

Egypt 1956, Lebanon 2006

50 years since the Suez War

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The 50th anniversary of the Suez aggression falls only months after Israel's recent attacks on Lebanon. What connections can be drawn between the two events, asks Hassan Nafaa*

At sunset on Monday, 29 October 1956, Israel launched a massive offensive across the Sinai Desert as the French and British moved to occupy the Suez Canal Zone. The three forces worked in close coordination in accordance with a plan agreed at a secret meeting held a few days earlier in the Paris suburb of Sèvres. Commentators agree that this invasion, inclusive of the motives for waging it, the international events that accompanied it, and its immediate aftermath, marked a major turning point in the history of the region. Its 50th anniversary falls only a couple of months after another major regional turning point, last July's Israeli attacks on Lebanon.

In the interval between these two events the Arab world has undergone a sea change, but Israel has remained a prime determinant of the direction and nature of the deeper currents of this change. It has long been established that Israel, barely eight years after its foundation, was the force behind the 1956 Suez invasion, which culminated in an astonishing political victory for Egypt and for those that supported it. Half a century later, Israel initiated an aggression that ended in both a political and a military victory for the Lebanese Hizbullah party and for its supporters.

Because Israel managed to reverse its political defeat in 1956 with the sweeping victory it attained in 1967, it is confident that it will be able to reverse the consequences of its 2006 military debacle by maneuvering Lebanon into signing a peace agreement and thereby eliminating its northern neighbour from the Arab-Israeli struggle. However, if the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, and Hizbullah's success in thwarting them, tell us anything it is that the era of easy victories is now over and that conflict in the region has entered a qualitatively new phase. In order to grasp the magnitude of this change better, it is useful to re-examine events in Suez in 1956 in the light of events in Lebanon in 2006.

The context of the 1956 invasion should first be examined, taking note of three essential factors. Firstly, in the period before the war conflict with Israel had receded in Arab priorities. Egypt, for example, had two major preoccupations — ending the British occupation and hastening economic and social development — and during its early years in power (1953-1955), the revolutionary government engaged in secret contacts in order to discover Israel's intentions and encouraged third parties, notably Washington, to investigate a possible settlement to the Arab-Israeli struggle. Unfortunately, Israel remained intransigent on the questions of borders and on Palestinian refugees, and further moves in this direction were not possible. Had it shown a modicum of flexibility, the Middle East would probably not be in the state it is in today.

Secondly, Israeli interests in 1956 converged with those of the traditional colonial powers, Britain and France. Evidence of this is to be found in Israel's determined attempts to obstruct Egypt's efforts to reach an agreement with Britain over the evacuation of British forces from the Suez Canal

Zone and in the Israeli drive to establish closer relations with France. In the course of this, Israel lent what support it could to France's colonial policies in the Middle East, especially in Algeria, and it did what it could to frustrate the ambitions of the Algerian national-liberation movement.

Thirdly, Israeli interests in 1956 diverged from those of the US. Washington at that time was working to secure the region against a perceived Soviet threat, towards which end it was courting a number of Arab governments, among them Egypt. So set was Israel upon preventing the US from drawing closer to Egypt that it masterminded terrorist bombings against American targets in Egypt (the Lavon Affair in 1954).

These three factors combined to induce Israel to intensify pressures on Egypt in order to compel it to agree to a treaty on Israeli terms before British forces withdrew from Suez. These pressures, which reached their height in a deadly Israeli raid on Gaza that claimed the lives of dozens of Egyptian soldiers, ultimately backfired, and they drove Egypt to turn to the Soviet Union as an additional source of arms.

In 1956, as the storm clouds gathered over Egypt as a result of Washington's withdrawal of its offer to finance the construction of the Aswan High Dam, in response to which Abdel-Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, Israel based its calculations on the belief that Abdel-Nasser's unprecedented act of defiance would augment his influence in the Arab world and unleash Egypt's energies in a direction that Israel feared would threaten its own national security. Yet, Israel was not about to confront a newly restructured Egyptian army that was being re-equipped with the latest weaponry on its own, and so it began to cast around for partners. The nationalisation of the Suez Canal served this end, even though this act was not directed against Israel, and nor did it constitute a threat to Israeli interests.

The primary aim of the Tripartite Aggression was to overthrow the four-year-old Nasserist regime, which the conspiring powers believed was still fragile and had many enemies within the country. The war itself not only put paid to these misconceptions, it also worked to strengthen the regime and to elevate Abdel-Nasser to the status of an unrivaled leader of the Arab people.

However, if the courage and efficacy with which Abdel-Nasser managed this confrontation enabled him to emerge politically victorious in spite of a military defeat, of greater importance is the fact that the crisis made the Pan-Arab trend a dominant political force that now directed the course of regional interactions and drove the national-liberation movements that would sweep away the influence of France and Britain. Abdel-Nasser had participated in the founding of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement in Bandung, and his Suez victory turned him into one of the foremost leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Third World and into one of the most influential leaders in the world. For British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and French Prime Minister Guy Mollet, Suez became a fiasco that cast them into political oblivion.

As for Israel, once it had attached itself to two major powers — Britain and France — it played little more than a supportive role. Israel had sought guarantees from Paris and London that it would not be left alone to contend with the Egyptian forces for more than 24 hours. This has but one meaning: Israel did not have confidence in its own military capacities and knew that it had to rely on British and French forces, which flies in the face of Israel's subsequent boasts of the feats its army performed during the war.

However, these facts aside, after Suez Israel believed that it had been robbed politically of its military victory. It registered these lessons, and has subsequently applied them to the letter, and it has not undertaken any military adventures since unless two conditions were met. The first is that it must enjoy overwhelming superiority, in order to be able to resolve a military engagement

independently. The second is that it must have a solid alliance with the US, in order that it will be able to capitalise politically on any military victory and will be compensated for its losses. Acting on these principles is what enabled the country to achieve its resounding victory in 1967 and then to retain the territories it occupied in the war.

Yet, as stinging as it was, Egypt's defeat in 1967 did not succeed in toppling Abdel-Nasser, even if it weakened him both at home and abroad. The fact that Abdel-Nasser succeeded in remaining in power after this debacle has surprised many. However, he had by then built up a record of popularity sufficient to keep the Egyptian people behind him and to inspire them to reconcile themselves with defeat and to the sacrifices that would be demanded of them. He proceeded to rebuild and rearm the Egyptian army in preparation for what he believed would be the next inevitable confrontation, with the war of attrition serving as a training ground on which Egyptian forces and their commanders could test their progress. It is difficult to determine how Abdel-Nasser would have conducted the 1973 war had he been alive to do so. As it was, fate handed Sadat the command, together with the task of single-handedly managing the political battle after the guns fell silent.

History has yet to disclose the full circumstances surrounding the October 1973 war and its immediate aftermath. Many hold that the military victory won by the Egyptian army during that war was turned into a political defeat. The strong cards that had made the October victory possible, being the military and political support of the Soviet Union and the Arab world and the political support of many European powers and Third World nations, tumbled out of Egypt's hands like so many dead leaves.

Soviet support fell by the wayside when Sadat announced that the October War would be "the last war" and that "the US held 99 per cent of the cards." Sadat forfeited Arab support when he agreed to lift the boycott of Arab oil and support Kissinger's step-by-step strategy, which led to the exclusion from the negotiating process of Egypt's wartime ally, Syria, and then eventually of all other Arab partners. As we know, this policy also brought Sadat to Jerusalem, thereby transforming the Arab-Israeli struggle into an Arab-Arab conflict and transforming Egypt, especially after it signed a separate peace with Israel in 1979, into a near outcast, not just in its natural Arab environment, but in the Islamic and Third World environments as well.

It should be stressed that the direction Egypt took did not so much represent the policy of the Egyptian government as it did the personal thinking of the Egyptian president at the time. Sadat did not consult anyone in advance over his decision to visit Jerusalem, a decision which led to the resignations of some of his closest aides. The People's Assembly was not given sufficient time to consider the peace agreement, and deliberations lasted no more than a few hours. Not long afterwards, Sadat dissolved the parliament that had approved the treaty in order to get rid of the 15 MPs who had voted against it.

Egypt's subsequent withdrawal from the Middle East struggle without exacting guarantees from Israel that it would not unleash its war machine upon other Arab parties threw the Arab world into turmoil. Unbound by either legal restrictions or moral compunctions, Israel turned its fury against the PLO, whose members it hunted down from Lebanon to Tunisia, and against Iraq when it struck the Iraqi nuclear reactor. Simultaneously, Lebanon became the theatre in which Arab-Arab and Arab-Israeli tensions played themselves out, and between 1978 and 1996 Israel made several military incursions into Lebanon, the most extensive being in 1982.

Developments in the Arab world during the period between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s were the product of the fragmentation of the region and of the gradual collapse of the dream of Arab unity, the force of which the Suez victory had embodied. As Arab unity disintegrated, Israel emerged

as a dominant power, but it still could not impose peace on its own terms. Although it succeeded in adding other treaties to the separate peace with Egypt, such as the 1993 Oslo Accords with the PLO and the 1994 Treaty with Jordan, these fell well short of realising an end to the state of war, let alone a comprehensive peace.

During this period, too, the Islamist trend emerged from the rubble of the collapse of pan-Arabism. This time the struggle was spearheaded not by the Arab regimes but by armed popular resistance movements, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Although these movements managed to make life hell for the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and Palestine, their achievements on the ground have varied. Hizbullah has been in the vanguard of the Islamist movements, especially after it compelled Israeli forces to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000, the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict that Israel has been forced to withdraw from an occupied territory both unconditionally and without being able to furnish protection for its local agents.

The year 2000 was also the year in which the peace process reached a dead end with the collapse of Camp David II, which had brought together US President Clinton, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. The failure of these talks drove home to the Palestinians as never before that Israel was not ready for a settlement that would lead to the fulfillment of the Arabs' minimum demands and that the only alternative open to them was armed struggle in the manner of Hizbullah. Thus, at the turn of the millennium, the Arab-Israeli conflict found itself at a new crossroads, with Hizbullah-style resistance pointing in the direction of victory and liberation and the Oslo process towards defeat. While the response of the Israeli people to Camp David II was to elect Sharon, that of the Palestinian people was to stage the Al-Aqsa Intifada, heralding the upheaval in Palestinian politics that would eventually bring Hamas into government.

Sharon imagined that he could crush the Palestinian resistance by isolating and laying siege to Arafat, who had turned down Israeli offers at Camp David. The Israeli prime minister also felt that the events of 11 September 2001 had supplied him with the legal and political pretexts for dealing with the Palestinian militant factions as though they were terrorist organisations. He was encouraged in this direction by the newly installed neo-conservative administration in Washington, which had embarked on its own global "war on terror." This has turned out to be merely a byword for a new strategy instituting a division of labour between the US, seeking unrivaled global hegemony, and Israel, seeking unrivaled hegemony over the Middle East. While Washington would take care of the "rogue states", the latter would tend to "terrorist movements" such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah.

The wars against Afghanistan and against Iraq were, I believe, intended to lay the groundwork for a war against Iran, which the US regards as the heart of Islamic fundamentalism, the pulpit of terrorism and the model of the rogue state. Washington, however, did not anticipate getting mired in Iraq or Iran's ability to capitalise on the mistakes the American administration has made in the region. Unable to set the stage for toppling the Iranian regime by force, Washington has fallen back upon the alternative of trying to isolate Tehran from its allies, especially Syria and Hizbullah. As a result, well before 12 July 2006, when Hizbullah staged its cross-border raid in which it killed eight Israeli soldiers, wounded 18 others and captured two, Washington and Israel had begun to plan a massive military offensive against Lebanon.

According to press reports, a meeting was held on the fringes of a meeting at the American Enterprise Institute on 17 and 18 June between US Vice-President Dick Cheney, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, three former Israeli ministers and Nathan Sharansky at which the final touches were put on a plan to destroy Hizbullah militarily. Only one construction can be put on this joint American-Israeli decision to go to war against Lebanon, which is that this operation was

intended to be part of a larger design to create an entirely new set of rules for the region and not just for Lebanon. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice revealed this quite succinctly in her declaration that “a new Middle East would be born from Lebanon’s birth pangs.”

Although what transpired at this meeting remains undisclosed, it is obvious that the participants agreed upon a division of labour whereby Israel would undertake the brunt of the military effort, while Washington would steer the diplomatic offensive in a manner that would ensure that Israel had the time to accomplish the military objectives. These were to destroy Hizbullah’s military infrastructure, to disarm its fighters and drive them north of the Litani River, to secure the unconditional release of the Israeli captives, and then to capitalise on the military victory to achieve a political situation on the ground that would serve US-Israeli objectives against Syria and Iran at a later date.

However, just as the Tripartite Aggression of 1956 backfired against Israel’s European co-conspirators, so too did the war against Lebanon in 2006 rebound against Israel and the US. Because of Hizbullah’s heroic resistance, Israel failed to resolve the battle militarily, and Hassan Nasrallah became as celebrated a leader in the Arab world as Abdel-Nasser had before him. Nor did the US manage to resolve the situation politically as it had hoped, even if it succeeded in securing the passage of the blatantly pro-Israeli UN Security Council Resolution 1701. In spite of the enormous destruction caused by the war, it may have opened an opportunity to resolve the issues of the Middle East once and for all. Yet, future developments in the region will depend largely on how the US decides to handle Iran and the Iranian nuclear programme.

The US and Israel believe they can circumvent the Islamist trend, which today is spearheading the resistance to Zionist expansionism, just as they thought they could get around the Arab nationalist movement that withstood the assault of 1956. If they are entertaining this hope, then it is as unattainable as a mirage, what with the US bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and Israel caught up in Lebanon and Palestine.

That said, there is one significant difference between 1956 and 2006 that is worth mentioning in conclusion. While 1956 was a political victory clutched from a military defeat, 2006 is a military victory thus has not yet turned into a political defeat, and this despite America’s hegemonic global power.

P.S.

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