

From Suez... to Baghdad

50 years since the Suez War

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Galal Amin* charts the course of history from the Canal nationalisation of 1956 to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and reveals some startling similarities

I was 21 when Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company and I still remember, as if it were yesterday, the great joy and enthusiasm with which we received the news. The whole affair did not last more than six months, from the sudden and unexpected act of nationalisation in July 1956, to the withdrawal in December 1956 of the last British soldiers taking part in the military invasion. But neither Egypt nor indeed the world at large was to be the same again. The more one thinks about it, the more surprised one is to discover the magnitude of its impact. Looking back at the whole period of the 50 years that passed since then, one is also surprised to find out how innocent it was to build so much hope in that single event. So many good things did indeed happen in the aftermath of nationalisation, and to a large extent as a result of it. But everything seems to have turned sour some 10 years later, and the final result was ultimately a great disappointment.

To Egyptians, the act of nationalising the Canal was essentially an act of defiance against the colonial powers, the first such act taken by the new regime of 1952. Overnight, Nasser became a hero for the Egyptians, the rest of the Arabs and the Third World. The very concept of the Third World was hardly born in 1956, but the nationalisation gave the notion an added significance and new respectability. For if the Third World is really to stand up against both West and East and to find an independent way of doing things apart from Western capitalism and Soviet socialism, what better start was there than to nationalise an important western asset that promises to bring an income big enough to finance a huge national development project like the High Dam?

Nasser had just been to Bandung the year before, joining the group of non-aligned nations led by India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia. But the nationalisation of the canal quickly gave Nasser greater prominence in the eyes of the people of the Third World than Nehru, Sukarno or Tito. Certainly none of the other leaders defied the West in such a dramatic fashion, and in the next 10 years the Arab world, led by Nasser, was to occupy centre stage in world affairs.

In Egypt, the canal nationalisation was soon followed by other acts of nationalisation and Egyptianisation. Much of what happened in the Arab world outside Egypt during the period (1956-65) is difficult to imagine had not Nasser's influence reached its peak. Events such as the unification of Syria and Egypt forming what was called the United Arab Republic, the successful revolution in Iraq, important political changes in Lebanon and Jordan, the greater political liberalisation in Saudi Arabia (all in the same year, 1958) and the revolution in Yemen (1962) owe much to Nasser's nationalising and reforming zeal. Important things were also happening elsewhere in the Arab world which were not so closely connected to previous changes in Egypt, such as Algeria's gaining of independence, the revolution in southern Arabia, and the military coup in Sudan to name but a few. But those 10 years have also witnessed important changes all over the world

which could have very easily be attributed to the same factors that helped Nasser to nationalise the Suez Canal and to get away with it.

In Russia, those 10 years coincided with Khrushchev's rule which started by his famous revelations in 1956 of the atrocities of Stalinism and the promise of greater political liberalisation. The Hungarian revolution of the same year, although ultimately crushed, must have been helped initially by the change in the international climate. The Cuban revolution brought Castro to power in 1958, but new regimes were also rising in almost all of Africa, during those very years, following the gaining of political independence from Britain and France by one African country after another. I vividly remember the great mood of optimism that characterised this period in Egypt, the Arab world and indeed in the whole world. It looked as if the world was embarking upon a great new age of rapid economic development, greater equality within as well as between nations, helped by an international organisation (the UN) in which small countries would at last have a say in running world affairs. Foreign aid looked as if it was to continue to pour from the rich to the poorer countries of the world, to pay for past injustices of colonialism. Cultural differences would be respected and every national allowed to protect its national heritage, but groups of countries that have strong cultural and historical ties would be encouraged to get together to form new economic and political entities, after the example of the newly-formed European Common Market (established in 1957), allowing the new young countries a greater bargaining power vis-à-vis the more powerful nations. The Arab world was of course one of the most likely candidates for such economic and political integration, and the formation of the United Arab Republic was seen as just the beginning of a grand scheme of Arab unity.

But just look at the world today and see how almost all these hopes have been cruelly shattered. After 10 years of rapid development, industrialisation and impressive reduction of economic and social inequalities the Egyptian economy slowed down almost to a halt following the military attack of Israel in 1967. Economic stagnation continued till the mid 1970s when income started to grow, and continued to do so for a decade as a result of injections from abroad, such as migrants' remittances and oil revenues, but this was associated with a decline in both industry and agriculture and increasing inequalities. The following 20 years (1985-2005) witnessed a decline in both fronts: the growth of income as well as the reduction of inequalities, but this was also accompanied by a rapid rise in unemployment caused by declining growth rates both at home and in the oil countries of the Gulf.

The rest of the Arab world did not do much better than Egypt, partly because of the decline in oil prices after the big boom of the 1970s, while Arab economic and political integration was shelved immediately after Egypt's defeat of 1967, with each Arab country going its separate way.

What was happening in the Arab world in the last 40 years was only a microcosm of what was happening in the world at large. Economic growth rates all over the world, with the exception of a few countries in Southeast Asia, were declining, in both capitalist and socialist countries alike. Rising inflation hit all, and high unemployment rates became a familiar part of the economic scope in capitalist countries, while socialist countries staggered along until the final collapse in 1989. The 1980s was called a "lost decade" for Latin America and Africa, but the 1990s were only marginally better, and towards the end of the 1990s the successful countries in east Asia, with the exception of China, were also hard hit by a financial and economic crisis that continued into the early years of the new millennium.

Then suddenly came the catastrophe of 9/11 in 2001, which was taken as an excuse for attacking Iraq in 2003. The tragedies taking place in Baghdad of which we hear every day in 2006 make the attack on Suez in 1956 shade into insignificance. But is there any connection between the two attacks? I, for one see a connection which I attribute to the changing balance of power between the

main actors on the world stage, once in the middle of the 20th century and another at its end. This change in the balance of power may go a long way to explain many of the changes that occurred in Egypt, the Arab world and in the world at large in the last 50 years, the great optimism of the first 10 years following Suez, and the great disappointments of the last 40 years.

The whole Suez affair, it can now be seen, would have been impossible but for the fact that the two old colonial powers, Britain and France were giving way to two new ones: the US and Russia. The world was virtually inherited by these two and divided between the two new empires. It just happened to suit them both, for about 10 years (1956-66) that some Third World countries, but by no means all, would be given a measure of independence provided they would not join the enemy camp. Most of Latin American countries were not given this privilege, nor were the oil rich countries in the Arab world, because of oil, nor Jordan, because of Israel, nor the east European countries because of their strategic position. Nevertheless, many other countries in Africa and Asia were allowed this measure of independence which produced such marvelous results in Egypt in the first 10 years after Suez. But what also helped was the fact that both West and East were experiencing rapid economic progress which was reflected in huge amounts of aid and a very rapid growth in international trade. Western Europe was busy putting its own house in order, completing its post-war economic reconstruction and forming a powerful economic Union; Japan was rapidly becoming a rival economic power (but not yet a serious threat), the US busied itself sending huge amounts of capital to support the rapid growth in Western Europe and Japan, while Russia was successfully launching the first man into space.

The sad developments in Egypt and the Arab world from the late 1960s onward were again a reflection of the changes in the balance of power between East and West as well as of the economic difficulties met by both of them. The "Détente" which occurred between the two superpowers starting in the late 1960s, was at one time called "a balance of weakness" rather than "a balance of power", but whatever the nomenclature, it dealt a severe blow to that measure of independence enjoyed by Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ghana and many other "non-aligned" countries. From then on, you had to be "aligned" with the glory brought about by the practice of independence gone forever. When one of the two superpowers finally disappeared, the future of such small countries as Egypt and her Arab sisters looked quite bleak, and indeed, this proved to be the case.

The omnipotence of the only remaining superpower seems so overwhelming that if it decides to attack Iraq and occupy its oil fields no one can challenge it. Having wiped the other superpower off the map 10 years earlier, it does look as if it can just do what it likes. But had not Britain and France wiped out Nazi Germany 10 years before Suez? The ferocity of the 1956 attack, considering the weakness and helplessness of the victim, must have looked rather peculiar to the observers of the attack on Egypt. Even to many people within Britain and France, it made little sense. But does not the American attack on Iraq in 2003 and the continued occupation of that country, also look rather peculiarly senseless? Could it be that the very feeling of one's own weakness, rather than the arrogance of power, is the driving force behind both attacks: the British and French attack on Suez in 1956 and the American attack on Baghdad in 2003? In both cases the big power may have felt that the days of its supremacy could be numbered, and that to save the situation and arrest the decline an act of great violence, however extreme, may be required. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in 1956 may have been fooled into thinking that the US, the new rising superpower, may leave him alone to settle his quarrel with Egypt, but US President George W Bush may also have been fooled into thinking that the new rising star (China), as well as other powers with old and new grievances against the US, would also leave him alone to rearrange the Middle East to his own as well as to Israel's liking. There are several indicators that Bush may be proved wrong over Baghdad, just as Eden has been proved wrong over Suez. If this happens to be the case, then Egypt and the Arab world may be given a new lease of life, brought about by a new balance of power as it indeed

happened more than once before.

P.S.

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