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**THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION AND THE SUEZ CRISIS:
SPYING ON ALLIES AND FRIENDS**

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THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION AND THE SUEZ CRISIS: SPYING ON ALLIES AND FRIENDS

Study of intelligence, surveillance and espionage [was]...[o]nce famously described by Sir Alexander Cadogan...as the “missing dimension” to most studies of international relations and diplomacy.

— Martin S. Alexander

If intelligence constitutes the missing dimension of studies on international relations, then, as Martin Alexander noted, the study of intelligence work directed against one’s friends and allies could be considered “the missing dimension to the missing dimension.”¹ In this essay I will examine one facet of one case of espionage directed at allies and friends—Eisenhower’s use of intelligence collected against the French and British in the weeks leading up to the Suez crisis of 1956. After a brief overview of the Suez crisis, I will address the different modes of collecting intelligence used by Eisenhower, including imagery intelligence (IMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and human source intelligence (HUMINT). I will then make a few observations about Eisenhower’s use of intelligence and offer some hypotheses on targeting one’s allies for intelligence collection. Finally, I will illustrate the continuing relevance of an important lesson from the Suez crisis—the suddenness with which a state might find itself needing intelligence on its allies and friends.

1956 Suez Crisis

On 26 July 1956, Egyptian President Abdul Gamal Nasser announced that his government had nationalized the Suez Canal. Nasser’s announcement came just six weeks after the last British soldiers left the canal, marking an end to over 70 years of British occupation. The canal linked the United Kingdom with its global empire and with Persian Gulf oil. With Britain still exhausted and financially enfeebled from the Second World War, Prime Minister Anthony Eden viewed the canal as the “jugular vein” of the British Empire.² Eden immediately ordered his military chiefs to

¹ Martin S. Alexander, “Introduction: Knowing Your Friends, Assessing Your Allies – Perspectives on Intra-Alliance Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 2.

² Chris Leininger, “Suez 1956,” 1 May 1996, <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/text/suez.html>, downloaded 31 Oct 2000.

begin making plans to retake the canal,³ for he was bent on reversing Nasser's action and removing Nasser—even if it meant killing him.⁴

The French government, under Prime Minister Guy Mollet, also wanted to see Nasser go. Embroiled in a nasty war against anti-colonial revolutionaries in Algeria, French military leaders were certain of Nasser's support to Algeria's FLN terrorists.⁵ The British factored French forces into their early invasion calculations, and both British and French forces began moving toward Suez in early August.⁶ However, plans for a September invasion were pushed back into November, and what started as Britain's Operation "Hamilcar" gave way to "Musketeer" and finally to a modified version of Musketeer called "Musketeer Revise."⁷ The delay was driven by the impracticability of the first two plans, and by the need for the British and French to coordinate with the Israelis. Collaboration between the French and Israelis had begun in early September, and by the first days of October Eden was aware of likely Israeli participation in the planned invasion of Egypt.⁸ On 14 October, the Deputy Chief of the French Air Force, General Maurice Challe, traveled surreptitiously to London and briefed Prime Minister Eden on the "Challe Plan," whereby Israel would attack Egypt, thus giving Britain and France a pretext for an invasion to secure the Suez Canal.⁹ Between 22-24 October, the British, French, and Israelis laid their final plans in a series of secret meetings in Sèvres, outside Paris.

On 29 October, Israeli forces commenced what they called Operation Kadesh with a paratroop assault near the Mitla Pass in the Sinai, just 45 miles east of the Suez Canal. In eight days the Israelis secured their military objectives in the Sinai and defeated the Egyptian armed forces there.¹⁰ On the day after the Israelis attacked, Britain and France issued an ultimatum to

³ Bill Jackson and Dwin Bramall, The Chiefs: The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff (London: Brassey's, 1992), 297-298; and Vic Flinham, "Operation Musketeer: Suez and Sainai – 1956," <http://www.navismagazine.com/sample/musketeer/suez.html>, downloaded 31 Oct 2000.

⁴ Scott Lucas and Alistair Morey, "The Hidden 'Alliance': The CIA and MI6 Before and After Suez," Intelligence and National Security 15, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 104 and 106; and Anthony Nutting, No End of a Lesson: The Story of Suez (London: Constable, 1967), 34.

⁵ Proof of Nasser's material support to the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) came on 16 Oct 1956, when French forces caught the Sudanese flagged ship Athos loaded with over 70 tons of arms coming from Alexandria, Egypt bound for the FLN. Alistair Horne, A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962 (London: Macmillan, 1977; paperback Papermac, 1996), 157-158.

⁶ Jackson and Bramall, 298-299; Victor Flinham, Air Wars and Aircraft: A Detailed Record of Air Combat, 1945 to the Present (New York: Facts On File, 1990), 47; and R. Ernest DuPuy and Trevor N. DuPuy, The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1341.

⁷ Flinham, Air Wars, 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*; and Lon Nordeen, Fighters Over Israel: The Story of the Israeli Air Force from the War of Independence to the Bekka Valley (New York: Orion Books, 1990), 36.

⁹ Nutting, 88-93.

¹⁰ A. J. Baker, Arab-Israeli Wars (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1980), 31-40.

Israel and Egypt, calling for both sides to withdraw from within ten miles of the canal, so British and French forces could occupy and maintain it. French forces had departed Bône in Algeria and headed for Suez two days before the Israelis had even attacked, somewhat undermining French efforts to portray themselves as peacekeepers reacting to a crisis brought on by Israel.¹¹ The Israelis, acting according to plan, accepted the ultimatum. Nasser, predictably, refused to go along with the charade.

On the night of 31 October, British bombers began pounding Egyptian Air Force (EAF) targets, and over the next week—until a cease-fire was declared—Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, and French Naval aircraft mounted attacks against the EAF. In conjunction with the air attacks, British planes were supposed to fly psychological air operations, dropping leaflets on Egyptian civilians to sow unrest and destabilize Nasser's government.¹² Meanwhile, the British and French ran "black radio" psy-ops,¹³ though, like the ill-starred leaflet drops, the radio programs seemed to have little effect.¹⁴ The aero-psychological ops fizzled, and a much-anticipated coup overthrowing Nasser failed to materialize. Still, British and French paratroopers went ahead with scheduled landings near the canal and secured their objectives on 5 November. Seaborne and heliborne landings commenced the next day. Under heavy pressure from the Eisenhower administration and threats from the Soviets, Eden's government called off the operation—to the dismay of the French and Israelis.

Though militarily successful, the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion was a political fiasco. By mid-November United Nations peacekeepers began displacing Israeli troops in the Sinai.¹⁵ Three weeks later the French and British agreed to withdraw from the canal zone. Except for the presence of the peacekeepers, the status quo ante was restored. Eden's political career was done. He resigned in January of 1957, just two months after halting the Suez invasion. Guy Mollet continued on in Paris as a lame duck premier, primarily because—Alastair Horne asserted—nobody else wanted to take over the impossible task of fighting the Algerian War.¹⁶ The Suez crisis marked an end of the *Entente Cordiale* between Britain and France and initiated a period of

¹¹ Flintham, *Air Wars*, 48.

¹² Lucas and Morey claimed "Leaflet drops were all but abandoned when it was discovered that converted Canberra bombers were technically unable to carry out the operations." Lucas and Morey, 111.

¹³ Richard Aldrich, "Intelligence, Anglo-American Relations and the Suez Crisis, 1956," *Review Article in Intelligence and National Security* 9 no. 3 (July 1994): 549.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, and Lucas and Morey, 110-111.

¹⁵ Baker, 40.

¹⁶ Horne, 163-164.

lingering distrust that exists to this day.¹⁷ The crisis also soured Washington's bilateral relations with London and Paris.

Eisenhower's Use of Intelligence: IMINT, SIGINT, HUMINT

The Suez crisis occurred at an inopportune time for President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Ike was campaigning for re-election, with the polling date set for 6 November. Uprisings that began in Budapest, Hungary on 23 October were finally crushed by Soviet troops on 4 November. So, Eisenhower had the twin crises of Hungary and Suez to cope with during the final weeks of his re-election campaign. Furthermore, the volatility of Middle East politics made it difficult for Eisenhower to decipher the true intentions of his allies. The Central Intelligence Agency was involved in a plan with its British counterpart, MI6, to overthrow the pro-Nasser government of Syria; however, Operation "Straggle," as the coup in Damascus was called, collapsed just before it was supposed to begin—the same time the Israeli Army invaded Egypt.¹⁸ More significantly, the British, Israelis, and French had joined in an elaborate and successful deception that misled Eisenhower about the target and timing of the invasion of Egypt. London and Tel Aviv created the false impression that Israel was on the verge of invading Jordan, a move Britain was treaty-bound to counter.¹⁹ Meanwhile the French privately, and falsely, assured Washington they would forego any forceful action to resolve the Suez crisis until after the U.S. presidential election.²⁰ To make matters worse, starting around mid-October, London and Paris imposed an information blackout on Washington.²¹ Given the gravity of events and the ambiguity of the indications reaching Washington in the weeks before the crisis, President Eisenhower needed solid intelligence on two of America's closest allies, Britain and France.

IMINT

Eisenhower learned the value of imagery intelligence as the supreme commander of allied forces during the Second World War.²² Because of his enthusiastic support, the U-2 spy plane went from concept to first flight in less than a year. On 4 July 1956, the first operational U-2

¹⁷ Ibid.; Flinham, *Air War*, 54; Jackson and Bramill, 305-306; Aldrich, 552; and Leininger.

¹⁸ Lucas and Morey, 105 and 109-110.

¹⁹ Nutting, 110; and Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995; paperback Harper Perennial, 1996), 228.

²⁰ Cogan, 107.

²¹ Ibid., 106; and Nutting, 111.

²² Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 200.

mission photographed military targets in the western part of the Soviet Union.²³ During the next four months, Eisenhower, who personally authorized each mission of the high-flying reconnaissance plane, increasingly sent U-2s to photograph British, French, and Israeli military sites in the eastern Mediterranean and Mid-East.²⁴ Flying from Adana, Turkey, U-2 pilots passed over Cyprus before heading west to Malta. This route took U-2s over the two islands where the British were building up their invasion forces. Another mission profile took the planes south over Cyprus and continued south to photograph sites in Egypt, Israel, and other nearby countries.²⁵ Starting with four flights in August, the number of U-2 missions over the Mid-East climbed steadily, reaching 14 in November.²⁶ U-2 photographs revealed the extraordinary build up of British aircraft and troops on Cyprus. And, as Eisenhower's journal entry for 15 October noted, a U-2 sortie over Israel turned up 60 French Mystère aircraft where only 24 should have been present.²⁷ By 28 October, the disposition of Israeli forces clearly indicated they would invade Egypt, not Jordan.²⁸ A U-2 flight that day informed Eisenhower that Britain had doubled the strength of its bomber force on Cyprus.²⁹ Though Eisenhower sent personal appeals to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion on 27 and 28 October asking him to avoid a military conflict, it was too late. The U-2s gave Eisenhower important clues about British, French, and Israeli military preparations for, and execution of, their invasion of Egypt. However, the U-2 images could not tell the president the ultimate intentions of his allies and friends.

SIGINT

As with IMINT, Eisenhower's World War II experience had taught him the immense value of SIGINT, and he lavished resources on the fledgling National Security Agency (NSA).³⁰ However, the role SIGINT played in Eisenhower's decision-making during the Suez crisis remains unknown to the public.³¹ The NSA enjoyed close relations with its British counterpart the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and the two agencies reportedly continued

²³ Ibid., 220-223.

²⁴ Cogan, 103.

²⁵ Stephen Ambrose, Ike's Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1981), 274.

²⁶ Cogan, 103.

²⁷ Andrew, 228; and Cogan, 103.

²⁸ Baker, 31.

²⁹ Andrew, 231.

³⁰ Ibid., 199-200 and 216.

³¹ Aldrich, 552-553.

to share information during the crisis.³² As part of a 1948 agreement establishing this Anglo-American working relationship, the two intercept services were not to work against each other, so the U.S. may have been unable to read Britain's diplomatic cables.³³ Christopher Andrew, an authority on intelligence matters, has suggested the U.S. was not even reading French signals, despite France's lax communications security.³⁴ Anthony Nutting, the British Minister of State at the Foreign Office during the Suez crisis, seemed convinced the U.S. could not read British, French, or Israeli diplomatic communications, though other observers disagree. Hugh Thomas, a Foreign Office colleague of Nutting, published an account of the crisis claiming the U.S. was reading diplomatic traffic between Paris and Jerusalem.³⁵ James Bamford, author of the first book about the NSA, boldly wrote: "That the NSA was reading the secret traffic of all three belligerents [Britain, France, and Israel] seems unquestionable."³⁶ Whatever its capabilities regarding British and French signals, the U.S. is credited with having been able to read Israeli military and Egyptian diplomatic signals.³⁷

Even if Eisenhower could not read any of the belligerents' encrypted messages, NSA intercepts undoubtedly alerted him to unusual patterns of activity by America's allies. Purportedly, SIGINT helped administration officials discover high-level meetings and a flurry of diplomatic activity between London, Paris, and Tel Aviv that was taking place around the middle of October.³⁸ Certainly, NSA's work informed Eisenhower of the dramatic rise in the volume of message traffic flowing between Paris and Tel Aviv during the second half of October.³⁹ Eisenhower used this evidence in an effort to prod Eden's government out of the information blackout, but Eden and his emissaries continued the deception about Britain's intention to protect Jordan.⁴⁰ Whether Eisenhower knew anything more from SIGINT remains unknown. Given the high classification of SIGINT data and its extremely limited distribution, it is no surprise that SIGINT collected against allied targets remains the black hole in the missing dimension of the missing dimension of studies on international relations.

³² Cogan, 104; and Andrew, 218.

³³ Cogan, 104.

³⁴ Andrew, 219; Cogan, 104.

³⁵ Aldrich, 553.

³⁶ James Bamford, The Puzzle Palace: A Report on NSA, America's Most Secret Agency (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 320.

³⁷ Cogan, 104-105; Andrew, 218-219. Former Assistant Director of Britain's MI5, Peter Wright, explained how the Egyptian cypher was broken in Peter Wright with Paul Greengrass, Spy Catcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer (New York: Viking, 1987), 82-86.

³⁸ Cogan, 105 and 110-111.

³⁹ Andrew, 231; and Cogan, 104.

HUMINT

Eisenhower does not seem to have benefited much from human-source intelligence during the crisis. The CIA had close working relations with MI6 in the Middle East, but up until October the British and French were quite open about their desires for a quick, forceful settlement of their problems with Egypt. So, there was little about British and French intentions the CIA could tell Washington that Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, hadn't already heard from Eden, Mollet, or their emissaries.⁴¹ Up until the day before the invasion, the CIA apparently lacked any firm details about the French-British-Israeli invasion plans.⁴² Furthermore, by mid-October the American military attaché in Tel Aviv was cut off from his British and French counterparts as part of the complete communications blackout.⁴³ On 24 October, with the blackout in effect, Eisenhower was briefed that Sir Walter Monckton, the British Minister of Defense, was quitting Eden's government because Monckton objected to the planned use of force to resolve the Suez crisis.⁴⁴ With Eisenhower and Foster Dulles duped into believing the British and French would not intervene militarily before the 6 November presidential election, the U.S. leaders pushed off taking any immediate action on Suez and focused on the uprisings in Hungary instead. By one colorful account, HUMINT ultimately alerted the administration to the pending Israeli attack, when the U.S. Military Attaché in Israel informed his Army superiors that his driver—"a reservist with one arm and one leg missing, and blind in one eye"—had just been called to duty.⁴⁵ That degree of mobilization could only mean that Israel was going to war.

Spying on Friends and Allies

Spying, or espionage, "is the clandestine acquisition of secret or protected information on non-U.S. persons or entities."⁴⁶ Obviously, spying on one's friend or ally poses a risk of damaging relations between that nation and the United States. If publicized, it could also damage the image of the U.S. abroad and at home. Used widely or indiscriminately, such spying would

⁴⁰ Nutting, 111.

⁴¹ Andrew, 225; Cogan, 107; and Lucas and Morey, 106.

⁴² John Ranelagh, The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA, revised and updated (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 301.

⁴³ Nutting, 111.

⁴⁴ Andrew, 229.

⁴⁵ Ranelagh, 301-302.

⁴⁶ This definition of espionage was taken from Frederick P. Hitz, "The Future of American Espionage," International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence 13, no. 1 (2000), 2.

tend to corrode American values—particularly the value Americans place in the rule of law.⁴⁷ Given these potential drawbacks, when should American presidents call on the Intelligence Community to target friendly states? What if a friendly state were spying on the U.S.? Would that change the answer? Studying the Suez crisis of 1956 will not yield definitive answers to these important questions, especially since so much remains unknown about who was reading whose communications before and during the crisis. However, Eisenhower’s use of intelligence during the Suez crisis can serve as a springboard for ideas, for ways of thinking about the issue, and for questions to consider when deciding whether or not to spy on one’s friends.

Interestingly, Eisenhower’s spying on the British and French during the Suez crisis seemed to have no discernable impact on relations between the U.S. and its European allies. Whatever problems Eisenhower’s espionage created, they were completely eclipsed by the mutual ill will generated by Anglo-French deception and Washington’s political and economic reaction to the situation. The value of this observation is mitigated of course by the short duration of the spying, and by the nature of the stakes involved in the crisis—Arab relations with the West, Soviet ambitions for greater influence in the Middle East, and NATO unity during an intense period in the Cold War. Clearly the potential impact of future efforts to spy on America’s allies will have to be weighed against the importance of the national interests at stake. The lower the stakes, the more heavily adverse effects of spying will weigh in the balance.

Apparently, technical intelligence, especially U-2 photography and NSA intercepts of communications between Paris and Tel Aviv, provided Eisenhower with the best clues of what America’s friends were up to during the Suez crisis. HUMINT played a smaller role, in part, because the U.S. lacked HUMINT channels for collecting information, which the British and French usually provided freely. However, another impediment to the HUMINT contribution may have stemmed from Eisenhower’s cognitive dissonance concerning British collusion with the French and Israelis. Ike just did not want to believe his friends the British were really committing such an awful mistake—one that could seriously damage Arab relations with the West and allow the Soviets an *entrée* to the Middle East.⁴⁸ Whenever intelligence involves a large degree of human judgement about a person known by the president, there is an increased potential for the president to resolve his cognitive dissonance by sticking with preconceived notions and discarding

⁴⁷ This is not to suggest that American espionage violates American laws. I am merely suggesting that unrestricted espionage targeting one’s allies demonstrates a lack of regard for their laws, which in turn would make it more difficult to maintain respect for laws in general—including America’s laws.

⁴⁸ Cogan, 110 and 119; Andrew, 226.

new intelligence. After all, anyone with the political skills to become president of the United States is probably self-consciously a better judge of other human beings than the vast majority of people in government service—including intelligence analysts. Therefore, IMINT, SIGINT, and physical evidence collected by HUMAN sources, rather than opinions and judgments rendered by analysts, will probably be most persuasive in helping presidents to overcome preconceived biases and to accept new intelligence.

Perhaps, the most significant lesson from the Suez crisis is that the need to know what one's friends are up to can arise quickly, leaving insufficient time to develop HUMINT or SIGINT capabilities suitable to the crisis at hand. It might surprise Americans to know Anglo-American relations reached their lowest point since the Suez crisis in November of 1994 because of events in Bosnia. Relations were so strained between American commanders in NATO and the British general in charge of UN forces in Bosnia, General Sir Michael Rose, that Rose was accused in the press of deliberately luring NATO airmen to areas defended by freshly delivered Bosnian Serb surface to air missiles. The U.S. reportedly learned of Rose's alleged actions through intelligence intercepts of communications between General Rose and his forward air controllers.⁴⁹ Whether or not the story was entirely true, it clearly illustrated how America might unexpectedly find itself at cross-purposes with one of its closest allies. Not all issues involve stakes for which the U.S. will be willing to risk damaging its relationship with an ally. Frederick Hitz, a former Inspector General of the CIA, averred that U.S. presidents do not authorize "collection of intelligence about the industrial capabilities of America's European allies," because such activities would damage NATO, and damage U.S. bilateral relations with its allies.⁵⁰ In words reminiscent of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine for using military force, Hitz suggested American espionage against its allies should be reserved for issues where U.S. vital national interests are at stake.

In a world where reliable data on matters of fundamental importance to the U.S. national security is not assured, justification exists for a resort to espionage to fill those gaps in knowledge. Presidents must be certain, however, that a vital national security interest of the United States is at stake before approving espionage collection that violates an ally's most sensitive national concerns or risks an undue threat of retaliation if revealed.⁵¹

⁴⁹ E. Vulliamy, "How the CIA Intercepted SAS Signals," *The Guardian*, 29 January 1996, cited in Jane M. O. Sharp, *Honest Broker or Perfidious Albion?: British Policy in the Former Yugoslavia* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1997), 43.

⁵⁰ Hitz, 10. Note: America's European allies don't seem to be convinced, see "Interception Capabilities 2000," Report to the Director General for Research of the European Parliament, Scientific and Technical Options Assessment programme office, <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/ic2000/ic2000.htm>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

But how should the U.S. prepare to gather intelligence on its allies given that crises like Suez and Bosnia can arise surprisingly quickly? Current geopolitical trends, such as the increasingly globalized economy, international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international narcotics trafficking, and international crime, suggest U.S. policy-makers and presidents will increasingly need intelligence about allied and friendly states. These trends suggest the missing dimension to the missing dimension in the study of international relations is likely to grow over the next decade.