

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v7i3.1614

Citation: Sanghro, R., Chandio, J., & Soomro, S. (2018). The Special Relationship: The US, Great Britain and Egypt over the Suez Canal. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 7(3), 127-135. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v7i3.1614>

The Special Relationship: The US, Great Britain and Egypt over the Suez Canal

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Abstract

The United Kingdom had ruled nearly the whole world. It is said that the sun never sets on the British Empire. The emergence of World War I and II weaken the power of Britain as a dominate colony of the world. However, by the end of WW-II, the US emerged as the newly famous, powerful country in the world. During the WW-II, the UK and the USA developed close cooperation. The relationship of both countries developed to such an extent that the Prime Minister W.D. Churchill called it the Special Relationship between UK-USA. The special relationship between both nations continued after the end of WW-II. It was believed that the bond of relationship is so strong that it cannot be rifted. It was right considering the close cooperation between both countries during the WW-II and aftermaths. However, the incident of the Suez Canal in 1956, completely changed the scenario. The tension between both states appeared over the Suez Crisis. This historical analysis is made to understand to what extent the special relationship was strong? Moreover, what went wrong during the Suez Crisis that shattered the special relationship between UK-USA. Was the Suez debacle of 1956, served as the litmus test paper in examining the special relationship?

Keywords: UK and USA relationship, Special relationship, UK, USA, Suez Canal, Egypt, Israel, France, the Soviet Union.

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1. Introduction

States make relations with another on various grounds such as social, political or religious so on so forth. Throughout the history, the UK and US had strong ties. Both countries had developed strong relations during the Second World War to such an extent that it came to be called as *the Special Relationship* by W.D. Churchill in 1943 (in a private meeting). He openly phrased the term in a speech on 5 March 1946 at Fulton, Missouri (Dumble, 2001). The individual relationships strengthened between both countries when both joined hands together in the WW-II. The critical element in building the special relationship was British Prime Minister Churchill. The close personal relationship between him and the American president gave this relationship legitimacy, and a sound strategic strength (Dumbrell, 2006). Churchill's cultivation in making Roosevelt close was the primary factor that developed this cooperation between both states which culminated in the status of the unique relationships. He had made strong personal relations with Roosevelt during the time of WW-II, by writing letters and meetings. Through this, he secured arms, ammunition, money and US troops to defeat Hitler during the WW-II. "No lover ever studied the whims of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt", he later informed the private secretary (Dimbley & Reynolds, 1988). This paper will investigate how these special relations developed and what were the motives behind the cultivating the specialities. Further, it will be analysed how long these special relations lived and what implications it left in the foreign policy.

2. The Biggest Test of Special Relationship: the Suez Crisis

The birth of unique relationships between the UK and the USA was made during the WW-II. Both countries co-operated each other during the difficult time of the war and succeeded in their efforts. The most significant setback in the Anglo-American special relations was seen during the Suez debacle in 1956. It should be noted that by 1956, the British have almost lost the control of her nearly all colonies. After the end of the WW-II, British almost lost its control over the territories and also willing to withdraw from the settlements. In 1947, India the biggest colony in Asia got independence. In the Middle East, only the control of Suez Canal of Egypt was left which was considered as one of the excellent sources of income for the UK and also served as the hegemony and power in the region. The Suez debacle has tremendous historical importance because it was the last sign of the British power that was left in Egypt which remained Britain of its colonial power and history. The British government had closed the access to the national assets however it was made open to the public for their journal view in 1987 (30 years- an official period for the release of the official British government documents) (Boyle, 2005).

The French constructed the Suez Canal in 1869. In 1854, Ferdinand, a French Consul to Cairo agreed with Ottoman governor to build a 100 miles canal. The initial construction was carried out in 1859 and was opened in 1869. In 1875 British became the largest shareholder in the Canal. After conquering Egypt in 1882, Britain became the custodian of the biggest and the most massive channel. It was an excellent source of income and dominance for the British Empire. Since then it had remained as the artery of the British Empire, connecting Britain with the Middle East, India and the Pacific (Dimbley & Reynolds, 1998; Louis, 2006; Holland, 1996).

After the partition of Indian in 1947, it became less important for the British, but still two-thirds of the oil was shipped to the West by this Canal. Therefore, strategically it was vital sea route for the British as she had ruled Egypt since 1882 and canal was the epicentre of her military might and presence in the Eastern-Mediterranean (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988; Holland, 1996; Heinlein, 2002). See (Figure 1 & 2).



Figure 1: The strategic importance of the Suez Canal

Source: <http://geography.howstuffworks.com/africa/the-suez-canal.htm/printable>

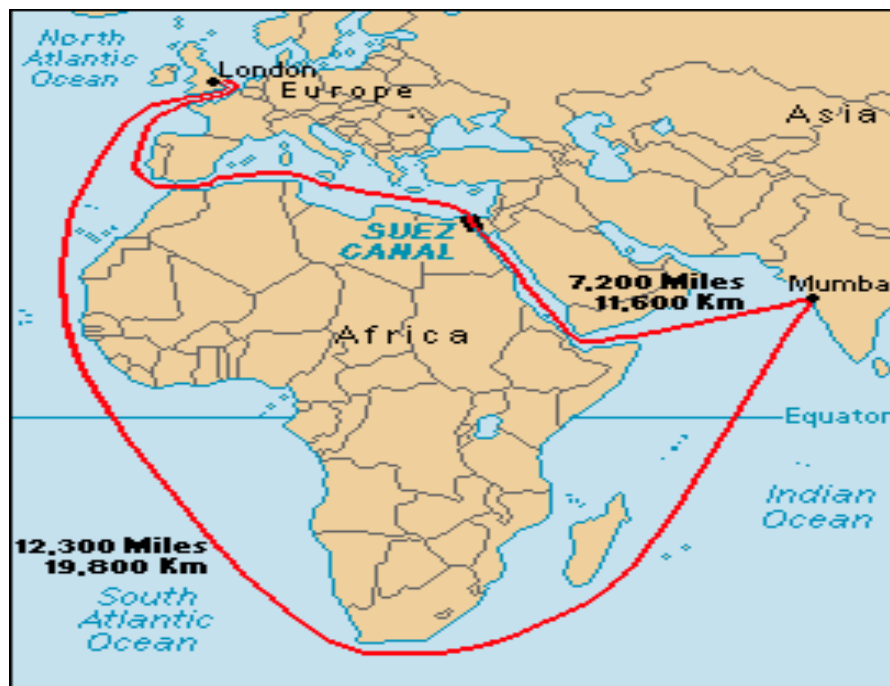


Figure 2: The Suez Canal Shortens the Sea Route from London to the Middle East and Africa

Source: <http://geography.howstuffworks.com/africa/the-suez-canal.htm/printable>

The situation changed for the British as she was not directly controlling Egypt except the Canal during the 1950s. However, for the Egyptians, the British hegemony over the Canal always reminds them of their secondary position in their own country due to the myriad influence of the British over the Canal. The military coup of 1952 in Egypt increased the feeling of hatred against the British (Dekmejian, 1971). Many Britons were attacked, their property in Egypt was burned, and finally, the boycott of the British goods was observed which made the British difficult to operate through the Canal. Later, in 1954, it was agreed that

the British would withdraw her troops from the Suez Canal in June and in June 1956 (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988).

Anthony Eden (later British Prime Minister), who was working as the foreign secretary believed the decision of withdrawal of the British troops from Canal Zone would lead to the new relations with the new military government under General Gamal Abdul Nasser.

Gamal Abdul Nasser was a military man, ambitious and a patriot (Thornhill, 2004; Jankowski, 2002). To him, Egypt comes first then the Arab. At one occasion during a public rally, he said: "I am Egyptian, and I feel Arab because I am deeply affected by the fortunes of the Arabs, wherever they may occur" (Jankowski, 2002). Egypt has strong emotional implications to his personality. Even before assuming the reins of the government in an interview, he asserted to him "Egypt means the Bible, it means the very essence of religion...I love the word Egypt" (Jankowski, 2002). He wanted to change his country, i.e. the modernisation of his country and also the political resurrection of the Arab world as a whole. By that time he had made cordial relations with Washington and London for his political and economic support. To boost the economy of Egypt, his (Nasser) government planned to construct a massive water reservoir (a dam). To this end in 1955, London and Washington agreed to give Gamal Nasser government a loan of \$70 million for constructing the water reservoir, i.e. the Aswan Dam (Alterman, 2002).

The Anglo-American plan for the peace treaty with Israel made Nasser furious. To strengthen his power and position, he ordered for the mass of weapons from the Soviet Union through Czechoslovakia (Giant, 1993; Dawisha, 2003). Further, his recognition of Communist China made Anglo-Americans anxious about his ambitions in Egypt. Later, on 19th July, Dulles, the American Secretary of State called the Egyptian Ambassador, informing him about the cancellation of the loan and issued a humiliating statement in press emphasising the doubts on Egypt's ability to construct the dam on the next day.

Nasser saw the refusal of the loan as a humiliation on the part of Egypt as a whole. Speaking to the nation on 26th July at Alexandria he strongly condemned the approach the US adopted to refuse the construction of the dam and urged the Egyptian government to rise against this humiliation. To this, he decided to nationalise the Suez Canal and declared the revenue generated from the Suez Canal would be used in the construction of the Aswan Dam. He ironically retorted "we shall build a High Dam on the skulls of 120,000, Egyptian workmen who died in building the Suez Canal" (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988).

3. Nationalisation of the Canal

The nationalisation of Suez Canal infuriated the British government very much who considered Cairo control of the Suez as "serious strategic threat to consumers of the non-dollar oil supplies from the Middle East" (Klug & Smith, 1999). It is said that by that time the British had only oil reserves for six week (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988). Hearing the news of Nasser's nationalisation of the Canal Anthony Eden said 'Europeans has financed and built the Canal for the sake of international trade and will not allow Nasser to have his hand on our windpipe'. He went further on and said 'Nasser must be broken...this should be done with economic and political levers. If however, these are tried and proved insufficient, the British then use armed forces' (Searle, 2001). To Eden, Nasser was a dangerous, double-dealer, treacherous and unappeasable dictator in the shape of Hitler (Lucas, 1991) who was involved in attacking British troops and civilians in Egypt and is intending to become the new Arab hero-the Saladin (Boyle, 2005).

Prime Minister Eden left no stone unturned in removing Nasser from power in Egypt. Eden was further intensified and became angry when Mr Nutting, the Minister for the state of Foreign Affairs, sent a letter to Eden informing of the possibility of chaos in Egypt if Nasser was removed. In his telephonic conversation, Eden shouted and said "what's all this poppycock you have sent me? ... I want him destroyed, can't you

understand? I want him removed...moreover, I do not give a damn, if there are anarchy and chaos in Egypt" (Dawisha, 2003).

Eden tried to impose political and economic sanctions on Egypt and planned to topple down Nasser's government with the help of US but failed to do so as Eisenhower, and the then American president did not agree. In this situation, Washington did same what London did in 1954 during the Dien Bien Phu crisis in Vietnam (where America tried to seek British help, but Britain remained silent). Washington was aware that if she helped London to oust General Nasser from power would help the Soviet Union to get influence in the Middle East (by assisting Egypt) (Hahn, 1991; Boyle, 2005; Chester & Richardson, 1991).

Eisenhower believed that the political solution of the conflict could be drawn because the use of power would be considered here as colonial gunboat diplomacy and would result in backfire which will benefit General Nasser, in getting support in Egypt through the Arab world.

Drawing the political sketch of Egypt and Nasser's growing popularity in the Middle East, Eisenhower writes to the British premier that the "the use of force, would increase the area of jeopardy" in the region. He agreed with Eden's characterisation of Nasser as a dangerous and untrustworthy but "I am afraid" Eisenhower wrote to Eden, "from this point onwards our views on this situation diverge" (Boyle, 2005). "If the military solution was carried out he mentioned that the people of Near East and the North Africa and to some extent of all Asia and Africa would be consolidated, against the West to a degree which I fear could not be averted in generations to come".

4. Anglo-American Relations

Eisenhower believed that it would be detrimental for US's interests to declare war against General Nasser. Therefore he used political and economic methods to force the attackers to the desist (Hahn, 2006). It would have been disturbing implications for America to get control of the Canal. Moreover, US does not want to infuriate the whole Arab world as she had more substantial interests in making cordial relations with the Arab countries. It is true that Washington had very close ties with the London since the Second World War and was willing to cooperate with the British government on the difficult time. It should be made clear that by the end of the WW-II, America was only the most powerful nation on the planet besides the Soviet Union and small powers such as Britain, France so on so forth. It was the age of the bipolar world (two big powerful nations, i.e. the US and Soviet Union).

The unique relationships (between Britain and America) got setback first time over the issue of the Suez Canal in 1956 when General Nasser nationalised the Canal. The Soviet Union's open support for General Nasser was also the main hurdle for the US to side with Britain. In short, Washington wanted to maintain her stronghold in the Middle East. It will never allow Moscow to fill the gap. The extent of the special relationship between both countries was to such an extent that the Eisenhower, later, sent Dulles to London to convene Eden to call all Canal Users Conference (CUC). First Eden refused but then agreed. The CUC met in mid-August 1956 and proposed that an international body working under the United Nations (UN) should operate the Canal, which Nasser refused vehemently (Klug & Smith, 1999; Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988).

The Anglo-American relations deteriorated during the Suez debacle. The Eisenhower was not taking interest to hand in hand with the British in their difficult time. Britain had long co-operated with the USA; both had great good relations during the WW-II. Britain had never thought that she would be left alone during this critical hour. The 2, October 1956 statement by Dulles was commenting on the users association that CUC had no teeth further shattered British hope for America. The CUC also failed to achieve any positive results for the British.

To Eden, this was a critical time as he was suffering from a fever caused by gallbladder operation. Pressure mounted on him as days passed. Finally, after the series of highly secret meetings and plans, Eden, Ben-Gurion (Israeli premier) and Guy Mollet (French premier), agreed on 25 October 1956 that Israel would attack Egypt on 29 through Sinai desert (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988; Louis & Bull, 1986). It was a kind of pretext which would give Britain and France a chance of achieving the authority over the Suez Canal. The agreement was therefore made between these countries to get control of the canal by force. Israel did accordingly, and on 30 October, Britain and France gave an ultimatum to Israel and Egypt, for moving back 10 miles away from the canal, to proclaim their dominance over the Canal which Cairo refused. Consequently, according to the plan, Britain involved herself in the war on the second day (see figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3: The Strategic importance of the Suez Canal in the region.

Source: Google Maps, 2018

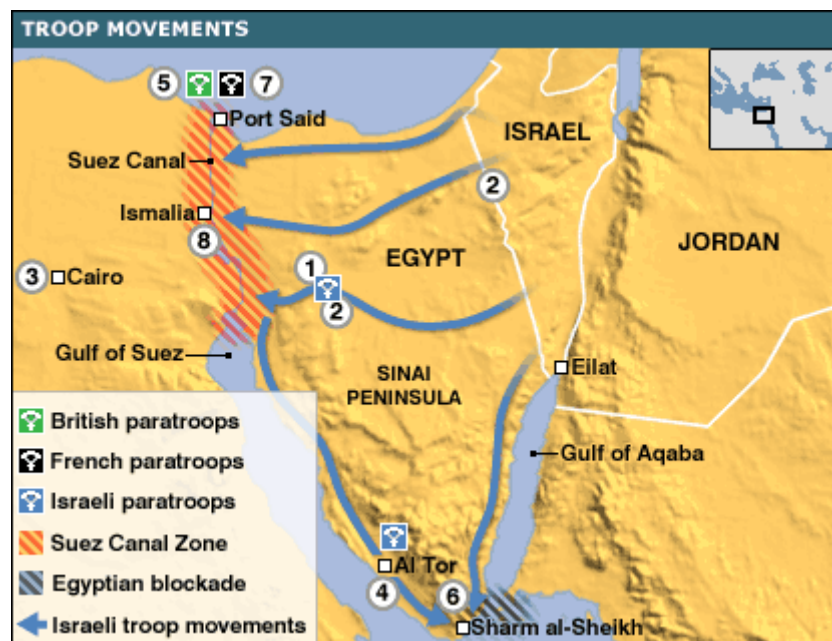


Figure 4: Israel attacked Egypt according to the Plan made between Britain, France and Israel on 29 October 1956 under an operation known as Operation Musketeer

Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5195068.stm

Eisenhower became aghast and furious over the British use of force over Egypt along the France and Israel. He expressed his concerns later. He had been suspicious when Britain suspended formal communication for two weeks before the attack. However, he knew through the intelligence reports by U-2 flights that revealed the military preparations (Chester & Richardson, 1991).

Prime Minister Eden was not aware of how the US would react to it instead he thought that she will not respond to it or will remain silent in the scene. Britain had overestimated. However, the case was different. The US reacted strongly. Eisenhower was outraged and dismayed by the British use of force. The scene changed dramatically when he angrily warned London that Washington would not support the war and the special relationship got setback severely the first time after the end of the WW-II. In a letter to Swede Hazlett on 22 November, Eisenhower wrote that "this was a sad blow because, quite naturally, Britain not only has been but must be, our best friend in the world. All these thoughts I communicated to Eden time and again. It was undoubtedly because of his knowledge of our bitter opposition to using force in the matter that when he finally decided to undertake the plan, he just went completely silent" (Boyle, 2005). What made Eisenhower was the timing of the war which concurs during the Hungarian crisis and particularly the US election on 6 November. His reputation rested on his ability to handle the world's diplomatic and military crisis (Louis & Bull, 1986).

By that time the US was condemning the Soviets colonialism in Eastern Europe otherwise all the countries will come under the umbrella of Soviet Union. Before the Suez crisis, the US followed the policy of 'Isolation' in the Middle-East. Later it was changed due to the different environment in the region and the greater involvement of the Soviets with the Arab world. Therefore he used the economic and political lever to pressurise Britain and France to desist (Hahn, 2006). He took immediate action when he heard of the British attack. He telephoned Eden and informed him that he would take this matter to the UNO, first in the morning when the door opens, before the USSR gets there (Chester & Richardson, 1991). The case produced in UNO with tangible results because France vetoed it. Finally, in General Assembly, he (US) got upper hand and approval on 1 November by Dull "we have no intention of standing idly by the President declared in December 1956, to see the southern flank of NATO completely collapse through communist penetration and success in the Middle East". He further stated that Washington intends to show her presence be felt strongly in the (Middle East) region (Hahn, 1998; Boyle, 2005).

In his last presidential speech at Philadelphia Eisenhower said "we cannot subscribe to one law for weak and another for the strong; one law for those opposing us, another for those allied with us. There can be one law, or there shall be no peace" (Dimbley & Reynolds, 1988; Boyle, 2005). America's firm stand against her special friend (Britain) won her image in the world. Even the cleaners and the typist at the United Nations building were congratulating the American diplomats. The resolution in the UN was passed against the occupying forces in Egypt on 2 November by 64 votes to 5 only (Boyle, 2005). The political situation shattered the image of the Britain which claims to be the champion of the human rights. She became under extreme criticism in the world, by her special friend (America). It was a humiliating defeat on the part of the Britain which was carried out by Washington in the UNO. By that time Britain forces had reached Cairo and surrounded the Port Said. The mounting international pressure finally compelled Britain to accept the ceasefire and leave Egypt.

The Anglo-American relations drifted apart during these days. The British ceasefire coincided with the news of Eisenhower's presidential victory in the election. The Anglo-American ties stranded to such an extent that when Eden tried to telephone Eisenhower to wish the elections victory but was turned down by Washington. The Eden was informed by Washington that there would be no such contact until Britain and France has withdrawn their forces from Egypt, and UN peacekeeping forces maintained the peace in the region (Louis & Bull, 1986). Once it the order in that region is attained the ground will be favourable for their both premiers (Eisenhower and Eden) for the meeting (Dimbleby & Reynolds, 1988).

The year 1956 witnessed the critical for Britain; the canal remained the last gasp of her empire and a humiliating defeat on the part of the empire (Porter, 2004). The Suez crisis had far-reaching implications on the British economy. In November 1956, Britain lost \$280 million, 15% of her total reserves (Klug & Smith, 1991; Heinlein, 2002). The Suez Canal crisis shattered Britain's cherished hopes that the unique relationships between both states, i.e. the UK and the USA existed. Until 1956, Britain was believed to have an influential role to play in the Middle East (Boyce, 1999). The loss of India (as a result of her independence in 1947) was not a loss of the whole empire. Still, there were many other colonies/territories that Britain dominates (rule). Her influence and dominance continued in Asia, Africa and the Middle East but the loss of the Suez Canal completely shattered the empire (Martel, 2000; Louis, 2006).

5. Conclusion

The Suez debacle marked the parting of the ways between the cherished Anglo-American relations (Springhall, 2001). To Eisenhower, the difference over the Suez was a 'family fight'. However, the friend's cooperation is needed particularly in the time of difficulty. The British were left alone in the difficult time. However, there is a difference between the human friends and the states friendship which lasts only with the interests of the state as a whole. The situation could have been avoided, by cooperation. The single-handed approach of Prime Minister Eden led down the US particularly the Eisenhower who was going through the election at that time. Moreover, the increasing influence of the Moscow over Nasser was also another factor that side-lined the US government and shattered the special relationship concept between the UK and the USA. The decision to use military option was Eden's own and Eisenhower was utterly kept in the dark. The humiliation over the canal led Eden to resign from his position. The crisis marked the transitional point of the British imperialism to US hegemony throughout the Arab world (Cross, 1969; Toye, 2008) and proved the British economic dependency on the USA. The debacle showed that there must be a change in Anglo-American relations this opened a new door for the British to play her role in different directions in future as the United States was concerned.

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