

The Suez Crisis – A Turning Point for the End of Empire in the Middle East?

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: February 28, 2013

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Helene von Bismarck

The most important and probably also the most challenging job of the historian is to explain change. A popular way to do so is to identify turning points: key moments which seem to have such a decisive impact on the course of events, that they accelerate, interrupt, slow down or give a new direction to a historical development. The concept of the turning point can be useful if we are to succeed in offering an explanation for the past instead of simply narrating a list of names and dates, but it is also one that ought to be applied with caution. As with any other concept, it should not be used too liberally. It is vital to be very precise about the specific consequences of the respective turning point. What changed and what did not? To argue that after this key moment, nothing was the way it was before, usually means overdoing it. Moreover, the concentration on turning points in history entails the danger of regarding everything that happened after the event in question as a foregone conclusion. Since prejudice inevitably stands in the way of analysis, this is a big mistake.

To illustrate this problem, it is worthwhile to examine the Suez crisis of 1956 and to discuss its consequences for Britain's – largely informal – empire in the Middle East. Britain's failed attempt to reverse the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company by invading Egypt in collusion with France and Israel has been generally acknowledged as one of the greatest disasters in the history of British foreign policy after the Second World War. From Nasser's perspective, on the other hand, it was a resounding success, which established him as an icon of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. The Anglo-French intervention in Suez provoked international outrage and caused a significant rift in Britain's relationship with its favourite ally, the United States. The Suez crisis brought the limits to Britain's power in the Middle East out into the open for the whole world to see, when, largely as a result of American economic pressure, the British and French troops withdrew from Egypt after only a few days. It was now obvious that Britain was no longer able to conduct a major military intervention in the region without American backing, a lesson which the British Government took very seriously after 1956.

In the short period of only fifteen years following the Suez crisis, Britain lost its remaining outposts of empire in the Middle East. Landmarks of this development were the Iraqi revolution of 1958, Kuwait's constitutional independence in 1961, the loss of the military base in Aden in 1967 and the ending of Britain's special treaty relationship with the small shaikhdoms of the Persian Gulf in 1971. However, this post-Suez process of British decline in the Middle East, which looks so linear and continuous in retrospect, was by no means considered inevitable by the relevant historical actors in 1956. The Suez crisis did not cause an organized or willing gradual British retreat from the Middle East, nor did it diminish Britain's will to contain Nasser's ambitions for regional leadership. A closer look at the events in Iraq, Kuwait, Aden and the rest of the Persian Gulf in the fifteen years following the Suez crisis shows quite the contrary: the more ground Britain was losing in the region, the tighter it held on to what remained of its empire there.

When a group of young nationalist Iraqi officers under the leadership of Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew the monarchy in Baghdad on 14 July 1958, the British Government erroneously believed that Nasser was behind the revolution and wanted to react by embarking on a large-scale Anglo-American military intervention in the Middle East designed to put a stop to the spread of Arab nationalist doctrines in the region. It was only because the US Government refused to agree to this plan that the British Prime Minister Macmillan had to appease himself with a much smaller operation that was confined to Jordan. In Kuwait, Britain respected the wish of the Amir for full self-government in 1961, but reserved the right to defend the newly independent country against foreign aggression. This was not an act of pure altruism, but the result of Britain's need to protect its own very substantial economic interest in the oil of the emirate. Britain's determination not to allow the oil-rich Kuwait to fall under foreign control became apparent within days of the emirate's independence, when an aggressive speech by the Iraqi president Qasim, who called Kuwait a province of Iraq, induced the British Government to launch its largest military intervention in the Middle East since the Suez crisis, this time, however, with American blessing. The retreat from Aden in November 1967 was especially painful for the British Government and they only accepted it reluctantly after several years of serious fighting against the significant anti-British violence there. The Aden base had been the headquarters of Britain's Middle East Command since 1960 and was crucial for the defence of Kuwait and the smaller Persian Gulf States. As for the latter, the ending in 1971 of Britain's special treaty relationship with Bahrain, Qatar and the seven Trucial shaikhdoms was a British decision, but one which was only decided in January 1968 and came as a great surprise to the local rulers as well as to Britain's men on the spot. Until then, Britain's Persian Gulf policy had been based on the assumption that there would be no withdrawal from the region before the mid-1970s at the very earliest.

The Suez crisis was undoubtedly a very significant event in the history of British imperialism, but whether it was really a turning point that pre-determined the end of Britain's empire in the Middle East is less certain. What changed after Suez was the Anglo-American relationship in the region. Britain's interests in the Middle East and its determination to protect them remained the same.

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