Anthony Eden, Full Circle: extract on the outcome of the Suez Crisis

Caption: In his memoirs, Anthony Eden recalls the pressure exerted by the United Nations and the United States in order to speed up the withdrawal of French and British troops from the Suez region.

Source: EDEN, Anthony. Full Circle. The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir Anthony Eden. London: Cassell, 1960. 619 p. p. 572-576.

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Anthony Eden, *Full Circle*

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The British and French Governments were under heavy pressure at the United Nations to name at once a date for the withdrawal of their forces. In this the United States Government took a leading part. The Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Humphrey, telephoned to Mr. Butler and made it clear that the United States would not extend help or support to Britain until after a definite statement on withdrawal had been made. In a further message he conveyed that the American Administration meant by this the announcement of an early date for such withdrawal.

This was unacceptable to us. Neither the French Government nor ourselves were willing to fix a definite date and announce it in public until certain conditions had been fulfilled. The immediate necessity was to secure precise assurances from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, before we handed over our responsibilities in Port Said to the United Nations contingents.

By persistent argument, we made some headway. It was accepted that the United Nations force should be built up to a competent size, though it did not in the end contain the Canadian contingent for which we hoped and which was made ready. The United Nations accepted responsibility for clearing the canal as quickly as possible. Surveying and diving operations were to begin before the Allied withdrawal. On the other hand, no use was ever made of our offer to place Anglo-French salvage resources at the disposal of the United Nations. Our salvage fleet was working with high efficiency and success in Port Said harbour and clearing the entrance to the canal. If full use had been made of it, the canal could have been opened many weeks sooner. The delay was due to fear of offending Nasser.

We insisted that there must be no discrimination by the Egyptian authorities against British and French shipping when the canal reopened, and this we secured. It was agreed that negotiations upon the future of the canal should be resumed on the basis of the six principles unanimously approved by the Security Council. This was cold comfort for the canal users. I urged that we should stand upon the eighteen-power proposals. The United States had played a large part in formulating them and the fact that they had been vetoed by the communist powers did not seem sufficient reason to drop them. The French Government shared my opinion and our Government's statement on December 3rd reiterated this. It was not welcome to Mr. Hammarskjöld, who was now committed by his conversations with the Egyptians to regarding the eighteen-power proposals as superseded. We held that only something equivalent would provide acceptable guarantees for freedom of passage through the canal. This should have been the basis for further negotiation.

Though they had only received partial satisfaction on some points, the British and French Governments reluctantly agreed to resume the withdrawal of their troops. These negotiations had committed the United Nations force more seriously and on a larger scale in the area of the canal. They had also alerted United States opinion, if not yet the Government, to the combined dangers presented by growing Soviet penetration and intensified Arab nationalism. We refused, however, to name in public a specific date for final withdrawal. This would have given the signal for further demonstrations and disturbances in Port Said. On our insistence, the phasing was arranged between the Allied Commander-in-Chief and the United Nations Commander, in the light of transport problems and the needs for preserving public order on the spot. After discussion with the French Government, we fixed December 22nd as the final day for embarkation.

During the closing weeks of the Anglo-French occupation, the Egyptians did all they could to stir up incidents and present them to the world as the result of Allied provocation. In spite of the cease-fire agreements, they attempted ambushes, Allied patrols were fired upon and grenades thrown at military vehicles. Arms were smuggled into Port Said and a virulent propaganda campaign was directed at its inhabitants inciting them against Allied authorities. These Egyptian activities were of a pattern with the *fedayeen* raids against Israel and they caused further casualties on both sides. During this tense period, Allied officers and men conducted themselves with remarkable coolness and forbearance. Their commander in Port Said, General Stockwell, protested several times to the United Nations Commander against Egyptian actions, but with little effect.

I returned from Jamaica on December 14th. During my absence I had a courteous exchange of messages with the President, an exchange which brought us no nearer a meeting of Heads of Government, urgent as this was. I was feeling much stronger and had no suspicion of the advice the doctors were to have to give me in January.

At London Airport, where many of my colleagues met me, I made a statement summing up the position and prospects at the moment:

There is now, I am sure from my own post-bag as well as other evidence, a growing understanding in Canada, and also in the United States, about the action which Britain and France were compelled to take in the Middle East. I am sure that this will go on increasing.

The formation of a United Nations force could be the turning point in the history of the United Nations. Does anyone suppose that there would have been a United Nations force but for British and French action? Of course not.

It is true that it would have been perfectly possible to allow events to drift, to let hostilities spread and develop, to allow the Moscow-Cairo axis to perfect its plans. All this would have given us much less immediate anxiety than we have had to bear. It would have been easy to do nothing. It always is for any Government and it would have been popular in some quarters. It would have been easy, but it would have been fatal, just as it was fatal in the years between the wars.

Everybody knows now what the Soviets were planning and preparing to do in the Middle East. Russia supplied arms in such quantities, as has now been revealed, because she knew the Egyptian dictator's ambitions suited her own book.

The aim was just this – more satellites, but this time in the Middle East. I am convinced, more convinced than I have been about anything in all my public life, that we were right, my colleagues and I, in the judgments and decisions we took, and that history will prove it so.

Of the next steps I said:

It seems to us two things are essential. The canal must be cleared by all available means, and without further delay. Its future must be settled, and permanently. Every country concerned must take a fresh look, and make a new effort to solve the problems that have beset the Middle East for far too long.

Soon after my return, my wife and I lunched alone with Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. We had a full discussion and at the end of it, Sir Winston summed up his judgment on the situation: 'What a magnificent position to fight back from.'

We now found the United States Government more helpful on two matters, the support of sterling and the supply of oil. Other problems arose, however, in connection with the canal area which complicated our plan of withdrawal, and on these they maintained a rigid attitude. The Foreign Secretary explained these difficulties to Mr. Dulles at a meeting in Paris on December 14th. We wished to find solutions for them before our troops finally left. Dulles reacted as if we were seeking an indefinite suspension of our withdrawal, which was not so. He stated that he could not release us from our obligation to withdraw, since

to do so would be ‘in some sense a breach of faith on the part of the Administration with Congress and United States public opinion.’ He maintained that our action had caused revulsion throughout the United States. This was strong language and at variance with the reports of our own representatives, who considered that the sharp feelings displayed at the time in Washington had not really represented American opinion.

The Foreign Secretary told Dulles that we were concerned with the future of British nationals and their property in Egypt. About 10,000 were involved, many of them Cypriots and Maltese. By the middle of December 2,500 had already been driven out by direct or indirect means. About 3,500 French nationals had suffered likewise. Much British and French property had also been seized by the Government. The threat of general expulsion was now hanging over all the remaining British and French subjects in Egypt. By contrast, Egyptian nationals in Britain had not been molested.

We brought strong diplomatic pressure to bear at the United Nations and a general expulsion did not take place. We were also trying to settle upon some system of arbitration, either through the United Nations or directly with the Egyptians, to consider the claims and counter-claims for compensation, which would shortly arise. These included the value of the seized British and French property in Egypt, the cost of clearing the canal and a just assessment of the damage done during the fighting. When we withdrew, the argument was still going on.

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