

The Research Question

Given the Cold War, the events in the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis brought humanity to the point of world war. Although the major fighting ended in fifty-five hours, the primary question is:

1. Did the UN resolve the 1956 Suez Crisis?
2. What was the relevance of the UN as a system of international order?
3. Was the reaction to the tripartite invasion effective?
4. Did the UN resolve the underlying issues that caused the war?

Brief History

The Isthmus of Suez is a land bridge in eastern Egypt joining the continent of Africa and Asia. The creation of the modern Suez Canal was the Herculean undertaking of Count Ferdinand Marie de Lesseps from 1859 to 1869. De Lesseps built the canal for the La Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez (Universal Company of the Maritime Suez Canal). Four years later, the Suez Canal Company incorporated with \$40 million in capital stock jointly owned by the French government and the Ottoman Empire. The immediate strategic importance of the inland waterway cannot be underestimated. It allowed the European powers to reach colonies in East Africa, India, and the Pacific Rim without having to negotiate the Horn of Africa. The British House of Commons saw such value in the system that in 1875 they agreed to purchase controlling shares in the Suez Canal Company for £3,976,582. Egypt thereafter became the focal point of British Middle East policy, supplanting the declining Ottoman Empire; Egypt soon became a protectorate of Great Britain.

In 1881, the nationalist Egyptian Army Colonel, Ahmed Arabi, led a revolt with the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians!” In a series of events presaging the ascendancy of Nasser, Arabi seized power. European stakeholders grew concerned that a radical Egyptian government would default on its debts, seize the canal, and upturn the status quo of international commerce.

Great Britain and France soon decided that their intervention was “an absolute necessity” to protect their vital interest. The British Parliament dispatched its army; France’s weak government waffled on authorizing force. Consequently, Great Britain intervened unilaterally.

On 19 August 1882, a British expeditionary force seized the Suez Canal with the aid of British reinforcements from India. They quickly defeated Arabi's forces at the Nile Delta and the following day the British force occupied Cairo. Queen Victoria gained total control of Egypt. France's failure to act decisively in her national strategic interest left Egypt open for Great Britain to takeover. The internationality of the Suez Canal was codified six years later. Under the terms of the 1888 Convention of Constantinople, the waterway was to remain open as a neutral passage for merchant ships of all nations in times of peace and war. Great Britain was the guarantor of the Canal's neutrality. Its management was the responsibility of the newly formed Suez Canal Company. In the 1950's, Great Britain still had a vested interest in the Suez Canal. It was her link to the British dependencies in the Pacific. The British government also held the largest financial stake in the Suez Canal Company. For France, on top of the French dispute over the canal, the government in Paris loathed Nasser's active support of Algerian revolution. As for Israel, her grievance with Egypt dated back to the 1948 War up to the terrorist attacks originating from Egyptian camps in the Sinai. Their Anglo-French-Israeli alliance of convenience formed in October 1956 to save the European economic interest and ensure Israeli national preservation.

On 29 October 1956, the Israeli Operation Kadesh started as a precursor for the Anglo-French Operation Musketeer. British and French troops joined the offensive on 4 November. The international community shocked at the brazen use of force compelled a ceasefire fifty-five hours later. After repairs, the canal reopened in early 1957. An agreement between Egypt and the shareholders of the Suez Canal Company paid shareholders approximately \$81 million in six annual instalments. The gravity of this crisis should not be underestimated. Just like 1914 on the eve of the World War I, the convergence of alliances had the potential for a world war. Within weeks of signing the UN Charter in 1945, the Soviet Union formed the communist power bloc, the Warsaw Pact. Using this as leverage, the Soviets supported Egypt politically, economically, and militarily. They made threats ranging from the introduction of a Soviet "volunteer" army to assist Egypt (something similar to the Chinese "volunteers" in the Korean War) to Soviet Foreign Minister Bulganin's veiled threat of bombing London and Paris. In the west, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) formed to counterbalance the Warsaw Pact. The Western powers also succoured Israel during its formative years. Despite President Dwight D. Eisenhower's intense opposition to the invasion, when the Soviet

Union began their saber rattling, Eisenhower was prepared to destroy the Soviet Union. The superpowers had the will and capability to fight each other in 1956 if brought to the point of war. Added to the Middle Eastern problems, the world faced the prospect of another continental war when the Hungarian Crisis flared. On 23 October 1956, a week before the invasion of Egypt, students and workers took to the streets of Budapest, Hungary demanding the removal of Soviet control. As the allied invasion of Egypt progressed, the Kremlin answered the Hungarian challenge on 4 November in an event similar to the later crack-down in China's 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. Covered by the confusion in the UN Security Council over the Suez Canal, Soviet tanks rumbled through Budapest streets and by many estimates killed 30,000 Hungarians; 200,000 people fled their country. By 14 November, Hungary was once more a Marxist outpost. The events of 1956 were the first true test of the effectiveness of the UN system since the Korean War (1950-1953). In 1950, the body joined to resist the North Korean invasion of South Korea and uphold the rule of international law. Similarly, in 1956, the UN joined to determine which actors had violated international law and how best to respond. By the end of the crisis, Israel won substantial gains. They stopped the terrorist attacks, they destroyed Egypt's new Soviet weapons, and more importantly, the new Jewish nation established itself as a highly professional and credible military power under leaders such as the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan. Egypt's tactical defeats were translated into success. Egypt gained the sympathy of the UN General Assembly now inundated with third world nations that voted as an anti-western bloc. More importantly, Nasser's prestige rose in the Arab world. Like Saddam Hussein in 1991, Gamal Nasser had stood up to the world's greatest powers and survived. Soon Nasser met his strategic objective of removing Europeans from Egypt. British military garrisons lost all mandates in Egypt established under previous agreements. Nasser's nationalization policies seized all European holding in the country and forced the flight of most foreigners from Egypt by the end of the 1950s. Gamal Nasser had succeeded in meeting Ahmed Arabi's 1881 nationalist goal of having "Egypt for the Egyptians!" The fortunes of Great Britain and France, in contrast, were dismal after the war. Both governments collapsed with the resignation of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and ouster of French Premier Guy Mollet. Both nations saw the precipitous downfall of their colonial holdings around the world. Their economies and alliances with America were in turmoil. For the French, the Nasser-sponsored Algerian insurrection

continued to humiliate the Fourth Republic as surely as the Suez operation, their 1954 defeat in Indochina, and their surrender to the Nazis in 1940.

Primary Legal Sources of 1956 Regime:

- 1888 Convention of Constantinople
- The United Nations Charter
- Related UN Resolutions [UNSCR 106, 54, 108, 118, etc]

[Following the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the UN passed Resolution 118 on 13 October 1956, which demanded that the settlement of the Suez Crisis should meet six provisions. The Soviet Union however vetoed the operative part of the resolution. Resolution 118, with no means of enforcement, became the casus belli for the invasion.]

Timeline: The Suez Crisis (1956)

26 July, 1956	President Nasser's announcement followed the refusal by the United States and Britain to help fund the Aswan Dam project. They blamed the state of the Egyptian economy but most observers believe it had more to do with Egypt's decision to recognise China and buy weapons from Soviet controlled Czechoslovakia.
1 August, 1956	Britain US and France hold talks on rapid escalation of Suez Crisis. The following day Britain mobilises armed forces.
16 August, 1956	International conference of 22 nations held in London on Suez Crisis. President Nasser refuses to attend. Although no communique is issued at the end of the conference, 18 nations agree a way forward based on the idea of international management of the canal.
9 September, 1956	Nasser rejects plans for international management of the canal after visit by Australian PM Robert Menzies.
12 September, 1956	Britain France and US say they are going ahead with plans for a Suez Canal Users Association despite Egypt's rejection.
1 October, 1956	Suez Canal Users Association SCUA officially launched.
5 October, 1956	United Nations Security Council meets to discuss endorsing SCUA but no vote taken.
24 October, 1956	Protocol of Sevres signed in Paris in secret by Britain France and Israel. Britain, France and Israel agree a plan codenamed Operation Musketeer to invade Egypt. Israel is to attack the Egyptian Army near the canal as a pretext for military intervention by Britain and France. Israel had been angered by cross-border raids from the Sinai peninsula and it also wanted to break the Arab blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba to win a secure outlet to Asia and Africa from its port of Eilat.

29 October, 1956	Israel invades Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula and troops progress towards the canal zone.
31 October, 1956	Britain and France begin bombing campaign to force reopening of the canal. Nasser responds by sinking 40 ships.
2 November, 1956	First emergency meeting of United Nations General Assembly to discuss Suez. Calls for an immediate ceasefire are vetoed by Britain and France which claim to be acting as a "police force" in international interests. Canadian Minister for External Affairs Lester Pearson proposes a United Nations Emergency Force UNEF to secure the peace in Egypt. The United States is also anxious for peace with pressure mounting over the Hungarian uprising and a looming presidential election.
5 November, 1956	Anglo-French forces land at Port Said. At Gamil airfield, 668 British paratroopers were dropped and 470 French paratroopers landed at two bridges on the canal at Rawsa, after the UN ultimatum for agreement to a ceasefire expires.
7 November, 1956	UN ceasefire comes into force after more pressure from US. Britain and France finally agree to a UN ceasefire after pressure from international community led by the US which refuses to shore up a struggling British. Anglo-French forces claim to have occupied most of the canal zone as far as Ismailia when the truce comes into force. Thirteen countries have by now signed up to the UNEF. Commanders plan for UN troops to arrive in Egypt within days.
21 November, 1956	First United Nations troops land at Port Said.
23 November, 1956	Under further pressure from the US, Britain reluctantly agrees to begin military withdrawal from Egypt.
23 December, 1956	British and French troops complete withdrawal. The UNEF takes control of the Suez Canal as British and French troops complete their withdrawal. Egyptians celebrate in Port Said chanting "Long live Nasser".
9 January, 1957	British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden resigns citing ill health but widely believed to have quit over Suez. The Prime Minister announces his resignation saying he has been advised by doctors to take more rest. At the height of the Suez Crisis he went abroad to recuperate after falling ill. Although he retains his personal popularity his reputation as a statesman has been badly damaged by the Suez Crisis and his resignation seems inevitable.

Council Freeze Date: 2nd November, 1956

Reference Link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez_Crisis

