The Suez Crisis: “The Advance on Sinai” (October 31st, 1956)

Abstract

The Suez Crisis presented diplomatic difficulties for West Germany. On the one hand, its government believed they were well-posed to benefit from the fallout of the crisis, since Germany had an advantage as a “non-colonial” power; some believed that West Germany could play a larger role in the Arab world after Britain and France’s blunder. On the other hand, the country’s special relationship with Israel, its alignment with Great Britain, France, and America, and its desire to prevent Egypt from recognizing East Germany kept it from throwing its weight behind the Egyptian cause. West Germany’s special relationship with Israel had been a sticking point in the Egypt-West Germany relationship long before the Suez Crisis; West Germany’s decision to pay reparations to Israel in March 1953 prompted Egypt to sign a trade agreement with East Germany in the same month. Egypt sought to play both Germanies against each other—it used its relationship with the GDR to exert pressure on the FRG but was always careful in its diplomatic relationship with the GDR, as it recognized that the FRG had far more economic power and ability to help Egypt than the GDR did.

Source

More than reprisal action and less than war is how Israeli spokesmen describe the military action that their government and military leaders have begun with the push across the Israeli-Egyptian border into the Sinai Peninsula. That sentence suggests the intention to limit the conflict and not go all out. A “calculated risk,” then, as the Americans have referred to such military conflicts on other occasions? That may be the case, or that may be the intention. We do not yet know for sure, because we do not know all of the considerations that the Israeli council of war took into account in the run-up to the explosive decision to invade the Sinai Peninsula. And even if we did know more, military conflicts, once begun, follow laws all their own. In any case, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the incident may evolve into full-blown war, indeed a conflict like that in Korea. Too much explosive material has been gathering in the Middle East. Political conditions there are reminiscent in some respects of the situation in the Balkans in 1914.

It is certain, in any case, that Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, mindful, like a descendant of the Maccabees, of the survival of the Jewish state in a hostile environment, deliberately brought about the clash with Nasser’s Egypt, since no one who has even remotely followed recent developments in the Middle East will deny that Israel has found itself in an increasingly dire predicament and also came under pressure. The seeds of the conflict whose expression we have just experienced were sown long ago. Actually, this probably already occurred when the United Nations—and this means the great Western powers—proved incapable of concluding the “first round” of the Arab-Israeli War with a peace treaty rather than a problematic truce. Difficulties that the “peacemakers” failed to tackle at the time are now returning to them and the world, but to a greater degree. We must not forget: From the beginning, with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the state of Israel has been, and remains, a special responsibility of the Western powers. For that reason, we now cannot impose a burden on the Israelis that others should be shouldering, at least in part.

We need not reach back that far in time. Recent weeks and months have in some respects exacerbated Israel’s national crisis. The circle of Arab partisans has closed, as the Israelis claim. Events before and after the elections in neighboring Jordan have also contributed to the crisis. The underground battle

between the partisans of England and Egypt that was waged in the Jordanian capital Amman, the failed attempt to have Iraqi troops march in, with the agreement of the English, immediately before election day in Jordan, the reaction to it, the tighter political and military ties between Jordan and Egypt—this entire complex interplay of pressure and counter-pressure, of agitation and bribery, which is extremely difficult for non-Orientals to understand, has imperiled Israel, and cast its future-minded politicians into dire worries. A state with fewer than two million inhabitants who have just embarked on their path to a modern nation, united by nothing but the difficulty of existing among thirty million Arab neighbors who are now on the move and getting ready to revolt against their outmoded feudal social structure—such a state can easily find itself in a position to venture what psychologists call a "flight forward." There is nothing to justify here and nothing to condemn, but we can try to understand.

And we hope that the Sinai War is not merely limited by those who have the power to do so and thus must assume responsibility, but also contained and settled. It would be madness to allow the Israeli tank columns to do their job just enough to bring about Nasser's desired downfall.

The great powers must spring into action now. It is they who bear the heaviest burden of responsibility at this critical juncture. They will only live up to their duties if each individual state is determined to set aside their special interests, for example in the Suez Canal, without reservations or ulterior motives in favor of the universal interest of preserving peace. For the governments of the great powers overlook how easily the centers of conflict in the Orient and Eastern Europe can develop into one great conflagration if they do not take decisive measures. The governments of the great powers will debate the war situation before the United Nations Security Council. What we can expect immediately from the Security Council may only be a moral appeal, perhaps a declaration under international law, and also the dispatch of General Secretary Hammarskjöld to the scene of events. The world expects this to have some effect.

But the governments of the great powers cannot leave it at that. They must seek to influence Tel Aviv and Cairo. Sadly, the preconditions are admittedly not ideal. All of the great powers have suffered some loss of credit in the Middle East, and this is at least in part their own fault. The situation is not made any easier by fact that the American government feels itself bound by the Tripartite Declaration of 1950, according to which it must come to the aid of any partner of the Israeli-Arab armistice if it is attacked, while the French government has already warned its allies that if hostilities break out, it will side with Israel. The British government for its part is tied by a complicated network of treaties to Jordan and Iraq, which in turn feel duty-bound to assist Egypt. The Russians, finally, could be tempted to seek escape from the crisis in Eastern Europe in the Orient. If peace in the Sinai and the Suez Canal cannot be preserved despite all these special interests, we could soon be facing dark times.

Israel, as it exists as a state today, is largely the life's work of David Ben-Gurion, a modern prophet figure who has attained unusual moral authority over his people. The policy of asserting the country's existence by force of arms is his policy. Longtime Foreign Minister Sharett, a man more strongly dedicated to accommodation with the Arabs, had to yield to this policy some time ago. But the head of government will, as is widely hoped, also muster the intellectual and moral strength to resist endangering his life's work with adventurism.

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