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U.S., defender of the Arabs? Rewind 50 years

By David Pitts

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In the current flare-up in the Middle East, America is clearly seen around the world as an ally of Israel. That has been the reality for decades. But there was a time when the United States took the side of the Arabs against Israel and our European allies. The occasion was the Suez crisis that began fifty years ago today, an event with profound consequences that extend into the current conflicts involving Israel and Iraq.

It was triggered when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956. Four years earlier, Mr. Nasser had become a hero to Egyptians, and to Arabs in general, after he helped lead a bloodless coup that deposed the corrupt King Farouk, widely viewed as a British stooge. At the time, 80,000 British troops were in Egypt. They were the victims of increasing terror attacks as resentment against their presence mounted. The British eventually withdrew the troops, but foreign ownership of the canal remained a festering sore.

The nationalization of the canal was a bold stroke designed to end British influence in Egypt once and for all. Britons regarded it as the lifeline of their empire, which, in 1956, still was largely intact. One of my earliest political memories as a boy growing up in England was watching Prime Minister Anthony Eden's television speech about the crisis. Calling the canal the "jugular vein" of the British Empire, Mr. Eden invoked the appeasement of Hitler and conveyed his determination to get rid of Mr. Nasser, who dared to thumb his nose at Britain's imperial might.

The Israelis, British and French conspired to attack Egypt and depose Mr. Nasser. The three countries agreed that Israel would invade first and that Britain and France would issue an ultimatum for both sides to cease fighting. When that failed, as planned, the British and French would invade Egypt as well. The three countries kept the conspiracy secret, including - fatally - from the United States. On Oct. 29, the plan proceeded as scheduled, with Israel's invasion of Gaza and parts of the Sinai Peninsula. Few were taken in by the turn of events, however, least of all the United States. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were furious. In a struggle with the Soviet Union to win over the peoples of the Third World, the U.S. was in no mood to tolerate the aggression. "The Israeli-French-British invasion is a grave error inconsistent with the principles and purposes of the [U.N.] Charter," Dulles said.

The U.S. backed a U.N. General Assembly resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire and the withdrawal of invading troops. With that very public act, the invasion was doomed.

On Nov. 6, less than a week after hostilities began, a cease-fire was announced. The Israelis, however, lingered on for months and refused to fully evacuate until

Mr. Eisenhower threatened them with sanctions in a televised speech to the American people delivered Feb. 20, 1957.

"The United Nations must not fail," he said. "I believe that in the interests of peace, the United Nations has no choice but to exert pressure upon Israel to comply with the withdrawal resolutions." The Israelis got the message.

The results of the crisis were profound. The Suez debacle mortally wounded the British Empire. Mr. Eden was forced out. His successor, Harold Macmillan, accepted that "a wind of change" was blowing throughout the world and that colonialism was finished. Within 10 years of Suez, the British Empire - on which the sun had once never set - was effectively dead. Mr. Nasser's victory, by contrast, sparked a surge in Arab nationalism and a resentment of Western interventionism that lingers into our own time.

This is a reality that the U.S., which sided with Arabs and against the Israelis and Europeans 50 years ago, cannot afford to ignore in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

David Pitts is a British-born journalist who has written extensively about colonialism.