

Anthony Eden, Full Circle: extract on the Suez Crisis


Caption: In his Memoirs, Anthony Eden, British Prime Minister from 1955 to 1957, recalls the need to take immediate measures in November 1956 following the invasion of the Sinai Peninsula by Israeli troops on 29 October 1956.

Source: EDEN, Anthony. Full Circle. The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir Anthony Eden. London: Cassell, 1960. 619 p. p. 522-524; 524-527.

Copyright: (c) Sir Anthony EDEN

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/anthony_eden_full_circle_extract_on_the_suez_crisis-en-1ecde4c5-baff-4e14-9ebe-11d0025729c7.html

Last updated: 01/03/2017



[...]

On October 25th a report came that Israel was about to mobilize. She did so on the 27th and moved against Egypt on the evening of the 29th. I thought then, and I think now, that the Israelis had justification for their action. It is at least a grim possibility that they would not be a free nation today had they not taken it. The marked victim of the garrotter is not to be condemned if he strikes out before the noose is round his throat.

If we were not prepared to condemn Israel, we could not stand aside and watch events. In an Israeli-Egyptian conflict our military advisers expected the Israelis to win; their quality, intelligent training and dedicated courage outmatching the Egyptian advantage in numbers and equipment. The chief peril to us lay not in the conflict but in its extension by the intervention of other Arab states. The best way to halt that was by intervening ourselves. These considerations decided our course of action.

Ministers had already considered at several meetings the ways in which the situation might develop. These had also been canvassed with the French. On October 25th the Cabinet discussed the specific possibility of conflict between Israel and Egypt and decided in principle how it would react if this occurred. The Governments of France and the United Kingdom should, it considered, at once call on both parties to stop hostilities and withdraw their forces to a distance from either bank of the canal. If one or both failed to comply within a definite period, then British and French forces would intervene as a temporary measure to separate the combatants. To ensure this being effective, they would have to occupy key positions at Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. Our purpose was to safeguard free passage through the canal, if it were threatened with becoming a zone of warfare, and to arrest the spread of fighting in the Middle East.

To realize this we would put into operation the plan for occupation of the Suez Canal zone, prepared by the joint Anglo-French military staff which had been studying the problem since the end of July. An advantage of this course was that we did not need to recast our military preparations. The same plan that had been intended to deal with Nasser's seizure of the canal fitted equally well with our new objective. Critics asked why we landed so far behind the combatant area. The answer is that to land anywhere except as planned would have involved delay and we could not afford delay. We were also limited by shortage of landing craft and had to have the use of a port.

Of course there were dangers in this policy. But there were dangers in any policy which we might have chosen, not least in that of complete inaction. Political decisions, especially when they concern the Middle East, usually involve a choice of evils. I am convinced that we chose the lesser evil.

[...]

On the morning of October 30th the Cabinet were informed that Israeli troops had entered Egyptian territory on the evening of the 29th and during the night had reached a point half way between their frontier and Ismailia. A second Israeli force was reported to be striking towards Suez. Other swift Israeli actions were also unrolling, though we only learnt details of these later. This was the situation the Cabinet had considered five days before.

The Cabinet was sternly conscious of the importance and urgency of the decisions it had to take. Now that the situation had actually arisen, it confirmed its readiness to act as had been decided, subject to the agreement of the French Ministers who were flying to London for consultations. It now considered the actual terms of the note in which this demand was to be addressed to Egypt and Israel; these would be discussed with M. Mollet and M. Pineau on their arrival.

The Cabinet examined the wording of the statement I was to make in the House that afternoon and endorsed it. We also discussed the attitude of the United States. The American Administration was urgently proposing to have Israel branded as an aggressor by the Security Council. It was unmoved by the history of the dispute or Egypt's aggressive attitude and declared intentions against Israel. Our hope was that the United States

would take some account of those events and be watchful of Soviet moves. The Cabinet then approved the terms of a message to President Eisenhower inviting his general support. I sent two telegrams to Washington that day. In the first I said:

We have never made any secret of our belief that justice entitled us to defend our vital interests against Nasser's designs. But we acted with you in summoning the London Conference, in despatching the abortive Menzies mission and in seeking to establish S.C.U.A. [the Users' Club]. As you know, the Russians regarded the Security Council proceedings as a victory for themselves and Egypt. Nevertheless we continued through the Secretary-General of the United Nations to seek a basis for the continuation of the negotiations.

Egypt has to a large extent brought this attack on herself by insisting that the state of war persists, by defying the Security Council and by declaring her intention to marshal the Arab states for the destruction of Israel. The latest example of Egyptian intentions is the announcement of a joint command between Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

We have earnestly deliberated what we should do in this serious situation. We cannot afford to see the canal closed or to lose the shipping which is daily on passage through it. We have a responsibility for the people in these ships. We feel that decisive action should be taken at once to stop hostilities. We have agreed with you to go to the Security Council and instructions are being sent this moment. Experience however shows that its procedure is unlikely to be either rapid or effective.

My second message was sent after our talks with the French Ministers and the delivery of our jointly agreed notes to the Egyptian Ambassador and the Israeli Chargé d'Affaires. It informed the President of the requests we were making to the belligerents, and continued:

My first instinct would have been to ask you to associate yourself and your country with the declaration. But I know the constitutional and other difficulties in which you are placed. I think there is a chance that both sides will accept. In any case it would help this result very much if you found it possible to support what we have done at least in general terms. We are well aware that no real settlement of Middle Eastern problems is possible except through the closest co-operation between our two countries. Our two Governments have tried with the best will in the world all sorts of public and private negotiations through the last two or three years and they have all failed. This seems an opportunity for a fresh start.

... Nothing could have prevented this volcano from erupting somewhere, but when the dust settles there may well be a chance for our doing a really constructive piece of work together and thereby strengthening the weakest point in the line against communism.

A message from President Eisenhower crossed my telegrams. He expressed his disquiet upon a number of points, but considered it of the greatest importance that the United Kingdom and the United States should quickly and clearly lay out their present views and intentions before each other, so that they might not in any real crisis be powerless to act in concert because of misunderstanding. That had been my purpose also at the January meeting in Washington, and all through this drawn-out business.

The question of consultation before action with the Commonwealth countries and the United States was one that troubled us greatly. Of course we would have preferred to do this. Whatever the outcome of such consultation, it would have smoothed our path. On the other hand, however sharply pressed, such

consultation was not possible within a matter of hours; it must take days at least. Nor was there any chance that all concerned would take precisely the same view of what action must follow the consultation. As a result there would be attempts to modify our proposals, to reach some compromise between several divergent points of view and, before we knew where we were, we would be back at an eighteen-power conference once more. This was the last thing in the world we wanted, because we knew quite well that once palavers began, no effective action would be possible.

The chief danger, especially for us, was that the conflict would spread. A localized war between Israel and Egypt, while troublesome, should not be highly dangerous internationally. The same could not be said of a war which had spread to include Syria and Jordan, with Iraq morally compelled to take a hand too. If this were to happen, the Jordan commitment would raise its head again, not in so acute a form, but alarming enough. Two events could be counted on to encourage Jordan and Syria to inaction, swift Israeli military success and the knowledge that British and French forces were on the way and would be used to localize the dispute. If that restraint was to be effective it must be applied at once. Twenty-four hours might well be too late, forty-eight certainly would.

The choice for us was stark and inescapable, either act at once to bring about the result we sought, the localization of the conflict, or involve ourselves in consultations. This would mean the same inaction as in the last three months. We chose to act.

I can imagine no conditions in which this conflict, so long expected, could have taken place with less risk of wider consequences for the world. Among these conditions Anglo-French presence and action signified most. It may be that our intervention brought the conflict 'prematurely' to an end, to use the adverb which the Leader of the Opposition employed. It is evident that intervention stopped it spreading.

Our consultations with the French Ministers began the moment they arrived and continued over luncheon. As soon as these had been concluded and all points of action and timing settled, the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Butler, who was Leader of the House, and I saw the leaders of the Opposition. We gave them in advance a copy of the statement I was about to make in the House of Commons.

I thought it my duty to tell the House of the decision we had taken at the earliest moment. This led me into what I now consider was an error in timing. If I had done so two hours later, the Opposition would have been given time to consider the statement I was to make. The Commonwealth and the United States would have had time to reflect upon the messages we had sent them. However, I informed the House at 4.30 p.m. that the French and British Governments were agreed 'that everything should be done to bring hostilities to an end as soon as possible'. I announced the terms of our notes to Israel and Egypt and described the action we proposed to take if those countries did not comply. Our purpose was 'to separate the belligerents and to guarantee freedom of transit through the canal by the ships of all nations.'

[...]