

The Art of Strategic Counterintelligence

The Musketeer's Cloak: Strategic Deception During the Suez Crisis of 1956

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In order to perform illusions greater than a sleight of hand, the magician often uses a cloak. The creation of illusions is not magical, or mystical, but is a hint of suggestion, an understanding of human nature, relatively simple technical manipulations, and the fulfillment of carefully planted expectations. Despite this fundamental awareness, one is awed by the magician's illusions of objects disappearing and appearing.¹

Military operations on the scale of Operation Musketeer, the 1956 British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt, require extensive advance planning and logistical preparation. When the large numbers, wide variety, and multinational character of the forces involved in the Suez operation, the narrow geographical confines within which it took place, and the sheer amount of intelligence gathering and analysis capability available to the United States at the time are considered, the attack upon Egypt should have been impossible to conceal. Yet, President Eisenhower and other American leaders were caught by surprise— especially so by the role that the Israelis played.

The question must be asked— why? As is the case with all complex questions, there is no single, simple answer, but the best generalization is that the British, French, and Israelis hid their preparations in plain sight by allowing the Americans to see what they expected to see and thus led them to a false conclusion, then acted in an unexpected way. The strategic deception operation that enabled them to do so was multi-faceted and

complex. The erroneous perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict that the deception planted in the American mindset in 1956 are still operative today.

It is often forgotten today that the United States had virtually no tradition of collecting foreign intelligence in a systematic manner prior to World War II. Throughout most of American history, intelligence operations had been organized and conducted on an ad hoc basis in response to a particular need. Not until 1947 did the United States establish a permanent dedicated intelligence service, the Central Intelligence Agency.

Thus in 1956, the CIA was less than 10 years old, and its capabilities were neither as extensive nor as developed as they are today. On the other hand, Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) was the world's preeminent strategic intelligence organization. The SIS's antecedents extended back to at least the 16th century, and its experience and sophistication far exceeded that of the CIA. In particular, the British had a marked advantage in the area of strategic counterintelligence. In the United States, counterintelligence generally meant catching enemy spies, not manipulating the perceptions of another power's intelligence services.

Strategic deception was an alien concept that was little understood in US intelligence and diplomatic communities. The British, however, had a long tradition of conducting such operations and considerable recent experience in their successful "XX" or "Double Cross" operations against Nazi Germany.

Although Americans had played a large role in its implementation, the spectacularly successful strategic deception plan for the D-Day invasion of Normandy had been the product of British minds. In the complex relationship between the CIA and SIS that had grown out of wartime British-American cooperation, the British were definitely the senior and most experienced partner.²

CIA's Estimative Challenge

In the months leading up to the founding of the state of Israel, the CIA, in its first report dealing with the Palestine situation had warned that the formation of a Zionist state would most likely harm US relations with the

Arabs.³ At the time, the CIA worried that the Zionists were a cat's-paw for the Soviet Union, and were concerned that formation of a Jewish state in Palestine would provide a precedent for the Soviets to demand that an independent Kurdistan be established and that Turkey's Kars Province be ceded to Soviet Armenia.

CIA analysts responsible for the region did not believe the Jews would be able to win the vicious, protracted guerrilla war that was certain to erupt upon British withdrawal and worried that public pressure would force the United States to come to their rescue. This, the CIA warned, would damage US-Arab relations and push the Arabs into the arms of the Soviet Union even though the Muslim Arabs had very little sympathy for communism because of its avowed atheism. Alternatively, it was feared that the USSR might assume the role of rescuer of the Jews and send troops into the region.

The first scenario presented a situation in which the United States would come to be seen as pro-Zionist and cost it recently won oil concessions in the Arab states and loss of access to petroleum resources; the second situation would put Soviet military forces in position to assert physical control over those resources.

Either outcome would have badly weakened future Western economic development in relation to that of the Soviet Union. The basic American strategic goal was to prevent any situation from developing that would give the Soviet Union the leverage it needed to gain influence in the Middle East. As the Arab-Zionist conflict developed, the CIA never wavered from this initial theme. Formulating an American policy that achieved that goal would prove difficult, the CIA's intelligence officers warned. They recognized that American policy toward Israel was driven by politics, not by the studied intelligence that they provided.

Politics, in turn, was driven by American public opinion, not by calculation. Public opinion, in its turn, was driven by a complex interrelationship of emotional sympathy for the Jews growing out of the Holocaust, preconceptions based upon history and religion, and oftentimes flawed or outmoded understandings of the real situation in the Middle East.

The CIA's analysts also recognized that the policies pursued by Great Britain and France in the region were driven by lingering imperial concerns that did not necessarily coincide with the long-term interests of the United States. Similarly, they recognized that the Arab-Zionist conflict, although

intertwined with the American-Soviet Cold War confrontation, was driven by causes that were separate from it. The result, the CIA's officers realized, was ambiguity in US policy in the region. That element of ambiguity made the CIA's task of providing information to decision makers much more difficult.

The Egyptian Perspective

Gamal Abd al-Nasser's rise to power in Egypt and the policies that he pursued enormously complicated the already difficult American strategic situation in the Middle East. Many of Nasser's domestic policies, such as land redistribution with compensation to the former landlords, though unpopular with Egypt's old ruling classes, seemed to be designed to undercut potential communist support among the rural poor and was viewed favorably in the West.

Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles took a particularly favorable view of Nasser, even after it became known that Nasser had agreed to purchase arms from the Soviet Bloc on very attractive barter terms. The CIA station chief in Cairo, Miles Copeland, was on even more cordial terms with Nasser—and he shared Nasser's distrust of the British. It was in fact Copeland and CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt who suggested to Nasser that he announce that the new armaments were coming from Czechoslovakia, not from the Soviet Union. Copeland and Roosevelt were obviously concerned that the arms deal would give a false impression that Nasser was moving Egypt into the Soviet orbit. Nasser most certainly was not, and CIA documents reflect that American intelligence officers clearly understood that he was not.⁴

For his part, Nasser tried to woo the United States with a three pronged approach, laying out his program in a well-written article that appeared in the January 1955 issue *Foreign Affairs*. First, he sought cordial relations with the United States in order to obtain financing for major development projects, notably the Aswan High Dam. He also sought to capitalize on the historic Wilsonian policy of anti-colonialism in order to use the United States as a counter weight to Britain and France, whose imperial designs he distrusted.

Nasser's was the classic diplomatic strategy of a weak nation playing off

strong nations against one another. Lastly, he sought to allay American fears of Soviet penetration into Egypt. When Nasser decided to accept the Soviet arms offer he did not view it as a departure from neutrality. Export subsidies on American cotton had severely depressed the world market price of that commodity, upon which Egypt depended for 85 percent of its foreign trade income. Thus when the Soviets offered to barter modern arms for cotton, Nasser simply took advantage of what to him was a very good business offer.⁵

US Preconceptions

US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles took a contrary view, however. To him, Nasser's Soviet bloc arms deal provided corroboration of an already held view that the Egyptian leader was the main local spoiler of US Cold War strategy in the Middle East. Although he was strongly anticolonialist when it came to dealings with Britain and France, Dulles viewed Nasser's willingness to do business with the Soviet Union through the Cold War prism. This made him susceptible to the British strategy of manipulating US foreign policy in ways beneficial to Britain's imperial interests by holding up the communist bogey.⁶

Miles Copeland, Kermit Roosevelt, Allen Dulles, and others at CIA recognized another critical factor that Nasser himself probably did not: apart from the potential damage to Egyptian relations with the United States, the increased danger that the "Czechoslovakian" arms deal invited to Egypt's security were disproportionate to the increase in military strength the arms bestowed.

True, the packing list was impressive: 200 MiG jet fighters and Ilyushin light bombers, 100 tanks, 6 torpedo boats, and even 2 destroyers—plus munitions and spare parts. The arms deal's weakness lay in its insufficient provision for training and technical support: the agreement called for East bloc technicians to provide only 90 days' instruction in maintenance and operation of the equipment to the Egyptians. With that little training, the new armaments would not give the Egyptians anywhere near the fighting power that its quantity seemed to indicate.

Nonetheless, the infusion of so much new military hardware into Egypt's arsenal would be alarming to the Israelis. The CIA further predicted that as

the Egyptians' perceptions of their own military strength relative to that of the Israelis increased, so would their militancy. Premature Arab combativeness would in turn give the Israelis pretexts to launch a preemptive war before the arms deliveries were completed.⁷

In October 1955, the CIA warned that many in the Israeli leadership were committed to territorial expansion and would welcome a war that brought it about. In the same report, it concluded that a new Arab-Israeli war would result in a devastating defeat for the Arabs. The Israelis would likely overrun Gaza and at least part of the Sinai, all the Jordanian territory west of the Jordan River and some east of the river, and the Syrian and Lebanese territory adjoining Israel's borders unless some outside power intervened— and CIA saw little likelihood of that happening. Only the British, who had a treaty obligation to defend Jordan, seemed likely to interfere with the Israelis militarily. Should circumstances come into favorable alignment the Israelis would probably not let the opportunity to expand Israel's borders pass, the CIA warned.⁸

Nationalization of the Canal

Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956 set in motion the Egyptian showdown with Britain and France that had been building steam for some time and brought about the favorable alignment of circumstances the Israeli's awaited. Just five days later, on 31 July, the CIA led the preparation of a 33 page Special National Intelligence Estimate on the situation and probable developments for President Eisenhower.

- CIA correctly predicted that the Egyptians would be able to operate the canal—contrary to the belief expressed by the British and French.
- It also warned that if the Egyptians succeeded with the takeover of the Suez Canal it would likely prompt a wave of anti- Western, anti-colonial, and nationalist sentiment in the Arab world that would encourage other nationalizations of foreign-owned oil concessions, pipe lines, and other oil related facilities.

At that point, the Intelligence Community was already concerned that Nasser's action and the British-French reaction likely to grow out of it would be damaging to the West and beneficial to the Soviet Union. The estimate stated:

The courses of action open to the West in this situation range from acquiescence with as good grace as possible, through recourse to diplomatic representations, legal action in international or other tribunals, appeals to the United Nations, and economic sanctions, to military operations against Egypt. The UK has already adopted drastic economic measures.... The courses of action open to Nasser in countering Western measures short of military action include seizure of British and other Western assets in Egypt, harassment of shipping in the canal by delays and hindrances, or full closure of the canal to Western shipping.. Both the UK and France on the one hand, and Nasser on the other, have already taken positions from which they are unlikely to retreat in the near future.... The recent developments are markedly to the Soviet interest, opening as they do a wider gulf between Egypt and the West, between the Arab world and the West, and possibly among Western nations themselves.⁹

The preparers of the estimate were careful to note that although Nasser would welcome the Soviet Union's support in the confrontation with Britain and France, they reiterated their previously stated belief that he did not intend to permanently align himself with the USSR. Nasser's primary motivation was Egyptian nationalism and anti-imperialism, and the estimate predicted that he would not exchange British domination for Soviet domination. In this they were proven correct. In their next paragraph, however, the analysts seriously misjudged another element in the situation:

Israel will view with satisfaction the widened rift between its principal Arab antagonist and the major Western Powers.... We do not believe, however, that Israel will attack Egypt, at least during the early phases of this crisis. Nasser will probably feel it necessary to avoid conflict with Israel while he is engaged in his contest with greater powers. However, if Nasser emerges as the victor in the present crisis, he is likely to take an increasingly stiff attitude toward Israel.¹⁰

Neither Israel's self restraint nor Nasser's discretion proved to be as great as the Middle East experts thought. They may also have thought Nasser had more control over events along the Egyptian-Israeli frontier than he actually possessed. The estimators almost certainly underestimated the ability—indeed the likelihood—that Israeli intelligence would reach the same conclusion about Nasser's future attitude that they had.

The CIA had serious concerns that should Nasser's gamble with the Suez Canal succeed, the temptation to use control of the vital waterway as a political weapon would become overpowering. Should the dispute over the canal end in a way that made it appear that Nasser had humiliated the British, his political position and anti-Westernism would be strengthened, and he would eventually embark on a campaign against other Western interests in the region.

The most important and vulnerable target would be Western oil concessions. Unless Nasser received a setback at Western hands, the report said, other Arab states would be encouraged to follow his example. Arab reactions to that setback might be equally damaging to Western interests, however. Reactions to Western military action against Egypt might be especially severe.¹¹



Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser cheered in Cairo after announcing the Suez Canal Company, Aug. 1, 1956. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS)

In assessing the possibility of Israeli military action, the report stated:

In general, Israel may be expected to pursue the line that the more trouble the Western Powers have with the Arab states, the greater should be their support to Israel.... Israel would probably welcome Western military action in response to Nasser's seizure of the canal.... We believe that the chances are against Israel itself deliberately initiating war with Egypt.... The danger of such action might materially increase if the Western powers undertook military action—in which case Israel might seek to join them; or if Western relations with Egypt deteriorated so drastically that Israel could feel reasonably confident of avoiding severe Western punitive measures as a result of attacking Egypt—presumably with the aim of destroying the Egyptian forces and toppling Nasser.¹²

Although couched in the language of probability and uncertainty— as all

forecasts are—the CIA clearly understood that the chances of the Israelis taking advantage of any British-French attack upon Egypt were great. It is also clear from this paragraph that the CIA's intelligence analysts understood that a set of circumstances could develop that would lead to a convergence of British-French and Israeli interests to the point that the Western nations would tacitly condone an Israeli attack upon Egypt.¹³

The Disinformation Campaign

American intelligence officers continued to follow the Middle East situation as pressure increased throughout the late summer and fall. British radio propaganda against Nasser increased sharply, both from the transmitters of the BBC and from Sharq al-Adna, the powerful SIS-owned Arabic language radio station in Cyprus. On 19 October, the CIA expressed the belief that Britain and France would not resort to military action unless there was some “new and violent provocation.” In the next paragraph, the CIA restated its belief that Nasser was most likely aware of that fact and would be especially careful to avoid any violent provocation.¹⁴

Throughout the lead up to the Suez Crisis the situation was further clouded by what amounted to a full-scale disinformation campaign underway in the US press aimed at turning American public opinion against Nasser. In the wake of the East Bloc arms deal, the State Department sent Assistant Secretary of State George V. Allen to Cairo to attempt to patch up relations with Nasser and, if possible, get him to cancel the arms deal with the Soviets. Allen was carrying a formal diplomatic note from John Foster Dulles that warned Nasser of the dangers inherent in too close relations with the Soviets. The note's tone, though it expressed serious concern, was not especially harsh, but someone at the State Department tipped the press that it was an “ultimatum” and it was so reported in the mass media even before Allen landed in Cairo.

Kermit Roosevelt intercepted Allen at the airport and advised him not to present the note to Nasser. Allen agreed, but the damage had already been done. Nasser's mindset had been formed by the press reports and he reacted to Allen's proposals based upon what he thought the undelivered note said. As a result, Allen's reconciliation mission failed. More importantly, it failed in such a way that John Foster Dulles and the

press blamed Nasser.¹⁵

As hostility toward Egypt increased in France and Britain, Nasser's vilification in the British press continued. Most of the American news media relied on British sources for information about the Middle East—and the British were well aware that many American journalists were predisposed to pro-Zionist sentiments. Although the specifics of the secret British disinformation effort remain hidden, there is circumstantial evidence that suggests that the British were carefully controlling the information from official sources available to American correspondents in order to capitalize upon the American media's preexisting pro-Zionist bias to transform it into an anti-Nasser bias.

Three leading British newspapers, *The Express*, *The Mail*, and the influential *Times* of London, whose lead the American press often followed, repeatedly compared Nasser to Hitler. The fact that Nasser, at the suggestion of US military intelligence officers, had invited famed German commando leader Otto Skorzeny to visit Egypt and had hired about 100 German military advisers recommended by him provided the factual foundation beneath fictive reports that a cadre of "unrepentant Nazis" was controlling Nasser from behind the scenes.¹⁶

Simultaneously, Israel was waging its own independent disinformation campaign. Forty percent of all the American reporters in the Middle East-North Africa region were based in Israel, while the remainder were scattered throughout the Arab world from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. There were 10 American correspondents in Israel; the most in any one Arab nation (Egypt) was five.

This concentration of reporters afforded the Israelis an excellent opportunity to manipulate American news coverage in their favor. Casualties inflicted upon the Israelis by *fedayeen* guerrillas operating from Egyptian and Jordanian territory were consistently played up so that the American public would view Israel's own aggressive actions as justified responses to attack. The separate British and Israeli disinformation campaigns meshed in the US news media. As a result, the interpretations that US policymakers read in the popular media (and that shaped US public opinion) and the CIA's classified intelligence reports often ran directly counter to one another. ¹⁷

On 24 October, the US ambassador in London reported to Washington that British Minister of Defence Walter Monckton had secretly resigned from

the Cabinet— and that Monckton had quit to protest the Eden government’s decision to attack Egypt. Suspicion that something was about to happen increased, but Washington evidently had no inkling that French Premier Guy Mollet, British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had already met secretly at Sèvres during 22–24 October and agreed upon a devious plan of action against Nasser.¹⁸

The Attack Plan

The plan called for the Israelis to begin the operation by a surprise air attack and parachute drop to secure the eastern entrance to the Mitla Pass, about 35 miles east-northeast of the southern end of the Suez Canal. Israeli armor and motorized infantry would then drive across the Sinai along three main routes of advance: one column would attack along the Mediterranean coast toward Port Said, another through the northern part of the peninsula via Bir Gafgafa toward the mid-point of the Canal, and a third across the center of the peninsula through the Mitla Pass toward the southern end of the Canal. This would present a “threat” to the Suez Canal and activate Britain’s rights to defend it under the 1888 Convention and the 1954 withdrawal agreement.

The British and French would followup with an ultimatum demanding that both sides withdraw from a zone ten miles wide on either side of the waterway, a demand that they expected Nasser to reject. At that point the British and French would intervene militarily to “separate” the combatants. David Ben-Gurion was understandably worried because the plan cast Israel in the role of aggressor, but prior publicity given to the *fedayeen* raids and the continuing Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping combined with selective reporting of Nasser’s bellicose rhetoric provided Israel with a plausible *casus belli*.¹⁹



US efforts to monitor developments in the eastern Mediterranean area

increased sharply after the report of Monckton's resignation. On 27 October, a U-2 flying from Wiesbaden, Germany, photographed the British bases in Cyprus. Its high resolution photographs revealed large numbers of British and French bombers and transport planes parked beside the runways. Concentrations of troops and equipment were also revealed. Another U-2 flying from Incirlik airbase in Turkey detected a squadron of French fighter-bombers parked at an Israeli airfield, but their presence did not raise alarms because French military aircraft had made unannounced visits to Israel before.²⁰

The SNIE of 19 September 1956 indicates that IC analysts had at least an inkling of the possibility of a situation developing between the Israelis and Egyptians that would give Britain and France a pretext to act. It stated:

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 action against Nasser.²¹

However, there is no hint in the record that analysts even considered the possibility that the British, French, and Israelis would conspire to manufacture a facsimile of that situation to furnish a pretext for Britain and France to move against Nasser.

The history of suspicion and animosity between the Zionists and Great Britain was simply too great for that to seem possible. Personalities also militated against such an alignment. Eden was anti-Zionist if not outright anti-Semitic; it was known that Ben-Gurion detested him. Nor did the Americans recognize the intent behind military moves they observed once the plan to attack Egypt was set in motion. The long buildup to the crisis had allowed the Royal Navy and Marine Nationale to move warships into position without arousing overly much suspicion. A long-planned NATO exercise off Greece involving two US Navy aircraft carrier battle groups and ships from several allied navies was scheduled for the same time. British and French ships that deployed to the eastern Mediterranean to participate in that exercise could easily be diverted to the Suez operation.

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The Jordan Piece

Jordan was an ally of Great Britain, and the fact that the British were obligated by treaty to come to Jordan's defense if that country was invaded provided the crucial raw material for another key part of the Suez deception plan. Guerrilla attacks launched out of Jordan had prompted the Israelis to contemplate an invasion of the West Bank while the Suez Crisis was unfolding.

Thus in the late summer of 1956, the British were confronted with the very real possibility of having to fight a politically unpalatable war to repel an Israeli invasion of Jordan. Troops and aircraft for such a contingency would have to be assembled on Cyprus. This provided an ideal cover for the buildup for the attack on Egypt. Likewise, when the French approached Ben-Gurion with the proposal that Israel attack not Jordan, but Egypt, the Jordanian situation furnished a ready-made cloak behind which the Israelis could hide the real intent of their military preparations.



A planned NATO exercise, involving US Navy aircraft carrier battle groups shown here, allowed British and French warships to enter the region without drawing undue attention. (© Bettman/CORBIS)

When Israeli mobilization began, the information the Americans received about it matched their preconceived expectations—they naturally assumed that the Israeli mechanized forces assembling in the Negev south of Beersheba were preparing to strike eastward at guerrilla bases in Jordan. Hand in hand with that erroneous supposition went one that the British troops on Cyprus were there to meet a Jordanian contingency.²³

In making their assumption about Israeli intentions based on what they thought they knew and what they saw happening on the ground, the Americans overlooked one critical fact: the theater of operations was simply too small for an interpretation of Israeli troop dispositions to be meaningful. The Israelis could just as easily strike at Egypt as at Jordan from the same starting points.

To complicate the CIA's problem even more, the small size of Israel's population allowed close personal relationships to exist between its top political leaders, senior military commanders, and their subordinates down to quite low levels. This permitted face-to-face transmission of plans and orders to the Israeli armed forces, removing the need to use communications systems that might have been vulnerable to US eavesdropping.

Convergence of a series of unrelated events also contributed to the Suez deception plan's success. In the United States, the presidential election was only days away and the demands of the campaign required most of President Eisenhower's immediate attention. In Hungary, meanwhile, the situation was nearing the crisis point (the Soviets invaded Hungary on 4 November) and drew the Department of State and the CIA's attention in that direction.

In the midst of the two crises, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles fell gravely ill, leaving the State Department leaderless. Dulles's illness may have been a mixed blessing to the British, French, and Israelis, however, as it opened the way for Herbert Hoover Jr. to become acting secretary of state on 3 November. Hoover had come to the Department of State from the oil industry and was both an expert on Middle East affairs and knowledgeable in international finance. Hoover did not share Dulles's negative view of Nasser and played a key role in persuading Eisenhower to instruct the Federal Reserve to dump sterling on the world currency markets at a steep discount, thus threatening the British with severe devaluation of their currency to force them to



British Prime Minister Anthony Eden (left) and US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (right). Both leaders were in poor health during the period, a factor that affected the course of events. (©Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS.)

agree to withdraw from Suez.²⁴

In the Rearview Mirror

With hindsight, it is possible to say that CIA and Intelligence Community analysts should have suspected collusion between the British, French, and Israelis. Many within the US intelligence establishment, particularly the CIA personnel who had been involved in the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, had learned to be wary of manipulation by the SIS—but that wariness did not extend upward to the higher echelons of CIA, the State Department, or the Eisenhower administration. It was at that level of US leadership that the strategic deception in the Suez Crisis was aimed. It was also at the top that the British-French-Israeli deception worked best.

For a time, ailing Prime Minister Eden was in a genuine quandary. Just as the CIA believed, Eden was willing to use force against Nasser, but was unwilling to accept the severe diplomatic censure that an invasion of Egypt would generate. That supposition became an integral element of American thinking that clouded it such that when military preparations were detected they caused no special alarm.

David Ben-Gurion's repeated assurances to Eisenhower that Israel would not take part in the British-French quarrel with Nasser and the real friction with Britain because of Jordan obscured the new British-French-Israeli alignment. Additionally, Eisenhower's reputation for integrity and honesty was well known. Eden and Ben-Gurion may have capitalized on that personal trait, knowing that since Eisenhower would not lie to them, he would be unlikely to suspect them of lying to him. In any event, the Americans were thoroughly misled.²⁵

Worse, US intelligence officers, diplomats, and political leaders had not only been wrong in what they thought, they had been deliberately misled into thinking what the British, French, and Israelis wanted them to think. In that respect the British-French-Israeli deception perpetrated on the United States during the Suez Crisis was one of the most successful operations of its kind ever undertaken.

Those running the British-French-Israeli counter intelligence effort

understood that humans tend to perceive what they expect to perceive. They correctly identified what the Americans were predisposed to think, and then exploited existing circumstances in such a way that the Americans saw so many *expected* things happening in an anticipated pattern that they did not perceive the *unexpected* intent cloaked by that pattern.²⁶

Furious that Eden, Mollet, and Ben-Gurion had deceived him and alarmed that CIA had failed to see through the subterfuge, President Eisenhower commissioned the head of his recently created Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities, Dr. James R. Killian to conduct a thorough investigation. Killian concluded that although the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose cabinet level office as established in the National Security Act of 1947 was titled “Director of Central Intelligence” and was supposed to be in charge of coordinating all US intelligence activities, the structural constraints imposed by the American intelligence system precluded the DCI from fulfilling that intended role. Eisenhower proposed to Allen Dulles that he assume the coordinating function embodied in the office of Director of Central Intelligence, and leave operational control of the Central Intelligence Agency to a subordinate. Legal and political constraints prevented this, however, and no major structural revamping of the US Intelligence Community occurred.²⁷

US-British relations had changed fundamentally, however. The Cold War and increased Soviet influence in the Third World (a development greatly boosted by the Suez fiasco) made a permanent breach impossible, and Eisenhower and Eden’s successor, Harold Macmillan, moved quickly to repair the damage, but many in the United Kingdom’s leadership never wholly forgave the U.S. for the severe pressure Eisenhower had exerted on them. Relations between the SIS and the CIA would never again be as cordial nor as open as they had been before Suez. By using their intimate knowledge of the methods and mindset of the US Intelligence Community gained during more than two decades of cooperation to deceive Eisenhower, the SIS sowed seeds of long-lasting suspicion and distrust between the British and American intelligence services. Although President Eisenhower threatened to discontinue all US assistance to Israel and to join the Soviet Union in supporting imposition of United Nations sanctions up to and including Israel’s expulsion from the UN to force its withdrawal from the Sinai, the Israelis emerged from the Suez debacle remarkably unscathed.

One reason may have been popular disbelief that there had been

premeditated collusion before the invasion. For many years after 1956, the British, French, and Israeli governments vehemently denied that they had collaborated in planning the invasion. The Israelis steadfastly claimed that they had launched their attack to preempt an imminent and overwhelming attack from Egypt. The fact that there had been a great deal of tension between Britain and the Israelis while the Suez invasion was in progress made these denials plausible.

For his part, Nasser, although he privately gave Eisenhower credit for forcing the British, French, and Israelis to withdraw, failed to capitalize on the potential US public relations windfall that the situation had given him. Worse, his silence allowed Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to claim credit for Eisenhower's accomplishment, in the process creating an impression that the USSR had a much closer relationship with Nasser than it really had.

In the absence of effective communication from Nasser, Israel's supporters in the United States were able to use the circumstances to frame a convincing pro-Israel/anti-Arab information warfare campaign in the US press, a campaign that became self-propagating. Once that was achieved, the Israelis had won a decisive strategic advantage, one many argue Israel continues to hold to this day.

Endnotes

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17. Ibid.

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19. Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 290–293; Terence Robertson, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1965), 146–47; Selwyn Lloyd, *Suez 1956: A Personal Account* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), *passim*.

20. Ibid; “Probable Repercussions of British-French Military Action in the Suez Crisis,” SNIE 30- 4-56, 5 September 1956; Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for the Record, “Briefing of Mr. Stevenson, September 10, 1956,” 12 September 1956.

21. “The Likelihood of a British-French Resort to Military Action Against Egypt in the Suez Crisis,” SNIE 30-5-56, 19 September 1956.

22. Aldrich, 485–87.

23. Ibid, 482; Morris, 288–89.

24. Aldrich, 488.

25. Donald N. Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran* (CIA Clandestine Service History, CS Historical Paper No. 208, 1954); Aldrich, 480–81.

26. Richards J. Heuer, Jr. *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), Ch. II/1–7.

27. Aldrich, 521–22.

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