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THE LIKELIHOOD OF A BRITISH-FRENCH
RESORT TO MILITARY ACTION AGAINST
EGYPT IN THE SUEZ CRISIS

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 19 September 1956. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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THE LIKELIHOOD OF A BRITISH-FRENCH RESORT TO MILITARY ACTION AGAINST EGYPT IN THE SUEZ CRISIS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the likelihood and probable circumstances of a British-French resort to military action against Egypt during the next few weeks.

CONCLUSIONS¹

1. At least for the immediate future, the UK and France will almost certainly seek to keep the way open for the use of force. The temptation for the British and French governments to resort to military action against Egypt will probably be great over the next few weeks, despite substantial opposition in the UK (and elsewhere) to the use of force.
2. On balance, at this stage of the crisis we believe that UK-French resort to military action is likely only in the event of some new and violent provocation — such as major violence to British and French nationals and property in Egypt — which would unite British public opinion behind such action. In such an event, the UK and France would probably use force against Egypt even without US support. We believe that Nasser realizes this, and will make every effort to prevent such violent provocation from occurring, though it is always possible that he may not be able to do so.
3. We do not believe that the nonviolent incidents which are likely to occur — interruption of shipping in the canal, refusal to admit ships with users' pilots, differences over tolls — will cause the UK and France to take military action against Egypt so long as the US continues to oppose the use of force. Should the situation develop so as to cause the US to sanction the use of force, there is at least an even chance that Prime Minister Eden would move despite the continued existence of public opposition to such a course.
4. Finally, it is possible, but we believe unlikely during the period of this estimate, that other situations of friction in the area — the Arab-Israeli conflict, or Iraqi-Syrian relations for example — might develop in such a way as to furnish an occasion for UK-French military intervention against Nasser.

¹The Suez situation has in the past two months undergone rapid changes, and is likely to do so again. Developments are, to an unusual degree, subject to influences which cannot be evaluated at this time.

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DISCUSSION

5. The majority of the British cabinet, especially Prime Minister Eden, and virtually all the members of the French cabinet, are convinced that the elimination of Nasser is essential to the preservation of vital Western interests in the Middle East and North Africa. They are gravely concerned with the dangers of appeasement and probably believe that forceful action against Nasser offers the only real hope of arresting the decline of their positions. They have taken pains to emphasize that they remain prepared to use force if necessary. They are continuing their military buildup in the Mediterranean. They are now in a high state of military readiness and can initiate military action at any time.

6. Nevertheless, over the course of the Suez crisis, the British and to a lesser extent the French governments have come increasingly to recognize disadvantages to the use of force. Although they continue to believe that there would be no serious Soviet military reaction and appear to discount the likelihood of critical repercussions in the Arab states, they have been forced to recognize that a resort to military action would entail serious adverse reactions throughout the non-Communist world. In response to the pressure of domestic and world opinion, they have felt compelled to indicate that they would use force only as a last resort, and the British government has reluctantly undertaken to take its grievances to the UN Security Council (except in case of emergency) before making any military move against Egypt.

7. The temptation to resort to military action against Egypt will be great over the next few weeks, particularly in view of the continuing Anglo-French military buildup and the unyielding stand of Nasser. As long as the USSR continues to support Egypt, it is highly unlikely that any diplomatic and economic pressures that can be brought to bear against Nasser will offer any early prospect that he will retreat from his refusal to accept a degree of international supervision or control of the

canal which the UK and France would regard as effective. Having firmly rejected the plan to have ships transit the canal under "users' association" auspices, he will almost certainly deny passage to those ships which refuse to accept Egyptian-supplied pilots and may also bar those which refuse to pay tolls directly to Egypt in convertible funds. There are various technical means by which Nasser could prevent the passage of ships failing to meet Egypt's conditions, even without resort to military force.

8. Furthermore, to the extent that Western shipping continues to use the canal on Egypt's terms, it may encounter, at least in the early stages, accidents, delays, and obstructions arising from Egyptian failures of operation. The UK and France would view such incidents as further justification for forceful action against Nasser.

9. While these factors are thus likely to maintain the temptation to use force at a high level, the inhibitions to the use of force will probably also continue to be strong. Egypt and its Soviet and neutralist friends will probably continue to press Nasser's proposals for a new conference on the Suez situation, thus generating further worldwide pressure against the use of force. If the West refers the case to the UN (for example, on the grounds of denial of passage of Western shipping), this would provide further demonstration of British-French desire to exhaust all peaceful means of achieving their objectives. While the UK and France might then regard themselves to be in a better position to justify a resort to force, the appeal to the UN would almost certainly generate new demands for conciliation. It might even result in a resolution — politically difficult for the Western powers to oppose — specifically enjoining the parties to refrain from use of force. There will probably be a growing tendency on the part of many who had originally supported the use of force to feel that the opportune moment for such action had passed.

10. The attitude of the US will continue to be of very great importance. The UK and France fully recognize that a resort to military force against Nasser without at least implicit US support would involve risks which they would hesitate to assume alone. On the other hand, there are limits to the US restraining influence. If a situation should develop in which British opinion generally was prepared to accept the use of force, the British government would probably resort to force even without US support.

11. It remains possible, though we believe unlikely during the period of this estimate, that if the UK and France are inhibited from using force over the Suez issue *per se*, they might eventually take military action against Nasser in connection with other possible crises in the area. It is possible that other situations of friction — the Arab-Israeli conflict or Iraqi-Syrian relations, for example — might develop in such a way as to furnish an occasion for UK-French military intervention against Nasser.