic alignment of Egypt.³

1. French Interest in a Canal

The first European power to show interest in a canal connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea was Venice (c.1500). However, nothing more was heard of the idea until the end of that century, when it re-emerged as a French project aimed at “diminishing Spain”. Even later, Louis

¹ George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, 4th edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 694.

² Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 694.

³ Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 694.

XIV contemplated the occupation of Egypt and the opening up of a sea route to the Far East, but nothing practical was accomplished until after the Revolution. In 1798, the Directorate sent an expedition to Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte with instructions to “have the Isthmus of Suez cut through, and take the necessary steps to assure the free and exclusive possession of the Red Sea to the French Republic.” Napoleon’s engineers did not believe that the project of a direct canal would be favourable, given that the level of the Red Sea was 30 feet above that of the Mediterranean. Instead, they recommended the reopening of the Canal of the Pharaohs. However, the destruction of the French fleet at Aboukir, and the subsequent defeat and repatriation of the French Army of Egypt, put an end to any such plans for the immediate future.⁴

2. The Construction of the Canal

Nevertheless, French interest continued and during the early years of the 19th century, its efforts to secure a concession led to clashes with Britain, who was more interested in a railway than in a canal, and was determined to prevent any increase of French influence in an area so vital to itself. Britain secured an initial advantage by obtaining the concession for the construction of the Alexandria-Cairo railway from the Viceroy Abbas I. However, in 1854 he was succeeded by his uncle, Mohammed Said, who was a personal friend of Ferdinand de Lesseps, a former member of the French diplomatic service who had been trying to obtain a concession for the construction of a canal for years. Fearing his influence with the new Viceroy, Britain pressed the Ottoman Government, as titular suzerain of Egypt, to prevent the grant of a concession which in spite of this, de Lesseps succeeded in obtaining concession in November 1854.⁵

Under the concession, which was redrafted and amended in 1856 and again in 1866, the Suez Canal Company was permitted to construct a maritime canal connecting Suez and the Gulf of Peluse, on the condition that the work would be completed in six years, and four-fifths of the labour would be Egyptian. The concession was to run for 99 years from the successful completion of the work. The Government agreed to make available the land required for construction free of tax, and to grant the Company other areas of land for agricultural purposes free of tax for ten years, with the right to exploit all mines and quarries within the concession areas. The Company was declared to be an Egyptian Company subject to the laws and customs of the Ottoman Empire, but

⁴ The National Archives, Foreign Office (FO) 370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962; For further information Durmuş Akalın, *Süveyş Kanalı* (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınları, 2015); Sevda Özkaya, *Süveyş Kanalı* (İstanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2015)

⁵ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 708. It could be argued that, without de Lesseps, there would have been no Canal, though it would surely have been built at a later time.

regarding its relationships with its shareholders, it was, by special arrangement, recognised as a joint-stock company governed by French law.⁶

3. British Opposition

Britain continued its opposition, stating that the Canal was a technical impossibility or, in any case, could be completed only at enormous and uneconomic cost and that the railway, for which Britain already held the concession, was a more practical proposition. Palmerston, who was the Canal's most determined and influential opponent, referred to it as "a bubble scheme", "a swindle", and "a foul and stagnant ditch". None of the Company's shares was taken up in Britain, and for some time after work commenced in April 1859, the country persisted in its opposition on the grounds of technical impossibility, the overstraining of Egypt's finances, the alienation of its territory, the risk of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the employment of forced labour, the possibility of the erection of fortifications, and the greater efficacy of a railway.⁷

Conflicting pressures in Constantinople prevented the Ottoman Government from reaching a decision until April 1863, when it was announced that the Sultan's consent depended upon three factors: the neutrality of the canal, the abolition of forced labour, and abandonment by the Company of the Sweet Water Canal and of the lands obtained for agricultural development. The Khedive Ismail agreed to refer the two latter questions to arbitration by Emperor Napoleon III.⁸ The Emperor's award dated July 1864 conceded both the abolition of forced labour and restoration of the Sweet Water Canal and of about 24,500 acres of land in return for an indemnity of 84,000,000 francs or about £3,200,000.⁹ Britain hoped that abolition of the *corvées*, and the financial straits to which the Company would be reduced, would deliver the final blow which would force it to discontinue work. However, it survived. The Sultan's official sanction was given in January 1866, and the Canal was declared open in November 1869 in the course of magnificent ceremonies which were estimated at having cost the Khedive about £1,000,000.¹⁰

During the first few years of its operation, the Canal disappointed both its promoters and the shareholders. Less than 500 ships had passed through it by the end of 1870, and the value of the 500franc share fell to 272franc in 1870, and to 208franc in 1871. The Company was on the

⁶ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁷ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. French opposition to the railway was every bit as bitter as British opposition to the canal. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 708-709.

⁸ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Ismail had succeeded Mohammed Sa'id in 1863, but was not granted the title of Khedive until 1867. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 708-709.

⁹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. For abolition of forced labour: £1,520,000; For the Sweet Water Canal: £640,000; for return of the land: £1,040,000; Total: £3,200,000.

¹⁰ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. The Canal was constructed by French brains, Egyptian sweat and the money of both. Being French, its construction was ruthlessly and at times hysterically opposed by Britain.

brink of bankruptcy, so de Lesseps contemplated selling the Canal to the Maritime powers for £12,000,000. He was restrained only by the Ottoman Government's ruling that it was Egyptian property, under concession to an Egyptian company had the right to "enjoy, relinquish, or seek to extend it, but not otherwise dispose of it". The increasing development of steam navigation improved matters significantly: nearly 1500 vessels passed through the Canal in 1875, and in that year the value of the shares rose for the first time above par to 674 francs.¹¹

4. Egypt's Share in the Construction

The Egyptians alleged that most of the responsibility for digging the Canal, both in terms of labour and finances, fell upon Egypt without any returns, and that in the 14-year period of construction around 120,000 Egyptians had died of overwork and disease. However, the Company's figures of that time suggested that the labour force it had employed over the ten years of construction, during three of which (1863-1865) work was almost at a standstill, averaged about 27,000 a year, and the mortality rate was alleged to have been only 1.72 per thousand. Nevertheless, it was known that mortality was heavy and that the final stages of the work were delayed by a cholera epidemic. Hence, the true figure was probably less than that given by the Egyptians and higher than that published by the Company.¹²

The estimated cost of the Canal was just over £16,000,000. Of this, the shareholders contributed £4,500,000 and Egypt £11,500,000, including £4,000,000 for stock and £3,200,000 under Napoleon III's arbitration award. In 1858, the Khedive sold the stock to the British Government, and in 1870, the Government of Egypt disposed of its share of the Canal profits to the *Crédit Foncier de France* for a down payment of 22,000,000 francs. While it is true, therefore, that Egypt paid heavily for the construction of the Canal; it did, in fact, receive direct returns in stock and profits, of which it later deprived itself for immediate cash benefits.¹³

5. The Khedive's Shares and British Participation in the Company

At the time of the allocation of the Company's shares in 1858, the Khedive, Mohammed Said, had received 64,000. In May 1860, when neither Britain, the United States, Austria nor Russia had taken up any of the shares reserved for them, he was induced to buy a further 113,642, making a total of 177,642 or 44% of the whole project. By the end of 1875, Ismail found himself so much in debt that he announced that he was prepared to sell his entire holding. French efforts to raise the necessary capital did not succeed, and on November 25 the British Government acquired

¹¹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

¹² FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

¹³ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

176,602 shares (a few having been disposed of previously) for £3,976,580. As the Khedive had already taken substantial dividends in advance, none was payable until 1894.¹⁴ However, apart from the fact that Britain had in this way acquired an investment which was eventually to prove far more profitable than expected, it acquired the right to the maximum of ten votes, and to the appointment of three Directors on a Board of 24.¹⁵ In 1883, the number of Directors was increased to 32, seven of the additional seats being allotted to representatives of British shipping interests. British representation was thus increased to 10, or just under a third of the total.¹⁶

Disraeli wrote to the Queen; “It is vital to your Majesty’s authority and power at this critical moment that the Canal should belong to England.” However, the Canal Company never owned the Canal, which remained Ottoman (and subsequently Egyptian) territory. It was a private joint-stock company which had the concession to operate the Canal until November 1968, when everything was to revert to the Egyptians.¹⁷

6. Treaties affecting the Canal

The state of bankruptcy caused by Ismail’s extravagance, and his unwillingness to follow the advice offered to him by the Commissioners of the *Caisse de la Dette*, led to his deposition in June 1879. His successor, Tawfiq, was faced almost immediately by internal discontent caused by the privileged position of foreigners. Things came to a head when, in military expenditure, 2500 mainly Egyptian junior officers, were placed on half-pay. The leadership of the discontented officers was assumed by Colonel Ahmad Arabi who, in 1882, succeeded in having himself appointed as Minister of War. Serious anti-foreign rioting and the steps taken by the Egyptians to strengthen the fortifications of Alexandria against possible invasion resulted in the bombardment of the forts by a British fleet (11 July 1882), and on 18 September a British army, advancing from Ismailia on the Canal, decisively defeated Arabi’s forces at Tel el Kebir. The acquisition by Britain of over 40% of the Canal shares, and the presence from now on of a British army of occupation in Egypt, raised doubts among other European powers as to how it might act as the *de facto* power controlling the Canal, and they were anxious to arrange some form of an international guarantee. Britain did not make any objections, and in 1883 took the lead in initiating discussions.¹⁸

¹⁴ Keith Kyle, *Suez* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), 13-14.

¹⁵ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Before nationalisation (1956), the British Government’s Suez Canal shares had been paying dividends of approximately £2,850,000 per annum over a number of years.

¹⁶ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

¹⁷ Kyle, *Suez*, 14.

¹⁸ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 709-710. Kyle, *Suez*, 16.

It had been stipulated in Article XIV of the Firman of Concession of 1856 that the Canal was always to remain open to merchant shipping regardless of flag. The Concession, however, had no international force, and neither had anything to say on the question of passage of warships. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, freedom of navigation had in fact been maintained. The latter war was the first, since the opening of the Canal, in which the Ottoman Empire (the suzerain territorial power) was engaged in hostilities. The Ottomans were, however, put to no trouble either in defence of Egypt or of the Canal, as Britain made its own position abundantly clear. On 6 May 1877, it addressed a note to Russia defining its interests in Egypt and warning that any attempt to interfere with the free passage of the Canal would not be consistent with the British declared attitude of passive neutrality. At the same time, Britain promised the Egyptian Government the naval support it might need. In the event, although Egyptian troops fought in the Ottoman armies, no defensive action was necessary, nor did any ship flying the Russian flag attempt to pass through the Canal. In 1882, de Lesseps claimed that the use of the Canal for British troop movements, and of Ismailia as base of operations, were violations of the concession agreement, the response to which was that Britain had acted only at the request of the Khedive to deal with internal rebellion against his authority.¹⁹

A few years later, the European powers reached an agreement in a Convention signed at Constantinople in October 1888, but with reservations by Britain regarding its freedom of action during the period of its temporary occupation of Egypt. The Convention was therefore suspended until 1904 when Britain and France signed an agreement by which the latter recognised the British occupation of Egypt, and the former declared its adherence to the Convention on condition that the Articles relating to international supervision (Article VIII) and the right of blockade (last sentence of Article I) should not be enforced.²⁰

Articles I-VII of the Convention dealt with the free passage and use of the Canal by the maritime powers, particularly in the time of war. Article IX placed responsibility for the execution of the Convention in the first place on the Government of Egypt, and secondly, in the event of Egypt being unable to carry out her obligations, upon the Imperial Ottoman Government. Under

¹⁹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. In 1882, Britain occupied Egypt. De Lesseps telegraphed to Arabi Pasha: "The English shall never enter the Canal, never. Make no attempt to intercept my Canal. I am there." However, Sir Garnet Wolseley was there too and, going through the Canal, landed at Ismailia. A quick victory at Tel al-Kebir and Egypt was at Britain's mercy. To a national-minded Egyptian, the Canal was the invasion-route through which the latest foreign ruler had arrived. See Kyle, *Suez*, p. 15. The "temporary" occupation lasted seventy-four years. According to the historian A.J. P. Taylor, the British promise to withdraw, made originally in a circular to the Powers, was repeated sixty-six times between 1882 and 1922. "But the condition", Taylor says, "was the restoration of order; and this condition was never fulfilled to British satisfaction." See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery of Europe, 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 289.

²⁰ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Kyle, *Suez*, 16-17.

Article X, nothing in the Convention was held to interfere with any measures taken by either of the two Governments for the defence of Egypt. Articles XII and XIII dealt with the territorial rights of the Ottoman Government and the Sovereign rights of the Sultan and of the Khedive. Article XIV laid down that agreement entered into under the Convention were not to be limited by the period of the Canal Company's concession. Nowhere in the Convention was the occupying power, Britain, mentioned, on the assumption that her occupation of Egypt was temporary and shortly to be terminated.²¹

The exact status of the Canal under the Convention was not easy to define. It had not been neutralised, as vessels of war, including those of belligerents, had the right of passage in the time of war as in time of peace. Although it was thus in some sense internationalised, it was regarded at all times as being an integral part of Egypt. Egypt was not itself a signatory of the Convention which, however, laid upon her and upon her then suzerain, Turkey, rights and obligations under Articles IX, X, XI and XIII, which by its declaration of 24 April 1957. Egypt was presumed to acknowledge the Convention at that time.²²

At the end of the First World War, the Central Powers - Germany (Treaty of Versailles, Article 152), Austria (Treaty of St. Germain, Article 107), and Hungary (Treaty of Trianon, Article 91) - recognised Britain's position as the *de facto* protecting power in Egypt by the silent agreement to the transfer of the Ottoman Government's obligations to Britain under the Convention of Constantinople. In this way, they gave belated recognition to a situation which had existed since 1882, but which appeared to have been treated internationally as though it did not exist. Article 99 of the Treaty of Lausanne between the Allies and Turkey repeated the recognition by all parties of the Convention, but only under conditions referred to in Articles 16 and 19 of the Treaty in which the defence of Egypt, and the security of, and free passage through, the Canal were left for agreement between Britain and Egypt. That agreement took a long time to reach, and up to the signing of the Treaty of Alliance of 1936 Egypt refused to recognise Britain's claim to have succeeded to the position of Turkey under the Convention of Constantinople.²³

In August 1936, Britain and Egypt finally signed a treaty, Article 8 of which dealt with the Suez Canal. The Canal was recognised as "an integral part of Egypt", but because it was also an international waterway and an essential means of communication for the British Empire, it was agreed that British forces might be stationed in the vicinity of the Canal until a time when the Egyptian Army would be able to ensure its security and freedom of navigation with its own

²¹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Kyle, *Suez*, 16-17.

²² FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Kyle, *Suez*, 16-17.

²³ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

resources. It was frequently argued that Article 8 of the Treaty was in breach of the Convention of Constantinople, but the peace treaties had formally transferred to Britain the reserve powers of defence conferred by the Convention on the Ottoman Government, and in so doing had sanctioned a long-established *status quo*.²⁴

Italian interest in the Canal was stimulated by the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-1936 and by the arguments then advanced as to the desirability of closing the Canal to an aggressor. As a vital means of communication with its new East African Empire, it was essential that the Canal needed not be closed to Italian vessels in any circumstances, and therefore the Italians began to push for a share in its management and representation on the Board of Directors. They were not successful: the best they could achieve was a declaration annexed to the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 16 April 1938, which reaffirmed “at all times and to all Powers the free use of the Suez Canal”. The Egyptian Government, as the territorial power concerned, took note of the intentions of the two signatories.²⁵

The Treaty of 19 October 1954, which terminated the occupation of Egypt by British troops, recognised the Canal as an integral part of Egypt, but also as a waterway of international importance, and expressed the determination of the two Powers to uphold the Convention of Constantinople guaranteeing freedom of navigation. This Agreement (Article 6), which allowed British forces to return to the Canal Zone in the event of a threat to the security of any of the Arab League States or of Turkey was in operation for a short time only and lapsed as the result of the events which followed nationalisation of the Canal in 1956. After then the security and free passage of the Canal lay entirely in Egyptian hands. Other than denying passage to Israel ships and cargoes, Egypt had otherwise maintained and improved the passageway and kept the Canal working at a high level of efficiency since 1956. It also declared Egyptian voluntary observance of the principles of the Convention of Constantinople.²⁶

7. The Suez Canal in Time of War

On the outbreak of hostilities between Spain and the United States in 1898, the Spanish Reserve Fleet passed through the Canal *en-route* for the Philippines. At that time, neither Britain nor Egypt had adhered to the Convention of Constantinople, and the Spanish were refused all facilities other than those normally granted to belligerents under international law. The Americans also addressed an enquiry to Britain on the question of passage by United States warships and received

²⁴ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 710.

²⁵ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

²⁶ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

the reply that they would be allowed transit without protest under similar conditions to those accorded to Spain.²⁷

By the time that the Russo-Japanese war broke out in 1904, Britain had declared adhesion to the Convention of Constantinople. Although Japan was Britain's ally, a squadron of the Russian Baltic Fleet passed through the Canal on its way to the Far East and was given coaling facilities at Port Said.²⁸

Seven years later war broke out between Turkey and Italy. Although the former was still nominally Egypt's territorial suzerain, and responsible for the execution of the Convention of Constantinople, a number of Turkish gunboats were interned and disarmed by the Egyptian authorities for failure to comply with the 24-hour rule (Article IV of the Convention), and armed vessels of both belligerents were given free passage to and from the Red Sea.²⁹

When war broke out in August 1914, there were a number of German and Austrian ships in Port Said waiting to pass through the Canal. Instead, they remained where they were, claiming the protection of a neutral port, and relying on the inviolability of the Canal and its ports of access under the Convention. They were compelled to leave by the Egyptian authorities and were captured beyond the three-mile limit by a British cruiser and taken to Alexandria, where a Prize Court ruled that the Convention had never intended that the Canal should be used as a port of refuge in which ships of belligerents might shelter indefinitely.³⁰

On the entry of Turkey into the war, Egypt was declared as a British Protectorate. In February 1915, the Turks made an unsuccessful attack on the Canal across the Sinai Peninsula, encouraged by the Germans, who had hopes of an anti-British rising in Egypt, or at least serious interference with the use of the Canal should such an uprising fail. The British used the Canal as their main line of defence, and the Turks justified their attack on the grounds that British troop landings and fortifications were a breach of the Convention, which had also never contemplated denying Turkey the right to defend its own territory against an enemy power. The argument was an academic one, because the Convention had always ignored the actuality of the British occupation, which in 1914 was still supposedly temporary (and in which the Turks had up till then concurred), and had disregarded the "shadowy nature" of Ottoman rule in Egypt.³¹

²⁷ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

²⁸ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

²⁹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

³⁰ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962; For further information Ritchie Owendale, *The Middle East since 1914* (London: Longman, 1992)

³¹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. The Suez Canal was treated, at least from 1916, as a British territorial possession, and Britain infringed almost every article of the Constantinople Convention.

When the Ottoman Empire entered war, the British position in Egypt became insecure. The British garrison was small, and the Ottomans could threaten and perhaps occupy the Canal Zone. Sir John Maxwell, the Commander-in-Chief in Egypt, believed that a small expedition to Alexandretta might forestall any move of the Ottomans against Egypt. Such an expedition, Maxwell thought, could cut the railway communications between Turkey and the Fertile Crescent passing through Cilicia and keep occupied, as well as, a sizeable contingent of Ottoman troops. A diversion at Alexandretta was, according to Maxwell, “the easiest, safest and most fruitful in results”, and “would not want a very large force.” However, Kitchener did not accept Maxwell’s plan and so the plan was shelved, and, instead, the Gallipoli expedition began. Kitchener, like most of the generals, believed that the war would be decided on the Western Front. However, on the failure of the Gallipoli expedition, the Alexandretta project was again mooted. This time, Kitchener himself, who came to Egypt in November 1915, to review the situation arising from the Gallipoli disaster, adopted Maxwell’s views. However, the balance of military opinion was, then, against a landing at Alexandretta. The General Staff in London were dubious of the wisdom of a landing in Alexandretta as a means of defending Egypt. The arguments of the General Staff were reinforced by objections from the French Government. When the expedition was proposed, the Sykes-Picot Agreement had not yet been concluded, and the French regarded the area of operations as within their sphere of interest.³²

With the war over, Egyptian nationalists demanded a final end to “temporary occupation.” On 28 February 1922, after riots in 1919 and years of disturbance, the British unilaterally proclaimed that Egypt was “an independent, sovereign state”. However, Lord Lloyd, British High Commissioner in Cairo from 1925 to 1929, said “To tell a country she is independent while you keep an army of occupation is not only a contradiction in terms but a fraud.”³³

In the course of 1935, Italy moved large quantities of war material and troops through the Canal for the campaign in Ethiopia. Following the opening of hostilities, Italy was adjudged aggressor by the League of Nations, and nominal sanctions were applied against it. The question arose as to whether the Italians should be denied use of the Canal. However, despite British and Egyptian sympathy for Ethiopia, no action was taken, and Italian troops and warships continued to pass through without hindrance.³⁴

Kyle, *Suez*, 17.

³² Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921* (London: Mansell, 1987), 43-45.

³³ Kyle, *Suez*, 17.

³⁴ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

After the collapse of France and Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, the Axis powers planned a drive on Egypt from Italian Libya, first to seize the Canal, and second to encircle Turkey by a subsequent advance through Palestine and Syria. The Italians also had plans to take over Britain's responsibilities in Egypt, abolish the Suez Canal Company, and to institute a special regime for Canal traffic. The most dangerous Axis push was halted at Alamein, only 70 miles from Alexandria, in the summer of 1942, and there was a moment when serious thought was given to plans for blocking the Canal as effectively as possible in the event of an enemy breakthrough.³⁵

The Germans and Italians from their airbases in Crete, Rhodes and the Western Desert made efforts to damage the Canal and to interrupt traffic by dropping mines along its length and by destroying its ports of access. A number of ships were sunk or damaged by mines and the Canal had to be protected by anti-aircraft batteries, barrage balloons and night fighters. Suez was bombed heavily in July 1942 and the attack was extended to Port Said and Ismailia in August. This was the worst year of the war as far as the Canal was concerned, and traffic fell to about 7,000,000 tons only, as compared with 30,000,000 in 1939 and 15,000,000 in 1945.³⁶

The measures taken to deny the Canal to enemy shipping and to the passage of contraband of war were not particularly different from those taken in 1914 and the Canal itself was freely used by the military for its own defence. An inspection system was set up at Port Said and Suez, but at both ports, the actual inspection took place outside the three-mile limit, and no goods were seized within Canal limits. Other defence measures included the closure of the Canal from sunset to sunrise, installation of booms at Port Said and Suez, the imposition of a blackout, and prohibition of the use of wireless by ships in the Canal.³⁷

In 1940, the government of Ali Maher Pasha was removed on British "advice" and in 1942 when, on 4 February, with their armoured carriers drawn up around the Palace, the British required King Farouk to appoint Nahas Pasha as Prime Minister or abdicate. Farouk, who was not a strong character, gave in to this ultimatum. Thus, Nahas Pasha was imposed by imperial will, while Ali Maher Pasha was cast out.³⁸

At the end of October 1956, Israel invaded and overran Sinai. In November, after Egypt's rejection of an Anglo-French note requiring the withdrawal of Egyptian and Israeli forces to a distance 10 miles from the Canal, British and French forces were landed at Port Said and Port Fuad, and before the end of hostilities had penetrated to within a few miles of Ismailia. About the

³⁵ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

³⁶ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

³⁷ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

³⁸ Kyle, *Suez*, 19.

same time, the Egyptians sank 49 ships in the Canal, thus blocking it to all traffic for a period of about six months, and also partially wrecked the railway bridge at Firdan. The Egyptians claimed that the sinkings were a justifiable exercise, under great provocation, of their right of defence in the face of military action which was itself a violation of the Convention of Constantinople. However, the sinkings were carried out in such a manner as to ensure that no ships of any nation (whether engaged in hostilities with Egypt or not) would be able to pass through the Canal until a long time after hostilities had ceased, and then only after intensive operations by an international salvage team. The Law Officers of the Crown gave the opinion on 5 March 1957 that both British and Egyptian military action in the Canal area were breaches of Articles I and IV of the Convention of Constantinople, but that Egypt was in breach of Article IV only to the extent that its defensive measures interfered with the free use of the Canal. It was also their opinion that Egypt's action in blocking the Canal was a clear violation of the Convention.³⁹

8. Nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company

The Universal Suez Canal Company was incorporated in 1858 as an Egyptian company subject to the laws of the Ottoman Empire, and the terms upon which its concession was granted were laid down in the Firmans of 1854 and 1856. The concession was to run for 99 years from the date of completion of the Canal, in return for which the Egyptian Government was to receive 15% of the gross profits: a benefit which it enjoyed for eleven years only before surrendering it for a cash-down payment of 22,000,000 francs to the *Crédit Foncier de France*. Therefore, from 1880 to 1937, a period of 57 years, although the Company was Egyptian in name and employed large numbers of Egyptians, and although the Canal ran through Egypt's territory and the Egyptians had borne the greater part of the cost of its constructions, they had no say in the direction of its affairs and received no direct profit from it.⁴⁰

It came to no surprise, therefore, that the Company became the target of nationalist agitation. It was looked upon with disfavour as a foreign concern which contributed little to Egypt's economy, and de Lesseps was vilified as "the worst enemy of Egypt in the 19th Century", who had succeeded in burdening the country with the cost of the Canal while robbing it of its advantages. It was regarded also as the main reason for Britain's continued occupation of the country, and the manner of life of the Company's senior employees, their obvious affluence and the amenities and privileges which they enjoyed, all contributed to the bitterness of the attack. This hostility found expression in 1910 when it was proposed to extend the concession from 1968 for a further 40 years

³⁹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. Lenczowski, *The Middle East*, 716-719.

⁴⁰ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

to 2008 in return for a cash-down payment of £4,000,000, and a share of the profits arising from 4% in 1922 to 12% in 1961 and 50% thereafter. Egypt was also to be represented by three Directors on the Canal Board. The Government of the day considered these terms extremely favourable, but the press raised a popular outcry of betrayal of the country's interests for the enrichment of foreign shareholders.⁴¹

Although the proposal was sturdily defended by Saad Zaghlul in the General Assembly, it was defeated with only one dissentient voice shortly after the Prime Minister, Boutros Ghali, had been assassinated by a young fanatic, who was thereupon elevated to the status of a national hero. This display of nationalist indignation did little damage to Egypt, as it was not until 1937 that an agreement was negotiated with the Company whereby two seats on the Board of Directors were allotted to Egyptians, and the Company agreed to pay a rental of £E.300,000 per annum and to accelerate Egyptianisation of its staff so that by 1958 not less than a third of its employees should be Egyptians.⁴²

In 1947, the Egyptian Government applied pressure again by proposing to apply to the Company, so that the Company Law of that year whereby 40% of its Directors, 75% of its employees and 90% of its labour would have to be Egyptians. The Company resisted on the grounds that it was an international concern and that the Canal was an enterprise of unique international importance. Nevertheless, it was thought advisable to negotiate a new agreement, which was signed in March 1949, by which the Government was to receive 7% of the gross profits (with a minimum of £E.350,000); the number of Egyptian Directors was to be raised gradually to 7⁴³; four out of every five vacancies in technical posts and nine out of ten in administrative posts were to be filled by Egyptians, and Egyptian coastal vessels of under 300 tons were allowed free transit of the Canal. The new agreement, achieved by polite pressure, restored to Egypt about half of the profits originally allotted to it, but not as much as it could have got in 1910; it conceded also a large measure of Egyptianisation.⁴⁴

The military government which came to power following the Revolution of 1952 was less friendly in its dealings with the Company than its predecessors had been, and less ready to be bought off. From 1955 onwards, it presented the Company with a series of demands aimed at undermining its privileged position and at preparing the ground for relinquishment of the

⁴¹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁴² FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁴³ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962. In 1949, 16 of the Board of Directors were French, 9 British, 7 Egyptian, 1 American and 1 Dutch. Real power lay in the hands of the Comity de Directeurs of whom 8 were French and 2 British.

⁴⁴ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962; For further information Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain and Egypt, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991)

concession in 1968. Exemption from foreign exchange regulations, which was part of the bargain struck in 1949, was revoked; and it was indicated that two Egyptians should be appointed to the *Comité de Directeurs*, that more Egyptians should be trained as pilots, and that the Company's reserves should be invested exclusively in Egypt. The result was a further agreement signed early in 1956, by which the Company agreed to transfer £E.10,000,000 of its reserves to Egypt on short call by the end of the year and to increase them to £E.15,000,000 by the end of 1958. Thereafter £E1,000,000 was to be transferred annually until 1963, by which time about £E.20,000,000 would have been transferred to, and invested in, Egypt. It was, however, agreed that these funds might be re-transferred at the end of the concession period.⁴⁵

Within a few months of concluding this agreement, the Egyptian Government nationalised the Company and seized its assets in Egypt. The announcement made on 26 July 1956 was done so without previous warning, but the smoothness and speed with which the seizure was carried out seemed to show that the operation had been planned carefully in advance and had only awaited a favourable moment to be put into operation. In July 1958, a Compensation Agreement was signed at Geneva under which Egypt agreed to pay £E.28,330,000 for the Company's Egyptian assets, £E.5,330,000 of which was covered by tolls collected in London and Paris after the nationalisation decree of July 1956. The Company retained all assets outside Egypt, which were considerable, and the pension liabilities of employees were divided between the Egyptian Government and the Company.⁴⁶

9. The Suez Canal Users' Association (SCUA)

Early in September 1956, the Americans formulated the idea of a Voluntary Association of Canal Users' (CASU, later known as SCUA) for the purpose of coordinating action between the nations using the Canal; of facilitating transit for ships of the Association, including the provision of pilots; of receiving Canal dues; and of cooperating with the Egyptian authorities in accordance with the Convention of Constantinople. The Association was to be seen as a *de facto* working organisation with no political objectives, and as a temporary expedient to enable members to exercise their rights of use pending a final settlement. A Declaration which embodied the aims of the Association was issued in London on 21 September 1956.⁴⁷

However, considerable doubts as to the effectiveness and exact purposes of the Association began to arise, particularly with reference to the payment of dues. Only 15 out of the 18 nations attending the London Conference joined the Association as active members, and several, including

⁴⁵ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁴⁶ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁴⁷ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

France, Italy and the Scandinavian powers, were sceptical of the whole conception of the Association and the uses to which it might be put. There was also a difference of opinion between the United States and Britain as to what proportion of any dues which might be collected should be conceded to Egypt. Opinion in the United Nations manifested itself in a Moreover, it soon became apparent that while the Americans regarded SCUA as a means of practical cooperation with Egypt at working level, until such time as agreement could be reached, the British took the view that its primary purpose was to apply pressure on Egypt to come to an agreement acceptable to the Canal users. These differences had not been resolved by the time of Israel's invasion of Sinai and the subsequent military intervention by France and Britain.⁴⁸

The Council referred to in Section III of the Declaration of 21 September 1956 was duly set up, consisting of delegates from all nations attending the London Conference, with the exception of Pakistan, Japan and Ethiopia, who participated as observers only. The Executive Group consisted of the representatives of the United States of America, France, Britain, Italy, Norway and Iran, with one seat left vacant. It was agreed that the United States and Britain should contribute 20% each of the necessary funds, France, 15% and other members the remaining 45% divided equally among them.⁴⁹

On 18 March 1957, the Egyptian Government circulated a memorandum on the operation of the Suez Canal, paragraph 4 of which specified that all tolls must be paid in advance to the Suez Canal Authority or its nominees; and on 24 April, it re-opened the Canal to traffic, but firmly rejected any form of international control. In a declaration dated 9 May 1957, the Council of SCUA, while authorising its members to make their own terms for passage of the Canal, stated that resumption of the use of the Canal by its members did not mean acceptance of the Egyptian Declaration of 24 April 1957. On 13 May 1957, the British Government lifted the ban on the use of the Canal by British ships, and authorized payment of dues to the Suez Canal Authority, while stipulating that such *de facto*, acquiescence was on provisional terms only, and dependent on "honest observance by Egypt of its own declaration". With the renewal of traffic under these conditions and the successful operation of the Canal by the Suez Canal Authority, SCUA had lost its purpose on a whole.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁴⁹ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962.

⁵⁰ FO370/2681/LR6/16: The Suez Canal, 4 October 1962; For further information Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Decent to Suez: Diaries 1951-1956* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986); Anthony Nutting, *No End of A Lesson: The Story of Suez*, (London: Constable, 1967); W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991); W.M. Roger Louis and Roger Owen, *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); David Carlton, *Britain and Suez Crisis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); David R. Devereux, *The Formulation of British Defence Policy towards the Middle East, 1948-56* (London:

Conclusion

Ever since the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, it has offered a great number of ships a short cut on the journey between Europe and Asia. Given its crucial nature, it was in the interest of all world powers to see that the canal, described by the British Prime Minister Anthony Eden as “Britain’s windpipe”, remained safe and open to all. To the north of the waterway is situated the Mediterranean Sea, which joins the Middle East to Europe, the Atlantic and the Americas. This alone gives the canal a key strategic importance, which, at the end of the Second World War, was paramount. The eastern Mediterranean, via the Bosphorous and Dardanelles, was the Soviet Union’s only southerly link with the world’s oceans. At the southern end of the canal, the ships pass down the Gulf of Suez, through the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean. From here, they can continue to any number of destinations in the eastern hemisphere.⁵¹

In 1878, Britain seized Cyprus followed, four years later, by Egypt and the Suez Canal in order to secure the route to India. As the canal turned into the major passageway for Britain’s growing eastern commerce, Egypt became the centre-point of the British Empire. In 1914, the Turkish danger to British interests was far greater than that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Egypt, which had been under British occupation since 1882, was still formally Ottoman possession and the British swiftly declared a protectorate in order to avoid a crisis of authority. The Turks constituted a real military threat and the British had to open new fronts on the Suez Canal to guard Egypt and in Mesopotamia in order to protect the route to India. Constantinople’s authority as a spiritual centre of Islam also raised the danger of subversion among the Muslim peoples of the British Empire. An attack on the Dardanelles, therefore, became the preferred option for a second front. In this way, it was expected to secure communications with southern Russia and quickly remove the Ottomans from the war.⁵²

After the Second World War, from the British aspect, the main military centre in the Middle East was Egypt. It was here that the Suez Canal Zone formed a large complex of air and naval bases, support installations and training areas, in which nearly 40,000 troops were located in 1951. However, it turned out that, after the war, a new partnership with Egypt proved was not so easy to arrange. Despite the importance of the Canal Zone, Bevin had been unable to come to a consensus, and the problem was made worse by the officers’ coup in 1952, from which Nasser soon emerged as a leader. This destroyed the whole trade network that had been carefully built up

Macmillan, 1990)

⁵¹ Stewart Ross, *Understand the Middle East since 1945* (London: Hodder Education, 2010), 3-4; For further information Sir Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (London: Cassell, 1960)

⁵² David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled* (London: Longman, 1991), 95.

since the First World War. For Nasser, foreign bases represented Western imperialism and to evacuate Britain from the Canal Zone became his primary goal. The eventual October 1954 agreement called for the withdrawal of all British forces from Egypt within twenty months. However, the Suez base would be maintained in peacetime and Britain had the right of re-entry in wartime for seven years. Having thus established a new relationship with Egypt, the British recommenced their efforts to form a regional security organisation.⁵³

However, Nasser also regarded regional pacts as symbols of imperialism. After the 1954 agreement, although the Suez base was in liquidation, the Baghdad Pact presented a major challenge, being focussed on his main regional rival, Iraq. Threatened by this and by Israeli raids, he turned to the Soviets for arms in September 1955. Six months later in March 1956, when King Hussein of Jordan dismissed General Sir John Glubb from his command of the Jordanian army, a strong source of British influence, Eden blamed Nasser. Eden no longer regarded Nasser as a potential partner, but as a dictator in the making. He compared Nasser with Mussolini, saying that “his object was to be a Caesar from the Gulf to the Atlantic, and to kick us out of it all...”. He emphasised strongly that Nasser must be disposed of, stressing “It is either him or us, don’t forget that”.⁵⁴

With the failure of a “partnership” came the revival of the old imperialist reflexes. The Aswan funding was cut, the search for an Arab-Israeli settlement abandoned and British and US intelligence began to prepare a coup in Syria to stifle a possible collaboration with Egypt. The new policy towards Nasser was agreed by the British on 21 March, and nationalisation of the Canal was taken as justification for an all-out attempt to overthrow him. However, the situation was not the same as that of 1882, or even 1942. The FO warned Eden that there had been an “immense change...”, but he ignored the warning. Britain’s invasion served not only to consolidate Egypt around Nasser but also to mobilise opinion in the UN, where Britain was almost totally isolated.⁵⁵

However, the largest underestimation the British made was that of the Americans. While the US government agreed that Nasser was a threat and that he should be kept in check, it opposed the use of military force to recover the Canal as long as an international solution was possible. Moreover, the US regarded the Canal as a colonial relic and held the view that Nasser’s legal case was a strong one.

⁵³ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 190-192; For further information Peter Woodward, *Nasser* (London: Longman, 1992)

⁵⁴ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 203-206.

⁵⁵ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 203-206.

The limits of post-war British power were underlined by the Suez failure of 1956. On 26 July, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, in retaliation for the Anglo-American cancellation of the Aswan dam a week previously. While the US aimed for a negotiated settlement, Eden prepared an invasion force and in mid-October, a French proposal of collusion with Israel gave him the justification he needed. When Israeli troops attacked Egypt on 29 October, the British and French announced their intention to intervene with the aim of protecting the Canal. However, by the time the invasion force arrived on 5-6 November, sterling was under pressure and the calls of protest at home and abroad were overwhelming. On the 6 November, the British accepted a ceasefire and on 29 November, they agreed to withdraw their forces, which was the condition of US support for sterling.⁵⁶

Suez had many far-reaching consequences, particularly in public. British politicians had been aware of the weaknesses underlying the country for many years. Yet the public image, underlined by 1940, 1945 and post-war recovery, was of a country that was still a major power in the global area. For an Egyptian ex-colonel such as Nasser to “*twist the lion’s tail, and get away with it*”⁵⁷, was a tangible and lasting blow to national self-esteem and international prestige. Nasser’s successful defiance transformed him into a Third World hero, encouraging anti-colonial nationalists elsewhere. Moreover, American and Soviet influence increased in the region, and never again did any British leader make the mistake of trying to challenge the US on a major issue. However, relations with America were soon restored, and Britain remained an important power east of the Canal. Furthermore, the Suez War was a departure from key post-war British policies. Secret dealings with Israel constituted as great conflict with the search for a new partnership with the Arabs; and allying with France and not America was equally bizarre, all of which Eden was largely held responsible.⁵⁸

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