

# The 1956 Suez Crisis, Nasser and the high tide of Arab nationalism

Tuesday 27 December 2016, by [ALEXANDER Anne](#) (Date first published: 11 October 2006).

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July 26, 1956. A crowd, tens of thousands strong, gathered in Manshiyya Square in Alexandria, to hear a speech by Egypt's president, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. The atmosphere was tense—only days before Nasser had received a humiliating rebuff from the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, to his request for a loan to build the High Dam on the Nile. Egypt had received arms from the Czech Republic in 1955, and Dulles hoped to achieve two aims: to humble Nasser, whose anti-colonial rhetoric was winning support across the Middle East, and to remind other aspiring Third World leaders that there was no neutral ground in the Cold War.

Nasser joked with the crowd, describing Eugene Black, president of the World Bank, as a peddler of 'mortgage colonialism'. Black reminded him, he said, of Ferdinand de Lesseps, whose company constructed the Suez Canal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> As the crowd laughed and cheered, Egyptian commandos were taking control of the Suez Canal Company's headquarters in Port Said. The hissing syllables, 'de Lesseps', were the code word to set the secret operation in motion.<sup>2</sup> Nasser finished his speech with a simple statement:

Everything which was stolen from us by that imperialist company, that state within a state, when we were dying of hunger, we are going to take back... The government has decided on the following law: a presidential decree nationalising the International Suez Canal Company. In the name of the nation, the president of the republic declares the International Suez Canal Company an Egyptian limited company.<sup>3</sup>

The crowd in Alexandria erupted with delight. Here at last was proof that the era of colonial domination was over: the greatest powers on earth would no longer determine Egypt's fate. In Washington, Nasser's reply to Dulles was received with consternation. The US Secretary of State told Anthony Eden, British Tory prime minister that Nasser must 'disgorge' the canal.<sup>4</sup> Dulles's reaction pales compared to the blind rage which descended on the leaders of the old imperialist powers, Britain and France. In London and Paris politicians competed in insulting Nasser. Hugh Gaitskill, leader of the Labour Party, then in opposition, likened Nasser to Hitler. Anthony Eden made the same analogy, warning that 'we all know this is how fascist governments behave, and we all remember only too well what the cost can be of giving in to fascism'.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, the British and French governments were waiting for an excuse to humble Nasser. French forces were fighting a brutal war to retain control of Algeria in the face of a nationalist uprising

which had united thousands of Algerians in the struggle for liberation. Leaders of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) found sanctuary in Cairo, and Nasser provided arms and financial assistance for their struggle. Eden, meanwhile, had developed an intense personal hatred of the Egyptian leader. In March 1956 he told Anthony Nutting, Minister of State at the Foreign Office:

*"But what's all this nonsense about isolating Nasser, or 'neutralising' him as you call it? I want him destroyed, can't you understand? I want him removed, and if you and the Foreign Office don't agree, then you'd better come to the cabinet and explain why."*<sup>6</sup>

Eden's rage reflected his sense that the Middle East was slipping away from British control. At the end of the Second World War Egypt, Iraq and Jordan were ruled by pro-British monarchs. Hundreds of thousands of British troops were stationed across the region. The Suez Canal, route to the empire in India and beyond, was firmly in British hands. Just over ten years later the Egyptian monarchy had been overthrown by nationalist army officers, led by Nasser, British troops forced to leave the Suez Canal after a long-running campaign of guerrilla attacks and mass demonstrations, while popular pressure had forced King Hussein of Jordan to sack the British commander of the Arab Legion, John Bagot Glubb.<sup>7</sup> Only the Iraqi government remained as subservient to British interests as ever. It was in Iraq that British officials hoped to find a counterweight to the rising tide of nationalism across the Middle East. Nuri al-Said, the Iraqi prime minister, was the architect of the Baghdad Pact, a military alliance signed in 1955 which linked Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Britain with the aim of checking Arab nationalism and undermining Soviet influence in the Middle East. A swift blow at Nasser, Eden believed, would tip the balance back in Britain's favour.

The outcome of the Suez Crisis<sup>8</sup> confounded Eden's hopes. A three-sided plot to seize the Canal and topple Nasser cooked up by the British, French and Israeli governments ended in humiliating failure. In the space of a week in November 1956 the British government faced public panic as petrol rationing was introduced, saw the pound plummet in value, the 'special relationship' with the US crack and the cabinet split while protests spread across the country and around the Middle East. Eden was packed off on sick leave and resigned, defeated and broken, in January 1957.

Meanwhile Nasser emerged from the crisis stronger than ever. His picture was everywhere—carried aloft in the streets from Cairo to Baghdad, on the front cover of Time magazine. The events of November 1956 seemed to validate the idea that national liberation was possible and that the state could be a weapon in the hands of anti-imperialists. Beneath the surface, however, Nasser's moment of triumph also demonstrated the limits of his strategy. The crisis exposed the weakness of key areas of the Egyptian state, such as the army and state party. The strength to resist the invasion came rather from below, through a popular mobilisation led by Communist activists who had played a central role in the mass movement against the British occupation during the 1940s. They organised civil defence, smuggled arms to keep guerrilla resistance going in occupied Port Said and mobilised thousands of volunteers for military training. Meanwhile, across the region, the massive protests which shook the governments allied to Britain were not brought to life by Nasser's agents, but had a life of their own as the latest episodes in the same long struggle for liberation.

## **Egypt in movement**

After the Second World War Egypt experienced a period of mass protests against British imperialism and the local pro-British ruling class. The national movements at this stage were broad-based coalitions of different opposition groups, including trade unions, left wing nationalist groups, Communist parties, student organisations and peasant groups. Their challenge to imperialism was also a challenge to the existing political order.

By 1952 the protest movement had sapped the strength of the state, with discontent growing in the army, a guerrilla campaign against British forces in the Canal Zone running out of the government's control. The burning of Cairo on 26 January 1952 was the most obvious outward sign of the old order's malaise.<sup>9</sup> The army officers who overthrew the monarchy took advantage of the crisis, but they were not central to the movement which helped to create it. Nasser, for example, had worked with activists from many different political backgrounds including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists in the Democratic Movement for National Liberation. Yet he argued that the officers' group needed to keep its independence.<sup>10</sup> Thus when the Free Officers took power in July 1952, they quickly asserted their autonomy, moving first against the independent trade unions and the left, and then against the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup>

Nasser's pamphlet *The Philosophy of the Revolution* justifies the officers' actions by painting a picture of a movement in crisis, bereft of leadership:

*"I imagined that our role was to act as the vanguard, that this role would not last more than a few hours before the masses appeared behind us, marching in serried ranks to the great goal...the vanguard performed its task, it stormed the ramparts of tyranny, ousted the tyrant and stood by...it waited and waited. Endless crowds appeared, but how different reality is to the imagination: these multitudes were the scattered stragglers from a defeated army."*<sup>12</sup>

In the absence of the movement, Nasser believed, the state itself could serve as a tool to change society.<sup>13</sup> And from using the state in the name of the movement it was only a short distance to seeing the state as the movement. The Liberation Rally, the single legal party created in January 1953, was designed to replace the old political parties during the three-year 'transitional period' of military rule.

In parallel with the creation of the Liberation Rally, the Free Officers also systematically undermined the organisations which had formed the core of the mass movement. A strike by textile workers in Kafr-al-Dawwar near Alexandria just weeks after the coup was met with fierce repression—two strikers were hanged. Left wing trade union leaders were arrested and supporters of the government elected to head the unions in their place.<sup>14</sup> In October 1952 student unions were dissolved, followed by all political parties in January 1953. The Muslim Brotherhood was initially spared, but Nasser moved against it after an attempt to assassinate him in October 1954.

Using the state to achieve some of the more long term goals of the national movement proved to be a slower process than demobilising the movement organisations. With the exception of land redistribution, enacted in September 1952, the balance sheet of the Free Officers' early years was weighted more towards repression than reform, although the events of 1956 pushed Nasser in the direction of greater state intervention in the economy following the sequestration of assets belonging to British and French nationals. Yet even before 1956 Nasser had begun to articulate a kind of 'anti-imperialism from above'. At the Bandung Conference of 1955 he argued that Arab countries should not align themselves with either the US or the Soviet Union, but preserve their hard-won independence. In September of the same year he also announced the purchase of Soviet arms from the Czech Republic. These policies were all bound together: Nasser was driven to greater radicalism in foreign policy both by the need for economic and social development and by the actions of the Great Powers. He had already approached the US for arms and been rebuffed before the Czech arms deal was agreed.

## **Conspiracy foiled**

Over the summer of 1956, while diplomatic wrangling over the future of the Canal preoccupied the world's media, British and French officials were searching feverishly for a pretext to launch military action against Nasser.<sup>15</sup> By October the detailed outlines of the plan were beginning to take shape. In a secret meeting at a villa in Sèvres, near Paris, British, French and Israeli officials hatched a plot whereby an Israeli attack on the Sinai Peninsula would trigger a British and French ultimatum calling on both the Israeli and the Egyptian armies to withdraw from the Suez Canal Zone. Confident that Nasser could not accept such terms—which meant abandoning Sinai and the Canal—British and French commanders planned to bomb Egyptian cities and land troops at Port Said to control the entrance to the Canal. The Israelis were to be well rewarded for their role: the French government was already supplying them with arms and fighter planes and it was at the Sèvres meeting that an agreement was reached to provide Israel with French nuclear technology and uranium fuel for a reactor to be built at Dimona.<sup>16</sup> On 29 October Israeli forces crossed into Sinai. As Egyptian troops rushed to engage the invaders, Britain and France made their demands for a ceasefire. The first British bombs were falling on Cairo by nightfall on 31 October. Six days later British and French troops landed at Port Said at the mouth of the Canal.

As the plot against Egypt unfolded, the problems with a conventional military response became clear. The Israeli assault caught the Egyptian command off guard. Nasser believed that the main thrust of any invasion would hit Alexandria first. The garrison in Sinai had been reduced to 30,000 men, including only 10,000 frontline combat troops. Egyptian commanders faced another problem: although well supplied with Russian arms, much of the new weaponry was not yet operational.<sup>17</sup> Despite these difficulties the Israeli assault was not unstoppable. Egyptian units in Sinai fought tenaciously and Israeli paratroops landing at the Mitla Pass suffered heavy casualties. Once British and French forces joined the attack, however, the dice were loaded against them. Nasser quickly realised that his troops would be trapped in Sinai by the British and French invasion and ordered a full scale retreat. According to the journalist Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, one of Nasser's closest advisers, it was at this moment of crisis that cracks began to appear in the Egyptian army command. Abd-al-Hakim Amer, Commander-in-Chief and one of Nasser's oldest friends, lost his nerve and refused to give the order to withdraw, until overruled by Nasser.<sup>18</sup>

The damage caused by confusion in the military command was reduced by the adoption of a new strategy—arming the people in preparation for a guerrilla campaign to resist the invasion. Once again the official mechanisms for mobilisation, in particular the only legal political organisation, the state-run Liberation Rally, showed their weakness. The Liberation Rally was, as John Waterbury comments, 'an unabashed improvisation on the part of the regime to replace the political parties it had outlawed'.<sup>19</sup> It had succeeded in partially co-opting sections of the trade unions—thus weakening the Communist movement—but its main role had been stage-managing rallies and demonstrations in support of government initiatives.

## **Popular resistance**

Nasser now turned to the Communist movement to give life to the inert bureaucracy of the Liberation Rally. Communist activists played a central role in the Popular Resistance Committees, set up by the government in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. They were also involved with organising military training for workers and university students. In the week after the invasion a million small arms were distributed.<sup>20</sup> The trade union lawyer Yusuf Darwish was a leading member of the underground Communist group, Workers' Vanguard:

*"I remember a general meeting in the Lawyers' Union against the aggression in 1956, I was in the back row and someone clapped me on the shoulder and said, 'We want you'. I thought he was a detective so I said, 'What do you want me for?' He said, 'We want you in the Liberation Rally'... So I worked with them and wrote propaganda leaflets."*<sup>21</sup>

Layla al-Shal recalls helping to set up the Women's Popular Resistance Committee in Cairo. A second year political science student at Cairo University, she was also an activist in the Democratic Movement for National Liberation, one of the largest Egyptian Communist groups:

A lot of women intellectuals and students and housewives joined us. We set up women's resistance committees across the capital. We had military-style training; how to defuse a bomb, how to shoot a rifle and so on. At that time the government was working in alliance with the Communists. There was a camp in an area near the Canal, where Communist volunteers went for training.<sup>22</sup>

Fathallah Mahrus, a young factory worker and trade unionist in the Workers' Vanguard, remembers how he and his comrades organised military training for workers in the Ramla industrial area of Alexandria, which included huge textile mills such as Sibahy & Co with its 20,000 workers:

*"In cooperation with the leadership of the armed forces in Alexandria, we set up a weapons training camp on a piece of waste ground next to the area where the factories were. The workers went out with their shift from work and were trained to use weapons. When they finished, the next shift came in."*<sup>23</sup>

Communist activists did not only bring their individual talents as organisers and agitators. They delivered their social and political networks: Communist teachers created resistance committees from their pupils, trade unionists recruited their workmates and students brought their friends from university.

On 5 November British paratroops landed at Port Said at the entrance to the Canal, while French forces seized Port Fuad on the opposite bank. With the regular army in disarray as it retreated before the Israeli advance, the city was poorly defended. Here the strategy of popular resistance would be put to the test. According to Fathallah Mahrus:

*"There was no army to fight in Port Said, just some individuals and a few soldiers and small units. So the popular resistance against the invasion was led by the people of Port Said—women and children as well—armed with cooking pans, kitchen knives, walking sticks and anything they could find."*<sup>24</sup>

Amina Shafiq, a young journalist from Cairo, was smuggled into Port Said to join the resistance. She found a town devastated by bombing, but dogged resistance continuing nonetheless. Her role was to turn reports from foreign news broadcasts of demonstrations against the invasion into leaflets:

*"I used to write about who was supporting us abroad, who had heard of us abroad, about the demonstrations outside Egypt. We were trying to encourage people, to tell them to be steadfast. People were exhausted and supplies were running out, so we were trying to keep their spirits up."*<sup>25</sup>

The ferocity of the resistance in Port Said was a grave setback for British and French plans. British officials had convinced themselves that Nasser was a hated dictator, and that the Egyptian people would welcome his defeat and overthrow. But as Fathallah Mahrus explains:

*"It wasn't about Nasser, it was about our homeland. The imperialists wanted to reoccupy our country, and the invasion was over the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company which was an imperialist company. And we forgot about what Nasser did to us, and we forgot our differences with him and the prisons and the camps and the torture because there was a common danger and a single*

*enemy: imperialism which wanted to occupy Egypt. All the Communists said the same.”<sup>26</sup>*

Despite this, there were tensions within the Popular Resistance Committees, as the authorities attempted to prevent Communist activists from gaining too much independence. Workers who took part in weapons training had to return their arms each night, and some government officials tried to exclude Communists from the resistance committees.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile events were moving quickly on the world stage. US President Eisenhower was enraged that Britain and France had acted without consulting the US government. In the UN Security Council a motion calling for an immediate ceasefire won the support of both the US and the Soviet Union, only to be vetoed by Britain and France. Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin made a statement reserving the right to use force to end the conflict in the Middle East, which was widely interpreted as a threat to use nuclear weapons against Britain and France. With sterling in free-fall, and anti-war demonstrations gathering strength, Eden's cabinet began to crack: Minister of State Anthony Nutting resigned. In order to secure US financial support to prop up the value of the pound, Eden announced a ceasefire on 6 November.

## Iraq

The attack against Egypt ignited protests across the Arab world. In Iraq the movement in solidarity with Egypt shook the government to the core, demonstrating the weakness and isolation of the pro-British ruling class. Despatches from the British Embassy in Baghdad betray a rising sense of panic throughout November and December. As the protest movement grew in strength, Nuri al-Said feared he might be dismissed by the regent.<sup>28</sup> Embassy officials worked frantically behind the scenes, trying to persuade 'the people at the top' that there was no collusion between Britain and Israel.<sup>29</sup> A despatch from the ambassador at the end of December 1956 spelt out what was at stake:

*“In the last seven weeks, we have had to struggle with little help from events to prevent a break of diplomatic relations with Iraq. To avert an abrupt dissolution of the Baghdad Pact, to ward off nationalisation or fatal interference with the Iraq Petroleum Company, to keep Nuri in power, and to try and maintain the confidence and support of those in authority here. We have not yet failed (though we may still do so).”<sup>30</sup>*

The protests in Iraq were not simply the result of Egyptian propaganda. Nasser seems to have played an important symbolic role: his name appears constantly in slogans; his speeches found a huge audience in homes and street cafes across the country. Yet there is little evidence of direct Egyptian intervention in the movement. This is underlined by the dynamic of the demonstrations, which began in response to the Anglo-French-Israeli attack, but quickly became generalised protests against the Iraqi government as a result of police repression.

Instead the demonstrations reflected the growing strength of a mass movement for national liberation. By 1956 the movement had already experienced two major peaks, in 1948 with the revolt against the Treaty of Portsmouth, known as Al-Wathbah (the Leap) in Arabic, and in 1952 another uprising (the Intifada).<sup>31</sup> Nuri al-Said was one of the movement's chief targets. He oversaw repression at home, while working tirelessly for British interests across the Middle East, notably through the creation of the Baghdad Pact.

Hanna Batatu gives a detailed account of the protests in Najaf in early November 1956.<sup>32</sup> Many demonstrations began in the Huwaish quarter. Alongside the Communists, nationalists were also active. Slogans on the protests included 'Down with the Martial Courts', 'Down with the criminal Nuri al-Said', 'Long live Gamal Abd-al-Nasser', 'For a people's government that would live in



harmony with the liberated Arab countries'. The protests peaked on 24 November when 'members of the police [were] beset on every side by angry crowds armed with daggers, pistols, stones and huge canes'. According to the official tally, the casualties were two dead, 27 demonstrators and nine police injured. The following day the ulama, or Muslim scholars refused to perform their religious duties, the police disappeared from the streets and troops called out to suppress the protests fraternised with the crowds.

Events in Basra were recorded in regular despatches from Noel Jackson, the British consul-general in the city, to his superiors in Baghdad. The biggest demonstrations in the city took place on 2 December, in response to events in Najaf. The centre of protests was the Girls' Secondary School in Basra City:

*"Crowds of students from other schools gathered outside, amongst whom were alleged Communists, who seem to have lead [sic] the demonstration. The usual anti-government and pro-Egyptian and Syrian slogans were used.... I understand that the Acting Director of Education accompanied by a police officer warned the members of the Girls' School, assembled for the purpose, against further activities of that nature."*<sup>33</sup>

The northern city of Mosul was the scene of a far more serious confrontation between protesters and the authorities in early December, ending with an armed siege of the city's police headquarters which was broken by the deployment of troops onto the streets. C J Burgess, British vice-consul in Mosul, sent a detailed description of the protests to Baghdad based on an interview with the city governor and the Mosul garrison commander. His report on 5 December 1956<sup>34</sup> gives details of large demonstrations in the city between 30 November and 3 December. On Friday 30 November, students from Adadia Secondary School attempted to join up with students from Gharbia Intermediate School for a demonstration, but were dispersed by police before meeting up. The following morning, Saturday 1 December:

*"Students from these two schools and four others, Sharqia Secondary School, near the Mutasarrifia [governor's residence], and three intermediate schools, Muthanna, Hadba and Umm al-Rabi'ain, commenced disorderly behaviour within the schools. Students harangued passers-by from the roofs with the expected anti-Nuri, anti-Western and pro Nasser slogans."*

The schools were surrounded by police 'to prevent them from organising demonstrations in the streets'. Around 3pm crowds gathered at the Bab al-Sinjar: 'The mob was led by nondescript adults waving large sticks and shouting for the most part "Down with Nuri", "down with Britain".' The armed protesters attempted to storm the police station. By about 4pm the police headquarters were surrounded by a crowd of up to 3,000 extending up to 400 yards behind the building. At this point the governor called in the army and the protestors dispersed. An attempt at another demonstration following day was dispersed by the army.

## **The end of empire?**

British power in Iraq lasted only another 18 months: in July 1958 revolution swept away the monarchy, Nuri al-Said and the Baghdad Pact. A few months earlier Egypt and Syria had merged to become the United Arab Republic (UAR) under Nasser's leadership and hopes were high that Iraq would soon join a new Arab super-state. The era when Britain's client kings dominated the Middle East had gone forever. Inside Egypt work was soon to begin on the construction of the High Dam on the Nile at Aswan, which Nasser hoped would power a new era of rapid economic growth. Increasing state intervention in the Egyptian economy was followed by an ambitious programme of social reform. By the early 1960s it seemed that poverty, like imperialism, could also be defeated as

Nasser pushed forward policies for the redistribution of wealth through land reform, subsidies on basic commodities, free education and a state-led employment drive.<sup>35</sup>

Yet Nasser's moment of triumph was brief. His strategy of using the state to achieve national liberation and economic development reached the limits of its potential within a few years of 1956. The collapse of the United Arab Republic demonstrated the difficulty of carrying out a 'revolution from above' without the support of the mass movement. In early 1958 leaders of the Baath Party in Syria appealed to Nasser to unite Egypt and Syria in a single state, the United Arab Republic. They hoped that the Egyptian leader would be a figurehead, and that his prestige would allow them to dominate Syria and overcome their rivals in the Communist Party. Nasser, however, marginalised the Baathists, appointing them to positions in Cairo while his closest colleagues were sent to rule in Damascus. He also brought the Syrian trade union movement under state control and banned political parties.<sup>36</sup>

However, it was the attempt to extend Nasser's economic reforms, in particular land reform and the 'Socialist Decrees' nationalising major industries and the banks which triggered the collapse of the United Arab Republic. The Syrian landlords and bourgeoisie were in a better position than their counterparts in Egypt to resist Nasser's attempt to expropriate them. In 1961 an army coup overthrew the UAR government in Damascus and handed power to a coalition of liberal politicians who promptly rescinded Nasser's reforms. The UAR's collapse provoked little protest, however. Repression of the left, demobilisation of the independent trade unions and the marginalisation of the Baath Party left Nasser with few allies in his struggle against Syria's old ruling class.

### **National liberation versus socialist revolution?**

There are many reasons why Nasser's route to national liberation turned out to be a dead end. The resources of a single state, particularly an oil-poor country like Egypt, were never going to be enough to challenge either the old or the new imperialist powers. The strength to resist imperialism lay in the fact that the mass movement in Egypt was part of a region-wide anti-colonial struggle. This was British imperialism's real weakness, as events in 1956 showed: invading Egypt meant risking the loss of Iraq.

Nasser's attempt to break out of the nation-state ended in failure, largely because the United Arab Republic simply replicated the problems of Egypt's 'revolution from above' on a larger scale. By undermining the anti-colonial movement's capacity to act independently of the state, Nasser also weakened the state's capacity to realise the goals of the movement. So the UAR fell apart, and even Egypt's state capitalist transformation was short-lived. Only a decade and a half after the 'Socialist Decrees', Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, would embark on a programme of neo-liberal reforms. Even before then the hollowness of the Egyptian army's claim to be the Arab world's vanguard against imperialism had been cruelly exposed in June 1967, with Israeli victory in the Six Day War.

Yet the Communists in Egypt, Iraq and Syria were unable to create an alternative to Nasserism which could build on the mass movements of the 1940s and 1950s. As Yusuf Darwish explained many years later:

Nasser used the Communists as guard-dogs: one day he'd want them out of prison, the next he'd throw them back inside. At that period he wanted us because we were clever: we could write pamphlets, and stir people up, and bear arms and so on... After the war ended and the invasion came to an end and things quietened down...they began to arrest the Communists.<sup>37</sup>

It is true that they faced tremendous objective difficulties. Under the monarchies in Egypt and Iraq



Communist organisations were banned, party activists frequently arrested and tortured. In Iraq the general secretary of the CP and other leading figures were hanged. The Egyptian Communist movement was fragmented and small: at its peak, the largest Communist organisation, the Democratic Movement for National Liberation, only counted around 2,000 members.<sup>38</sup> Even in Iraq the CP's explosive membership growth came after the revolution of 1958, and followed a period when severe repression had depleted the party's strength.<sup>39</sup>

Yet repression alone does not explain why the Communists were unable to rebuild and take advantage of the crisis of the nationalist regimes in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, at the very point when the limits of 'national' revolution in Egypt, Iraq and Syria were becoming clear, the majority of the Communist movement in these three countries dissolved itself into an alliance with the party of the state.<sup>40</sup> Here the problem lay in understanding the relationship between national liberation and socialist revolution. Leon Trotsky's analysis of the link between the democratic revolution and socialist revolution in Russia could have provided a guide for action, but the majority of Communist organisations in the Middle East followed the Stalinist leadership of the Soviet Union and rejected Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.<sup>41</sup>

Instead Communists in the Middle East looked to an older concept of Lenin's, in which he argued that Russian socialists could not push the democratic revolution 'beyond the scope of bourgeois social-economic relationships'.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, although Lenin argued that the working class, in alliance with the peasantry, would carry out the tasks of the democratic revolution, this 'democratic dictatorship' would be short-lived, soon to be replaced by a conservative bourgeois state.<sup>43</sup> This formula, or a version of it, was accepted by Communist organisations in Egypt and Iraq.<sup>44</sup> In practice its influence can be seen in attempts by the Communists to prevent the army-led revolutions of 1952 and 1958 breaching their 'bourgeois limits'. So the major Communist organisation in Egypt in 1952 refused to organise solidarity for striking textile workers in Kafr al-Dawwar when two activists were hanged by the Free Officers.<sup>45</sup> In Iraq the Communists bolstered the personal rule of Abd-al-Karim Qassim as the means to strengthen a cross-class alliance in support of the revolution, and attacked Qassim's rival, Abd-al-Salam Arif, for raising the slogan of a 'socialist republic' because he risked 'throwing patriotic social strata into the lap of imperialism'.<sup>46</sup>

Trotsky by contrast, agreed with Lenin that the working class was the only class capable of leading the democratic revolution to success, but argued that once in power, the working class could not simply limit itself to constructing a bourgeois democratic state. Instead he said, 'the democratic revolution grows over immediately into the socialist, and thereby becomes a permanent revolution'.<sup>47</sup> As Tony Cliff demonstrated in *Deflected Permanent Revolution*, however, Trotsky's predictions were not borne out in the wave of national revolutions after the Second World War. In country after country the old pro-colonial regimes were overthrown, but not by the working class or the peasantry. Instead sections of the intelligentsia or factions in the army seized control of the state.<sup>48</sup>

The consequences for the Communist movement were profound. The same forces which the Communists saw as leading the struggle for national liberation now turned against them. In Iraq, for example, Qassim feared the Communists' growing power—by 1959 they were capable of mobilising something like a million people for the May Day demonstration in Baghdad.<sup>49</sup> He arrested hundreds of Communist activists, dissolved organisations close to the party and shut the offices of the General Federation of Trade Unions. Although the repression was not as serious as in Egypt, the damage inflicted by Qassim weakened the party, and it was unable to resist the Baathist seizure of power in 1963. In the bloodbath which followed Qassim was killed, and thousands of Communists were also murdered.

Despite the tragic fate of the Iraqi and Egyptian revolutions of the 1950s, the struggle for national

liberation in the Middle East still inspires millions of people who want to see a world free of imperialism, poverty and war. The real heroes of the Suez Crisis were the tens of thousands of ordinary people who took to the streets in Egypt, Iraq and around the Middle East to defy the imperialist powers. The same courage and hope can be seen today in the protests against the US occupation of Iraq and the Israeli attack on Lebanon. It will fall to the new generation of socialists in the Middle East to ensure that this time we break imperialism's hold on the region for good.

**Anne Alexander**

## NOTES

1: He did not, of course, build the canal, whatever it might say in English and French history books. Tens of thousands of press-ganged Egyptian workers built the canal and paid a high price for it in lives lost.

2: In order to make sure that the code word was not missed by the waiting commandos, Nasser repeated de Lesseps' name 14 times in the space of ten minutes. See Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, Nationalisation Speech, 26 July 1956, translated from audio recording in Arabic on the Nasser Foundation web site:

<http://nasser.bibalex.org>

3: Quotes from Nasser's speech retranslated from Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, Nationalisation Speech, 26 July 1956, as above.

4: FRUS (C), 1988, memorandum of a conversation between prime minister Anthony Eden and secretary of state Dulles, 10 Downing Street, London, 1 August 1956, 12.45 pm, document 42, pp 98-99, quoted in A Gorst and L Johnman, *The Suez Crisis* (Routledge, 1997), pp66-67. Dulles also warned Eden at this meeting against the unilateral use of force against Nasser.

5: Quoted in A Gorst and L Johnman, as above, p69.

6: A Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez* (Constable, 1967), pp34-35.

7: Demonstrations in December 1955 also led to a cabinet revolt which prevented Jordan's accession to the Baghdad Pact. See M Oren, 'A Winter of Discontent: Britain's Crisis in Jordan, December 1955-March 1956', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol 22, no 2 (May 1990), pp171-184.

8: In Arabic the Suez Crisis is known—rather more accurately—as the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt.

9: Jean and Simonne Lacouture give a vivid description of the events of 'Black Saturday'—Egypt in Transition (Methuen, 1958), pp108-109.

10: Khaled Mohi El Din, *Memories of a Revolution: Egypt 1952* (American University in Cairo Press, 1995), p25.

11: See R P Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford University Press, 1969), pp105-106, for a discussion of relations between Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohi El Din, as above, for details of his relationship with the communists.

12: Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, *Falsafat al-thawrah* (Dar al-Sha'ab, no date, 9<sup>th</sup> edition), p22.

13: This picture of defeat provided a convenient justification for the Free Officers' continued hold on

power, but the long hard struggle by Nasser to bring the trade unions, political parties and student unions under state control suggests that the movement was far from dead in July 1952.

14: M Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions and Economic Restructuring* (Columbia University Press, 1997), p45.

15: For decades after 1956, the exact details of the agreement remained secret. At the time British officials denied that there had been any collusion at all. John Selwyn-Lloyd, British foreign secretary, told the House of Commons that there was 'no prior agreement' between the British and Israeli governments over the invasion of Egypt. It was not until 1996 that historian Avi Shlaim published the Israeli government's copy of the secret memorandum signed at Sèvres 40 years previously. See A Shlaim, 'The Protocol of Sèvres: Anatomy of a War Plot', *International Affairs* 73, 3 (1997), pp509-530.

16: A Shlaim, as above, p523.

17: K Love, *Suez, the Twice-fought War* (McGraw-Hill, 1969), p493.

18: M H Heikal, *Cutting the Lion's Tail: Suez through Egyptian Eyes* (Corgi, 1988), p197.

19: J Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat* (Princeton University Press, 1983), p312.

20: Heikal, as above, p194.

21: D Hashmat, 'Yusuf Darwish, muhami ummal', *Awraq Ishtirakiyya* (July/August 2004), pp24-25.

22: Layla al-Shal, telephone interview, Cairo/London, 31 March 2006.

23: Fathallah Mahrus, interview, Cairo, 25 March 2006.

24: As above.

25: A Shafiq, telephone interview, Cairo/London, 31 March 2006.

26: Fathallah Mahrus, interview, as above.

27: Abu-Sayf Yusuf, *Wath'iq wa-mawaqif min tarikh al-yasar al-misri 1941-1957* (Sharikat al-Amal, 2000), p357.

28: Telegram, British Embassy, Baghdad to Foreign Office, 1725 23 Dec 1956 FO371/121647.

29: As above.

30: As above.

31: As in Egypt, the movement in Iraq included a number of different political trends, from the communists to Arab nationalists to liberal democrats. Major organisations included the various clandestine communist factions, principally the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), Arab nationalists organised in the Independence Party, the National Democratic Party led by Kamil al-Chadirchi who identified with the social democracy of the British Labour Party. In addition to the political parties, trade unions and student unions played an important role in mobilising the movement. See H Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 1978); K Chadirchi, *Muthakirrat Kamil al-Chadirchi wa tarikh al-hizb al-watani al-dimuqrati* (Cologne, 2002); M Mahdi Kubba, *Mudhakirati fi samim al-ahdath 1918-1958* (Beirut, 1965).

- 32: H Batatu, as above, pp749-757. Events in Najaf barely register in Foreign Office correspondence, probably because there was no British presence in the city.
- 33: FO 371 / 121647 British Consul-General, Basra to Embassy, Baghdad, 14 December 1956.
- 34: As above.
- 35 See J Waterbury, as above, pp61-82 and p209.
- 36: See S Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict 1946-1970* (Cornell University Press, 1999).
- 37: D Hashmat, as above.
- 38: J Beinin and Z Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882—1954* (IB Tauris, 1988), p405.
- 39: See H Batatu, as above, p897.
- 40: The majority of the Egyptian Communist movement agreed to dissolve into the state-run Arab Socialist Union in 1965. In Iraq, the Communist Party joined the Ba'athist government in 1972, only to face a ferocious campaign of repression led by Saddam Hussein six years later. In 1972 the Syrian Communist Party also joined forces with the Ba'athists in the National Progressive Front.
- 41: The full text of Trotsky's work is available online at:  
[www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1931-tpv/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1931-tpv/index.htm)
- 42: Quoted in T Cliff, *Deflected Permanent Revolution* (1963),  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1963/xx/permrev.htm>
- 43: As Tony Cliff notes, Lenin changed his views after the revolution of February 1917. One crucial reason why the working class would be forced to push the revolution beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy, was (as Lenin realised in 1917) that in countries where the bourgeoisie was weak and cowardly, other, more reactionary forces were waiting in the wings to take power, as Kornilov's attempted seizure of power in September 1917 demonstrated. T Cliff, as above.
- 44: As an internal document of the Egyptian communist movement put it: 'The people's democracy we want to establish in Egypt is not a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. We aim to establish a democratic dictatorship of all the classes struggling against imperialism and feudalism'—Archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, CP/CENT/INT/56/03—Note on Communist Policy for Egypt, nd.
- 45: The DMNL's paper *Al-Malayin* for 10 September 1952, days after the hangings, ran a lead article entitled 'The Road of the People and the Army—a National Front Against Imperialism and Traitors'—Communist Party Archives, CP/CENT/INT/56/04—Summary of Articles from *Al-Malayin*, 10 September 1952. Other Egyptian communist organisations did not follow this position, but as the largest group by far, the DMNL's influence played an important role in disorientating the whole movement.
- 46: Aziz al-Haj in *Sawt-al-Ahrar*, 23 November 1958, quoted in H Batatu, as above, p834.
- 47: L Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution*,  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1931-tpv/pr10.htm>

48: T Cliff, as above

49: For a longer discussion of the role of the Iraqi Communist Party in the revolution of 1958 see A Alexander, 'Daring for Victory: Iraq in Revolution 1946-1959', International Socialism 99 (Summer 2003).

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**P.S.**

\* "Suez and the high tide of Arab nationalism". International Socialist Review. Issue: 112. Posted on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006:

<http://isj.org.uk/suez-and-the-high-tide-of-arab-nationalism/>