

Chapter 18 – Chapter exercises

The Suez crisis: Europe's final imperial venture in the Middle East

The 1956 Suez crisis is generally thought to have heralded the introduction of the Middle East into the Cold War period, but perhaps more telling is how the crisis crystallizes the European view of the region in the immediate post-war era. The crisis was precipitated by the nationalization of the Suez Canal under the orders of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Prior to nationalization, the canal had been under the administrative and financial control of the British and French governments.

In the 1950s, at the onset of the Cold War, Britain had sought to consolidate and strengthen its position in the Middle East due to the region's strategic importance as an area abundant in oil reserves. As a result, the British garrison at Suez became one of the largest military installations in the world. An ongoing cooperative relationship with the Egyptian Kingdom was of vital importance if Britain wished to maintain a consistently strong presence in the region.

For much of the 1940s, Egypt had experienced widespread social and political instability caused by inflationary pressures, unemployment, and general widespread economic instability. This instability in turn was to manifest itself politically through the formation of more radicalized/less westernized political parties that were more ideologically inclined towards fundamentalist Islam and communism (Kyle 2003).

Anti-British sentiments were further inflamed amongst the Arab world as a result of the pivotal role that the UK had played in the formation of the state of Israel. By the early 1950s, the Egyptian government had agreed to unanimously overturn the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 that had granted Britain a lease on the Suez military garrison till 1956. A prolonged increase in violent activity against British troops ensued following Britain's refusal to leave on the basis that Egypt had rescinded on the 1936 agreement. Egyptian authorities did little to curb this hostility and following the deaths of 41 Egyptian citizens in 1952 during the Ismailia police barracks siege by British troops (in which UK troops attempted to disarm a troublesome auxiliary police force), widespread rioting occurred throughout Egypt. These riots would serve as a catalyst for the removal of the pro-western Egyptian monarchy. Later that year, future Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser and his followers instigated the removal from power of King Farouk and initiated the process of establishing an Egyptian republic (Louis et al. 1989).

The Suez crisis would be precipitated in July of 1956 following the decision by the UK and US governments to rescind their previous commitment to finance the construction of the Aswan Dam. The refusal was seen as a direct consequence of continued and strengthening ties between Egypt, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. President Nasser was to react to this decision by nationalizing the Suez Canal Company on the assumption that the predicted tolls would pay for the construction of the Aswan Dam within five years. The two leading European powers, Britain and France, in conjunction with Israel, saw the canal as a vital asset in the Middle East due to its strategic importance for the flow of petroleum. The three countries then began a process of secretly preparing

military action against Egypt. However, following military conflict in the Canal region, Britain, France, and Israel were forced to withdraw under external pressures from the US, United Nations, and the Soviet Union. In many ways, the event signalled the credible emergence of Arab nationalism, the beginning of the end of European (principally British and French) influence across the Arab world, the emergence of the United States as the dominant external power in the region, and the beginning of a protracted slow-down in European–Arab relations (Thornhill 2006).

Would you agree that, following the failure of the British mandate in Palestine and, amongst other issues, the French problems in Algeria and Syria, the Suez crisis was a telling example of the changing context of the former European colonial powers in the Middle East?

Do you agree that the demise of European influence and interests in the Middle East have merely been replaced by those of the United States in the post-war period?

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/suez.htm>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5195068.stm

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinet-office-100/the-suez-crisis/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/suez_01.shtml

Kyle, K. (2011) *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East*, new edn (London: I.B. Tauris)

Louis, W.R. and R. Owen (1989) *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Thornhill, M.T. (2006) *Road to Suez: The Battle of the Canal Zone* (Stroud: The History Press Ltd)