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## **A SUEZ MOMENT?**

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In the autumn of 1956, Britain embarked on a military operation to take control of the Suez Canal Zone. Earlier in the year, the Egyptians had nationalised the canal, mainly to bring in revenues to aid the development of the country, especially the building of the Aswan High Dam, but also as a sign of nationhood following the rise of Arab nationalism in the early 1950s. The British operation was conducted publicly with the French and secretly with the Israelis and followed a period of some years when Britain had been allowed by treaty to garrison the Suez Canal Zone even after Egyptian independence had been achieved.

For Britain's government, headed by Anthony Eden, the decision by President Nasser to nationalise the canal was both a political affront and also a strategic problem. Before the supertanker and container revolutions, most maritime trade between Europe and the Asia/Pacific region went through the Suez Canal and the governments in London and Paris both found it unacceptable that the canal should move outside the commercial control of a European country. For the British government, and especially for Mr Eden, President Nasser's action was a direct insult to Britain's imperial standing, and Nasser was likened by Eden to Hitler.

The wider context was that Britain still saw itself as a world power. Some colonies in West Africa were beginning to gain independence, with the Gold Coast becoming Ghana, but Britain retained world-wide links, its Navy had fleet carriers that could operate almost anywhere, the Air Force had bases in South East Asia, and the armed forces totalled nearly a million. Indeed, until the withdrawal from the Canal Zone in the mid-1950s following the expiry of the treaty, British army forces deployed there were close in size to the entire British Army of today.

It was in this context that the outcome of the Suez Crisis was so fundamental. The Anglo-French operation involved major amphibious landings at the northern end of the canal at Port Said, but also included extensive bombing of Egyptian airfields and naval action against the Egyptian Navy, all this supposedly to protect the canal from an Israeli/Egyptian conflict in Sinai, which had been started by Israel in collusion with the French and the British. International reaction was immediate and deeply critical, with the Eisenhower administration in the United States being hugely concerned that this late colonial venture would simply exacerbate the development of anti-western Arab nationalism. Heavy financial pressure was put on Britain and France, a ceasefire was effectively forced on the two countries before the military objectives were even remotely achieved, and only the fig-leaf of a UN Emergency Force in Sinai gave any semblance of post-conflict stability.

The 'Suez Moment' for Britain was even more severe than the catastrophic French loss of the garrison town of Dien Bien Phu in Indo China two years earlier that had resulted in the precipitate withdrawal from the region. The French were still determined to maintain their African possessions, especially Algeria, and this was to lead to a long and bitter conflict at the end of the 1950s. For Britain, though, Suez marked the end of an era, with Anthony Eden resigning shortly afterwards, a broken man. He was replaced by Harold Macmillan who, with his able Colonial Secretary, Ian Macleod, speeded up Britain's process of decolonisation and eventual military withdrawal from east of Suez. Britain's perception of itself as one of three great world powers was at an end.

### **An American Century**

Fifty years later, one of the key questions is whether the United States can maintain its position as the sole superpower with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan having become so unexpectedly difficult and

protracted. Will current policies be maintained through to the next administration or will the United States experience its own Suez moment?

On two different levels the situation is different, but there may also be similarities. One of the differences is that the Bush administration came to power at a time of great influence for neoconservative elements. The belief in the idea of a New American Century was dominant in the new administration, this being centred on the view that the collapse of communism in the early 1990s meant that free market liberal democracy in the American mould was the only way forward for the world. In the 1950s, Britain was clinging to the idea that it was still a great power, even if it was one of three, but the United States fifty years later saw itself as undisputed world leader – Pax Americana of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century would be much more global than the Pax Britannica of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This was also reflected in the other difference – at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the United States was the undisputed military power, vastly exceeding the military capabilities of any other country and getting close to the position it now holds, of a military budget that exceeds the combined military spending of every other country in the world.

The similarity, though, is in the distinct possibility that US power has over-reached itself, much as Britain was deluded in its perception of itself in the mid-1950s. This is perhaps best analysed in terms of the expected results of the vigorous responses to the 9/11 atrocities.

### Expectations

The 9/11 attack was an appalling event often likened to Pearl Harbour in 1941. That is not a good comparison because Pearl Harbour was an attack on a distant military base by a belligerent state in the pre-television age, whereas 9/11 hit the American heartland, was totally unexpected, and was witnessed nationwide as it happened. In the eighteen months that followed, an extraordinarily vigorous response ensued involving direct retaliation for 9/11 but a wider re-assertion of US influence.

There were three main elements to the response. One was that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan would be terminated. What would emerge would be a pro-western country with a long-term US military presence. Furthermore, the process of terminating the Taliban regime would also have involved US bases being established in Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan. Such links in a region stretching from the Caspian Basin east through to Kazakhstan would greatly increase US influence in a singularly oil-rich part of the world, while limiting Russia and Chinese power.

The second element would be the dispersal of the al-Qaida movement. Evicted from Afghanistan, many of its leaders killed or captured, and key supporters detained indefinitely, the movement would be no more than a shadow of its previous self. There was no expectation that the movement would disappear, but the threat would undoubtedly be greatly diminished.

Finally, by terminating the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, there would be several outcomes of great benefit to the United States and its close allies. Iraq itself would lose its maverick and unpredictable leadership, this being replaced by a pro-western regime. With more than a tenth of the world's oil, Iraq would not necessarily be a key focus of US oil interests, but it would certainly diminish the importance of Saudi Arabia, a useful development given that country's variable support for US security interests in the Gulf.

Another outcome would be the development of a free market economy in Iraq involving wholesale privatisation of state assets, a flat rate tax system and a minimum of financial regulation. This would be a remarkable experiment to be undertaken by the Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer, and

would result in a free market system which would far exceed what was possible in the United States with its trade unions, financial regulators and other restraints.

Perhaps most important was the anticipated effect on Iran, a formidably oil-rich and gas-rich state with a population of 75 million that was seen as the real threat to US security concerns in the Gulf. With US bases in Afghanistan to the east and Iraq to the west, and with the Fifth Fleet controlling the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, whatever regime was in power in Tehran would take great care to avoid antagonising the United States.

All these elements, focusing on regime termination in Afghanistan and Iraq and the curtailing of al-Qaida, were confidently expected to be achieved by the end of 2003, little more than two years after the 9/11 attacks. US influence would have been consolidated, those responsible for the 9/11 atrocities would have been punished and the Project for a New American Century would have been given a remarkable boost.

### Outcomes

The actual outcomes have been radically different but, even so, it is not clear whether they add up to a 'Suez moment' for the United States. In Afghanistan, US intelligence officials concede that the Karzai government controls barely 30% of the country, most of the latter being beholden to local warlords but with Taliban militias having considerable influence in much of the south and south-east of the country. These militias are benefiting from a surge in opium poppy cultivation, bringing substantial illicit revenue into the country, much of it ending up under the control of the militias.

Across the border in western Pakistan, large areas of North and South Waziristan and other border districts are under the control of Taliban, al-Qaida and other paramilitary groups. In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, January and February saw substantial upsurges in violence, especially in terms of marked increases in roadside bombs and suicide attacks. In response to these problems, the Bush administration hopes to expand its support for the Pakistani Army in the border districts and is considering a 'surge' in forces in Afghanistan (see January briefing, *NATO – A Sense of Crisis*) that would take the numbers of foreign troops in the country to around 70,000. Both developments would be controversial, with an enhanced Pakistani involvement risking a further increase in anti-Americanism and a surge in Afghanistan putting a further strain on the already overstretched US Army.

In Iraq, the surge of five extra combat brigades during 2007 initially had a substantial effect in curtailing the very high levels of violence that had affected much of Central and Northern Iraq. By December 2007, the US military casualties and the Iraqi civilian casualties had both declined by 70% or more, but much of this was due to a six month ceasefire instigated by one of the two most powerful Shi'a militia groups, the Mehdi Army. Furthermore, many of the mixed urban areas of previous times had consolidated into Shi'a or Sunni communities, lowering the risk of inter-communal violence but at the cost of losing the relative tranquillity of the previously mixed neighbourhoods. This was also at the cost of massive movements of refugees, with around two million Iraqis internally displaced and a similar number fleeing to neighbouring countries.

A further factor was the decision of the US military to enlist the aid of Sunni groups opposed to the levels of civilian violence coming from some of the al-Qaida elements within the country. These 'awakening' groups were effective in countering al-Qaida units but by the start of 2008 they had risen to 70,000, all paid for and armed by the United States. By the end of February there were signs of dissatisfaction emerging in some of these groups as they saw little change in the dominance of the Iraqi government by Shi'a political parties. Moreover, the groups may have been financed and armed by the United States but there is substantial evidence that they remain bitterly opposed to the US presence, seeing it as an occupying power, even if it has been temporarily of use to them.

Beyond all of this lies the issue of civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan – somewhere between 80,000 and 150,000 depending on assessment methodologies, with at least a similar number of serious injuries. Since 9/11, at least 120,000 people have been detained without trial, some for six years or more. In Iraq alone, in February, there were reported to be 27,000 suspected insurgents detained in US military prisons, and at least 10,000 more in Iraqi government prisons. The high rate of civilian casualties, the huge number of detentions and the instances of torture, prisoner abuse and rendition all lead to greater support for radical Islamist groups.

Moreover, the loose and dispersed al-Qaida movement itself has proved remarkably resilient and able to evolve in a number of locations. As well as its strength in South West Asia, there have been increases in influence in Algeria, Morocco and Lebanon, and there have been reports of a revitalised group in Libya that is bitterly opposed to the rapprochement between Gaddafi and the West. In Somalia, radical Islamist groups retain influence in a very volatile environment, with US forces responding with missile strikes in the south of the country.

The developments in South West Asia, the Middle East and North Africa are being met by further enhancements of counter-terrorism resources in western states. In Britain, for example, the expansion is quite remarkable. In addition to Counter Terrorism Command in London, three large 'hubs' - Counter Terrorism Units - have been established in the cities of Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham, to concentrate new resources in specialised locations. These will have 2,000 personnel assigned to them within a year, and are co-located with new regional offices for the UK's Security Service (MI5). A fourth hub is expected to be established in the south of England and five more Counter Terrorism Intelligence Units are being set up elsewhere across England and Wales.

The Security Service was the lead intelligence agency at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1990s but its resources have been deemed entirely inadequate to tackle the current problems. As a result its staff numbers have increased from 2,000 in 2001 to 3,300 today, growing to 4,000 in the next three years. Overall, Britain's internal security budget will rise from £2.5 billion today to £3.5 billion in 2011.

### **A Suez Moment?**

Relating these kinds of changes within western countries to the wider 'war on terror' and its many problems leads to the conclusion that there is a critical need for a thorough reconsideration of the entire conduct of western military and security operations since the 9/11 attacks. Eight to ten months ago, there were indications of this in the United States as intense debates in Congress began to embrace the idea of major withdrawals from Iraq, much of the thinking stemming from the conclusions of the Baker-Hamilton Report the previous autumn.

In practice, this has not happened. Moreover, as the 2008 Presidential Election campaign continues, the issues of Iraq, Afghanistan and the 'war on terror' have not come to the fore in the manner expected by many analysts. That could change, but the effect so far has been mainly due to the impact of the surge in Iraq. That surge has had the effect of decreasing the level of the violence sufficiently to give an impression of military progress that has, in turn, resulted in the development of a conservative political analysis that the war in Iraq can be won. Therefore, any withdrawal at this stage, or in the next two to three years, would be throwing away a victory. This is a powerful narrative that will be difficult for a Democrat presidential contender to counter during the campaign, let alone if entering the White House next January.

A wider perspective on the war may well suggest that occupation of countries in the Middle East and South West Asia is simply not possible in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but that is not how it is seen in Washington and the partial success of the surge is largely responsible for that. In one sense, the

decrease in violence in Iraq is hugely welcome in that many thousands of people have not been killed or maimed in the past few months, but that cannot disguise the grim consequence that another outcome is that a 'Suez moment' for the United States has yet to happen and a long-term continuation of occupation and conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan is an inevitable consequence. That will be an issue of great satisfaction to the wider al-Qaida movement, leaving us with the bitter irony that a military operation that has curbed some violence is likely to mean a much longer war.

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