United States’ President Eisenhower and Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser
Peace or the Prevention of Communism? Eisenhower’s Conflict of Goals in His Foreign Policies Regarding Egypt in 1956

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On July 26, 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the dictator of Egypt, nationalized the Suez Canal Company, much to the wrathful chagrin of Britain. About three months later, on October 29, 1956, Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula, thus opening hostilities with Egypt. Shortly thereafter, Britain, in conjunction with France, also attacked Egypt in a desperate and badly executed attempt to retake the Suez Canal. In the first decade of the Cold War, the response of the Eisenhower administration to this Middle East conflict is surprising. Eisenhower came down hard against his traditional allies, diplomatically humiliating them and forcing them to back down from their assault on Egypt, a surprising act, as Egypt was drawing ever more closely to becoming a Soviet Satellite state and was receiving substantial arms from Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia, whilst Eisenhower held a very strong anti-Soviet position and was diplomatically and personally connected to the British due to his experiences in World War II. Evidently for Eisenhower, certain foreign policy considerations took precedence over traditional alliances and Soviet complications. Ultimately, Eisenhower’s foreign policy commitment to peace as
a means of countering Soviet influence inadvertently allowed the Soviet Union to gain a foothold in Egypt and the greater Arab world during the Suez Crisis.

Early historians and biographers of Eisenhower have lauded him for his policy of not using military intervention to solve international disputes, and relying instead on peaceful mechanisms.\textsuperscript{1} Even Stephen Ambrose, a more recent historian, praises the Eisenhower administration in the same vein by declaring that avoiding war was one of Eisenhower’s major foreign policy accomplishments.\textsuperscript{2} However, a lack of military intervention, although admirable, serves to disguise Eisenhower’s true role in the Suez Crisis and the greater politics of the Middle East. In fact, intervention was the exact order of the day in the early Cold War. Eisenhower felt that the Cold War had given the United States a responsibility to the nations of the world, particularly with regard to the Middle East. In Eisenhower’s words, “American policy had been one of neutrality. Our hope was to prevent armed conflict between the Israelis and the Arabs and gradually to help bring about normal relations among the nations of the region.”\textsuperscript{3} Later, about the Suez Crisis, Eisenhower said, “it would require all we could do to keep the lid from blowing off.”\textsuperscript{4} Eisenhower clearly felt a personal responsibility to the inhabitants of the Middle East, and this responsibility expressed itself in his two foreign policy goals for that region.

\textsuperscript{1} For example, Arthur Larson, \textit{Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 122.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 34.
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The first of these goals was the adherence to international law for the sake of peace. Eisenhower wrote that preserving the peace in the Middle East was a “vital necessity,” and his attachment to the achievement of peace led him to seek diplomatic resolutions rather than the application of brute military force. Notably, one of Eisenhower’s speechwriters, Arthur Larson, claims that it was in fact Eisenhower’s commitment to the “rule of law among nations” that led him to seek diplomacy over combat. However, it was just the opposite. Eisenhower said, “if the day ever comes when the nations of the world will obey the mandates of international law, whether they approve of them or not, the end of international conflicts…will also not be far off.” This portrays that it was Eisenhower’s goal of peace that drove him to use international law, rather than a commitment to the law that drove him to pursue peace.

Eisenhower’s other overriding policy goal in the Middle East was the reduction and prevention of Soviet influence. Although never directly at war, the United States and the Soviet Union were in the midst of a contest over the allegiance of the smaller nations of the world. Specifically regarding the Suez Crisis, Eisenhower said, “One role of the United States…was to counter Soviet rumblings…” Beyond countering direct Soviet threats, Eisenhower’s policy was to make it clear the wisdom of an alliance with the West, and to “nurture and

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6 Larson, 122.

7 Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 175.

8 Ibid., 42.
promote” such stances. Unfortunately, Eisenhower’s efforts to produce peace ended up nullifying, to a large extent, his efforts to curtail Soviet interference.

In Eisenhower’s view, the primary linchpin to lasting political tranquility in the Middle East, as well as the potential basis for Western influence, was the relationship between the United States and Israel. More specifically, Eisenhower sought the reduction of this diplomatic relationship because he wanted friendlier relations with the Arab states so that he could keep them out of the Soviet orbit. Consequently, he followed an overarching policy of “friendly impartiality” with Israel, rather than Truman’s “special relationship.” In minimizing the alliance with Israel, Eisenhower hoped to gain the trust of the Arab states and ultimately establish an anti-Communist league among them.

In the mid-1950’s, Gamal Abdel Nasser became ambitious and aggressive in his attempts to build up his nation and become the leader of the Arab world. As such, he became a major player in the politics of the Middle East and the U.S. policies for that region. Eisenhower hoped to “make Nasser see the benefits of strengthening his ties with the West” by offering him economic aid. Nasser was only too ready to accept American aid, and in 1955 he requested 27

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Eisenhower turned him down. There was a diplomatic understanding between the United States, Great Britain, and France in which those nations pledged to use economic means to keep the military powers of the Middle East in equilibrium. This understanding was known as the Tripartite Agreement of 1950, and, in practical terms, it meant that none of the three Western powers would disrupt the military status quo in the Middle East by selling too many weapons too fast to Israel or the Arab states, thereby creating an arms race and possible hostilities. In Eisenhower’s view, the way to achieve peace in the Middle East was to “prevent either side from achieving a decisive edge in weapons of Western production.”

Eisenhower also hoped that this policy would discourage the nations of the Middle East from going to the Soviet Union for weapons. Eisenhower’s belief that the Tripartite Agreement was the “surest guarantee of national security” in Middle East caused him to deny Nasser the weapons he wanted. Unfortunately, Eisenhower overestimated the importance of the United States in Nasser’s calculations, and he misunderstood the impact of the Cold War on the Arab nations in the Middle East. Nasser wanted weapons, and he did not particularly care from whom they came. Consequently, when he was rebuffed by the United States, he naturally turned to the Soviet Union. In Eisenhower’s

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14 Ibid., 22.
15 Ibid.
words, Nasser “made good his threat… and took steps to obtain arms from Communist nations.”

Eisenhower’s attempt to keep the peace caused a setback in his efforts to keep out the Soviet Union.

In fact, Egypt received an amount of weapons from the Soviet-held Czechoslovakia that was worth at least three times the amount for which Nasser originally petitioned the United States. This, in effect, nullified the purpose of the Tripartite Agreement by creating a serious arms imbalance in the Middle East. However, when an alarmed Israel requested weapons from the United States, Eisenhower turned them down as well, believing that “a United States shipment of arms would only speed a Middle East arms race.”

It is possible that Eisenhower had a greater faith in the power of the Israeli Defense Forces than Israel did. He writes in his memoir that he believed the Israeli army was approximately numerically equivalent to the sum of all the Arab armies, and “certainly better motivated, better trained, and more effective as a fighting force.” This might have been the view on paper from the capitol of one of the mightiest nations on earth, but from the ground in the tiny state of Israel surrounded by enemies, the arms shipment from Czechoslovakia caused serious apprehension.

However, Eisenhower had not given up his commitment to using economic efforts to bring Nasser into the fold of the West. Beyond weapons,

\[17\] Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 25.
\[18\] Ibid.
\[19\] Ibid., 24.
Nasser also wanted funds for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, which would be a major supplier of electricity and water for farmlands.\(^{20}\) In an attempt to curtail the diplomatic gains of the Soviets after the arms deal, the Eisenhower administration offered to aid Egypt in the preliminary funding of the Aswan Dam project.\(^{21}\) However, Nasser was also considering the Soviet’s offer to finance the dam, a stance that, in Eisenhower’s view, was an attempt to “play off East against West by blackmailing both.”\(^{22}\) Furthermore, Nasser recognized the Communist government of China, much to Eisenhower’s “annoyance.”\(^{23}\) For Eisenhower, dealing with both of the opposing superpowers of the Cold War constituted a betrayal of American trust.\(^{24}\) His attempts to sway Nasser toward the West economically were backfiring, and Nasser’s contemplation of accepting aid from the Soviets infuriated him. Consequently, Eisenhower changed tactics from appealing to Nasser’s monetary needs to playing hard to get. After protracted negotiations, Eisenhower withdrew the offer to finance the dam on July 19, 1956.

One week later on July 26, Nasser made an exceedingly surprising and seemingly stupid move: he nationalized the Suez Canal, intending to use the


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 127.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.

revenue to finance the construction of the Aswan Dam. This move caused the tension between Egypt and the nations associated with the Suez Canal, along with the general tension in the Middle East, to skyrocket. The British government had evacuated its troops from Egypt under the guarantee that the canal would never be shut to British shipping. Consequently, the British felt threatened by Nasser’s aggressive moves, and believed that their national honor was at stake. The French already hated Nasser for funding Algerian rebels, and both nations had economic motives to oppose Nasser’s move. In fact, the British government owned 44 percent of the shares of the Suez Canal Company, with most of the rest owned by French citizens. As if the situation needed one more angry party, Israel had been engaged in a continuous guerrilla war with the Palestinian Fedayeen commandos, who were being sponsored by Nasser. In fact, one scholar, Isaac Alteras, suggests that Israeli reprisal raids might have helped motivate Nasser to buy more weapons, which in turn caused even greater alarm in Israel. The Israelis believed that Nasser was arming for “a war of annihilation against Israel.”

In light of this major escalation in tensions, Eisenhower consistently

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28 Ibid., 128.

29 Isaac Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 141.

30 Ibid., 142.
urged a peaceful resolution to the conflict, particularly by letting the United Nations Organization handle the problem. Eisenhower sent Robert Murphy, the Deputy Under Secretary, to London to “urge calm consideration of the affair and to discourage impulsive armed action.” The United States organized a conference in London for all of the nations who used the Suez Canal or were involved in the dispute over Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal. Eisenhower thought, “the united and clearly expressed opinion of the majority users of the Suez waterway and of those nations most dependent upon it...will exert a pressure which Nasser can scarcely ignore.” The majority of the nations that attended the conference agreed to two proposed American solutions, but “Nasser brusquely rejected both schemes.” Still, Eisenhower remained committed to diplomatic negotiations “until a peaceful but just solution is reached—regardless of how long it takes.”

Although Eisenhower was still infatuated with the idea of winning the Arab world for the West, he began to dislike Nasser more and more. In fact, even as he advocated the use of peaceful means to Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister, he said that he did not wish to see Nasser “grow as a menace to the

31 Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 37.
peace and vital interests of the West.” Eisenhower’s twin goals of peace and curtailing Soviet influence, which had been operating in Nasser’s favor, now began to turn against Egypt. Eisenhower regarded Nasser as the culprit who had allowed Soviet influence into a vital area of the world, so he began a campaign to diplomatically isolate Nasser and force him to back down or realign himself with the West. Eisenhower began correspondence with the leaders of nations on the fringes of the Crisis and the Cold War, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, and Ibn Abd Al-Aziz Saud, the monarch of Saudi Arabia. He was always sure to emphasize that the United States was on the side of peace in his correspondence as he attempted to draw a distinction between the United States and the Soviet Union. “You may be certain that the United States Government will not abandon its belief that...a peaceful solution [to the Suez Crisis] can be achieved,” Eisenhower wrote to Nehru. To Al-Aziz Saud, Eisenhower said, “Your Majesty may rest assured of my continuing deep interest in a peaceful and equitable solution of the Suez problem. I shall not relax my efforts to this end, and I am sure I can count on Your Majesty to do the same.” As a soldier who had fought through the horror of World War II, he loved peace and thought that a desire for peace was a sufficient common ground on which he


could form a partnership with the Arab states against the Soviet Union.

In fact, Eisenhower believed that non-military options were the only ways that the Soviet Union could be kept out of the Middle East. Eisenhower argued to Eden that if Britain deployed military forces against Nasser, “all Arabs would be forced to support him,” and Nasser would become the acknowledged dominating power in the Middle East. The prospect of Nasser becoming the leader of the Arab world was intolerable to Eisenhower, because the Soviets had “likely…developed quite a hold on Nasser” as they sought to “gain a dominant position in the Near East area.” Again, Eisenhower’s commitment to peace was primarily in order to provide an attractive-looking contrast to the warmongering and threatening Soviets. Nasser’s insistence on ignoring the American peace policies, along with his association with the Soviet Union and arrogant international actions regarding the Suez Canal, caused Eisenhower to begin to oppose him, although not to the extent that the British, French, and Israelis did.

The crowning attempt of Eisenhower to win the friendship of Nasser and the Arab nations happened during the Suez War, the conclusion of the Suez Crisis. On October 29, 1956, David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister of Israel, opened hostilities by launching Operation Kadesh. Israeli paratroopers landed in


and secured the Mitla Pass on the Sinai Peninsula, only twenty miles from the Suez Canal. They were swiftly followed by armored reinforcements, about 3,000 strong, under the command of Ariel Sharon. Eisenhower was furious. He felt “double-crossed” by Israel’s deceptive military buildup and surprise attack. But in fact, Israel was acting in conjunction with Britain and France, as those nations desperately wanted to regain control of the Suez Canal. The day after the launch of Operation Kadesh, Britain and France jointly sent Israel and Egypt an ultimatum, declaring that if they did not cease hostilities and withdraw from the Suez Canal region, they would face military intervention. Of course, neither Israel nor Egypt would back down, especially Egypt since the British and French were demanding that they evacuate their own territory. On October 31, Anglo-French bombing raids on Egypt began, later followed by the landing of paratroopers and other forces at Port Said and other controlling points on the Canal on November 5.

If Eisenhower was angry at Israel’s deception, he was enraged at the actions of Britain and France and opposed them for several reasons. First, he felt personally betrayed. On October 30, before he knew of the Anglo-French intentions, he sent a message to Anthony Eden that said, “I address you in this note not only as head of Her Majesty’s Government but as my longtime friend…I should like to ask your help in clearing up my understanding as to exactly what is

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39 Isaac Alters, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 221.
40 Ibid., 224.
41 Ibid., 228.
42 Ibid., 239.
happening between us and our European allies...especially between us, the French and yourselves." According to Ambrose, Eisenhower decided that the "cabal could not be allowed to succeed. The plot reeked of nineteenth century colonialism of the worst sort..." Eisenhower believed that Israel, Britain, and France had committed an unprovoked attack on a country that he was trying to draw to the West, consequently causing serious damage to the cause of the United States in the Cold War.

Actually, the Cold War dictated Eisenhower’s response to the Suez War, just as it dictated all of American foreign policy. Eisenhower’s premier foreign policy concern was to prevent the Soviet Union from taking advantage of the crisis, and worming its way into a more influential position. He said on November 1, “At all costs the Soviets must be prevented from seizing the mantle of world leadership through a false but convincing exhibition of concern for smaller nations...." After the British and the French became involved, the possible moves of the Soviet Union occupied Eisenhower’s mind, and he worried about “the opportunities that we have handed to the Russians...and every day the hostilities continue the Soviets have an additional chance to embarrass the

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44 Ambrose, 358.

Western world beyond measure.”46 Specifically, Eisenhower was afraid that the Soviets would use a UN resolution condemning the whole affair as a way to legitimately enter their own military forces into the Middle East. “It is vital,” he wrote to Eden, “no excuse be given for Soviet participation in UN force.”47

In order to prevent the Soviets from having this advantage, and in order to salvage any chance of turning the Arabs to the West, Eisenhower applied strong diplomatic and economic pressure on Britain, France, and Israel. Aside from subtle threats, Eisenhower would not allow shipments of oil to Britain to make up for the loss of Middle Eastern oil, and he refused to bail out the British pound sterling until Britain ceased hostilities with Egypt.48 Britain folded, forcing France to follow suit. The British and French were humiliated and, in Eisenhower’s words, “won battles but nothing else.”49 Israel, although forced to agree to a cease-fire and face international condemnation, did manage to achieve several of its military and defensive objectives, such as halting the Fedayeen raids.50

This was Eisenhower’s last attempt to win the friendship and trust of Nasser and the Arab nations. First the Israelis, then the British and French had

48 Isaac Alteras, Eisenhower and Israel, 240.
49 Eisenhower, Waging Peace, 98.
50 Ibid., 98.
initiated a war on Nasser that he would have lost had not the United States stopped them. Eisenhower had single-handedly saved Gamal Abdel Nasser, but rather than win Nasser’s thanks and praise, Nasser ignored the role of the United States in saving his regime. The Soviet Union had already strongly denounced the whole affair as a “barefaced plot to grab the Canal from Nasser,” and Eisenhower’s advisers told him not to take the same position as the Soviet Union. Therefore, rather than call for the condemnation of Britain, France, and Israel, he verbally maintained his friendship while he advocated submitting the whole affair to the United Nations. To Nasser, this sounded like a very weak position, and he refused to align himself with the West. The Soviet Union’s threats and censures of Israel and the Anglo-French plot gained it the respect and admiration of the Arab world. Consequently, even though it was the United States that saved the Egyptian regime, the Soviets received all the credit. Eisenhower’s attempt to sway the Arab states through a platform of peace in order to contrast with the military stances of the Soviet Union allowed the Soviet Union to appear stronger and win Nasser over without doing anything at all.

Eisenhower’s foreign policy leading to the Suez Crisis is easy to deride. According to some scholars, his Cold War policies were based on morality and principles, but they were unsuited to an increasingly complex world. He understood the concerns and priorities of neither Israel nor the Arab states. His

52 Isaac Alters, Eisenhower and Israel, 317.
allegiance to the Tripartite Agreement as a means of keeping peace in the Middle
East and curtailing Soviet influence actually caused tensions to rise and allowed
entrance of Soviet arms into the region. His decision to oppose his traditional
allies and save Nasser’s regime ultimately allowed the Soviets to gain a
diplomatic victory in the Middle East and enabled Nasser to begin “a campaign
aimed at undermining Western interests in the region.”\textsuperscript{54} Nasser did not view
himself as a part of the international, law-abiding community, nor did he see
himself under any obligation to the world superpowers. Rather, Nasser desired to
dominate the Arab world, and he had no scruples regarding who helped him
fulfill this goal. Eisenhower’s failure to understand Nasser’s priorities and
character caused him to pursue “unrealistic” and mutually incompatible goals for
the Middle East, which ultimately failed to bring peace to the region or curb
Soviet influence.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Isaac Alteras, \textit{Eisenhower and Israel}, 317.
\textsuperscript{55} Eisenhower, \textit{Waging Peace}, 24.