

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Suez and After: Canada and British Policy in the Middle East, 1956–1960

Janice Cavell

Volume 18, Number 1, 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018258ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/018258ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cavell, J. (2007). Suez and After: Canada and British Policy in the Middle East, 1956–1960. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(1), 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018258ar>

Article abstract

The Suez crisis is generally considered to be a decisive turning-point in Canada's relations with Great Britain. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent and Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson refused to support Britain's military action in Egypt, choosing instead to work through the United Nations for a resolution of the conflict. It seemed that Canada was repudiating a subservient role and declaring its final independence from the mother country. However, the documentary record shows that Canadian politicians and diplomats were in fact eager to work for what they believed to be Britain's good. In their view, Britain had temporarily lost sight of its own, and the western world's, best interests. During the years immediately after Suez, support for British policies was a priority of Canadian diplomats, most notably Arnold Smith, Canada's ambassador to Egypt from 1958 to 1960. Smith played an important role in the resumption of diplomatic relations between Britain and Egypt. Drawing on previously unused documents in the files of the Department of External Affairs, this paper outlines Canadian views of, and Canada's relationship to, British policy in the Middle East during and after Suez. It demonstrates that a "colony to nation" framework is inadequate for the study of the Anglo-Canadian relationship in the years following World War II. Instead, the broader context of Cold War politics must be taken into consideration. The paper also shows that despite the surface differences between Liberal and Conservative foreign policy, there were strong elements of continuity between the St. Laurent and Diefenbaker governments.

Suez and After: Canada and British Policy in the Middle East, 1956–1960

JANICE CAVELL

Abstract

The Suez crisis is generally considered to be a decisive turning-point in Canada's relations with Great Britain. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent and Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson refused to support Britain's military action in Egypt, choosing instead to work through the United Nations for a resolution of the conflict. It seemed that Canada was repudiating a subservient role and declaring its final independence from the mother country. However, the documentary record shows that Canadian politicians and diplomats were in fact eager to work for what they believed to be Britain's good. In their view, Britain had temporarily lost sight of its own, and the western world's, best interests. During the years immediately after Suez, support for British policies was a priority of Canadian diplomats, most notably Arnold Smith, Canada's ambassador to Egypt from 1958 to 1960. Smith played an important role in the resumption of diplomatic relations between Britain and Egypt. Drawing on previously unused documents in the files of the Department of External Affairs, this paper outlines Canadian views of, and Canada's relationship to, British policy in the Middle East during and after Suez. It demonstrates that a "colony to nation" framework is inadequate for the study of the Anglo-Canadian relationship in the years following World War II. Instead, the broader context of Cold War politics must be taken into consideration. The paper also shows that despite the surface differences between Liberal and Conservative foreign policy, there were strong elements of continuity between the St. Laurent and Diefenbaker governments.

Résumé

La crise de Suez est généralement considérée comme un tournant décisif dans les relations entre le Canada et la Grande-Bretagne. Le premier ministre Louis St-Laurent et le sous-secrétaire des Affaires extérieures Lester B. Pearson ont refusé d'appuyer l'action militaire britannique en Égypte, choisissant plutôt de collaborer avec les Nations Unies afin de résoudre le conflit. Le Canada parut alors déclarer une fois pour toute son indépendance par rapport à la mère

patrie. Toutefois, les documents sonores montrent que politiciens et diplomates canadiens ne considéraient pas qu'ils avaient cessé de travailler pour ce qu'ils croyaient être le bien de la Grande-Bretagne. À leurs yeux, le problème était plutôt que la Grande-Bretagne avait temporairement perdu de vue ses meilleurs intérêts et ceux du monde occidental. Au cours des années qui ont immédiatement suivi la crise de Suez, l'appui des politiques britanniques demeura une priorité pour les diplomates canadiens, notamment Arnold Smith, ambassadeur du Canada en Égypte de 1958 à 1960. Celui-ci allait jouer un rôle important dans la reprise des relations entre la Grande-Bretagne et l'Égypte. Inspiré des documents inutilisés des anciens dossiers du ministère des Affaires extérieures, cet article décrit le point de vue des Canadiens à l'égard des relations du Canada et de la politique britannique au Moyen-Orient durant et après la crise de Suez. Il démontre que le récit privilégiant le passage du statut de colonie à celui de pays ne convient pas à l'étude de la relation anglo-canadienne dans les années qui ont suivi la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le contexte plus large des politiques de la guerre froide doit être pris en considération. L'article montre également qu'en dépit de différences superficielles, les politiques étrangères des gouvernements libéral de St Laurent et conservateur de Diefenbaker contiennent d'importants éléments de continuité.

Canada and Britain at the End of Empire

The Suez crisis of 1956 precipitated the most dramatic divergence between British and Canadian foreign policy of the entire twentieth century. The result was bitter humiliation for Britain and diplomatic triumph for Canada, with the Canadian minister for external affairs, Lester Pearson, being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in resolving the crisis. It is, therefore, natural enough that 1956 should be seen in retrospect as the definitive parting of the ways between the mother country and the former colony — the “de facto end of the British Empire in Canada,”¹ as two prominent historians have described

1 Norman Hillmer and J. L. Granatstein, *Empire to Umpire: Canada and the World to the 1990s*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, 1994), 226. Elsewhere, Granatstein describes the support for British actions in Canada as “the last gasp of the old Anglocentrism.” In his view, “The old Canada was going, and the Suez crisis and the responses it provoked demonstrated that fact.” *Twentieth Century Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1986), 307. According to Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, Canadian officials found it “galling” and “infuriating” that “the British were fumbling back into their discarded colonial costumes, picking up the imperial elephant gun, and going hunting for an ‘emerging nation.’” *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 143. See also John English, *The Worldly Years: The Life of Lester Pearson, Volume II: 1949–1972* (Toronto: Knopf, 1992), 130, 135, 144–5; José W. Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945–71* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 115; and John Melady, *Pearson's Prize: Canada and the Suez Crisis* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), 109, 111.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

it. But many Canadians at the time were bitterly critical of the government's actions, feeling that Canada should have stood by Britain's side.² Such emotions may well have contributed to the Liberals' defeat in the 1957 federal election. By the time Pearson actually received his Nobel Prize, his party's 22 year monopoly of power was over. The new government was headed by John Diefenbaker, who made no secret of his strong emotional commitment to Britain and the Commonwealth.

Under Diefenbaker, Canadian diplomats were generally supportive of British policy in the Middle East. In particular, the ambassador in Cairo, Arnold Smith, played an important role in the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the United Arab Republic or UAR (the name given to the short-lived union of Egypt and Syria between 1958 and 1961).³ Smith used his good personal relationship with Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to promote a more positive view of British motives and policy — no easy feat in the tense political atmosphere after Suez, which was worsened by events such as the 1958 revolution in Iraq and by western concerns about Soviet "penetration" of the Middle East. There is, however, no evidence that this was a specifically Conservative, pro-British line imposed from above by Diefenbaker and his secretary of state for external affairs, Howard Green, who had both been ardent and vocal supporters of Britain in 1956. Instead, the main architect of the new policy was Smith himself, a diplomat cast very much in the Pearson mould. Despite outward appearances, there were in fact many elements of continuity between Liberal and Conservative policies in this area.

Canada's refusal to endorse British actions in 1956 and its support for Britain in the years following the crisis were both dictated by the same considerations: the success of the western alliance in the Cold War and the unity of the Commonwealth.⁴ These were, inevitably, the main foreign policy preoccupations of both the Department of External Affairs and the government in

2 See James Eayrs, "Canadian Policy and Opinion During the Suez Crisis," *International Journal* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1957): 97-108; and José W. Igartua, "'Ready, Aye, Ready' No More? Canada, Britain, and the Suez Crisis in the Canadian Press," in *Canada and the End of Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 47-65.

3 Canada played an even more important part in the resumption of relations between the United Arab Republic and Australia. Since 1956 Canada had acted as the protecting power for Australia in Egypt — the first time Canadian diplomats had taken on such a role. On the resumption of relations with Australia, see Janice Cavell, Michael Stevenson, and Kevin Spooner, eds., *Documents on Canadian External Relations* (hereafter *DCER*) Vol. 26 (1959) (Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2006), documents 377-380.

4 On the importance of the Commonwealth to Canada and the other "old dominions" during the 1950s, see Francine McKenzie, "In the National Interest: Dominions' Support for Britain and the Commonwealth after the Second World War," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 34, no. 4 (December 2006): 553-76.

power, whether Liberal or Conservative. To them were added the traditional emotional loyalties to Britain, strengthened by the close working relationship that had long existed between External Affairs and the Foreign Office.⁵ Consultation between British and Canadian officials on matters relating to the Middle East became almost non-existent in November 1956, but was especially frequent during Smith's first year as ambassador, when there was no British, French, or Australian representation in Cairo.

This paper will begin with brief overviews of the British presence in the Middle East and of Canadian policy during the 1956 crisis. It will then examine the situation at the time of Smith's appointment (October 1958), and finally describe Canada's relationship to British policy in the period leading up to and immediately following the resumption of diplomatic relations between Britain and the UAR in December 1959. The archival evidence on Smith's role as an intermediary between Britain and Egypt throws new light on the relationship between Canada and Britain at the end of empire.⁶ There was indisputably a gradual loosening of ties with the mother country throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but both the emotional and the political bonds remained strong even after Suez.⁷ However, my purpose is not merely to demonstrate that this was the case. Instead, this paper will explore the complexity and subtlety of the pragmatic political considerations linking Canada and Britain together in the Cold War period.

By the late 1950s the Canada-UK relationship was deeply enmeshed in broad international concerns. It is, therefore, highly misleading to interpret Canadian actions within the framework of a "colony to nation" narrative. That the end of empire in Canada coincided with the Cold War and decolonization in Asia and Africa was of immense importance. Britain was far more than a mother country (or former mother country) to Canadians in this period: it was a Cold War ally and the leading nation in the Commonwealth. To be properly understood, attitudes toward the UK in both the Pearsonian "golden age" and the Diefenbaker era must be placed in an international context. The conventional picture of Canadian politics and foreign policy during the years from 1956 to 1960 contrasts Liberal continentalism to a lingering colonial mentality

5 See John Hilliker and Greg Donaghy, "Canadian Relations with the United Kingdom at the End of Empire, 1956-73," in *Canada and the End of Empire*, ed. Buckner, 25-46.

6 On the chronology of imperial decline, see John Darwin, "Imperial Twilight, or When Did the Empire End?" in *ibid.*, 15-24.

7 The Liberal Winnipeg *Free Press*, which unhesitatingly condemned British actions in 1956, nevertheless published an editorial urging readers to "Be Fair to Britain." The writer argued that what Britain had done "has to be condemned. There is no dodging this. The last people who should try to dodge it are those Canadians who are most anxious to maintain Canada's links to Britain. ... [T]he proper role of this country is not to be indignant; it is to try to understand and earnestly to seek ways of halting the consequences of the error." (1 November 1956), 29.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

among the Conservatives. However, neither of these stereotypes adequately accounts for Canadian policy during and after Suez.

Canada's Role in the Suez Crisis

In the years before 1956 there seemed to be no connection whatever between the Middle East and Canada's vital interests. Britain had first been drawn into the area by the existence of the Suez Canal. The canal, built as a commercial enterprise by Ferdinand de Lesseps' Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez, opened in 1869. Almost half the shares in the company were owned by the khedive (viceroy) of Egypt, Ismail Pasha. The rest were sold to various stockholders, mainly in France. Ismail Pasha's shares therefore represented a controlling interest. In 1875 Ismail's debts forced him to sell the shares to the British government for four million pounds, giving Britain effective control over this exceptionally important transportation link. The canal was the route not only to India but also to Britain's Far Eastern and Pacific possessions. Even after Indian independence in 1947, Australians and New Zealanders continued to see the canal as essential to their communication with Europe. For Canada, in contrast, nothing of importance was at stake in either the nineteenth century or the first half of the twentieth century.

At first the British preferred to safeguard the canal by shoring up the Ottoman Empire. So precarious, however, did Turkish rule at times seem that Britain sent troops to Egypt in 1882, supposedly as a temporary measure. Though without official standing in Egypt, the British stayed on and on as de facto rulers. When Turkey entered World War I on Germany's side, the British government declared a protectorate over Egypt. After the war, League of Nations mandates over Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine made Britain a major player on the Middle Eastern scene. In Iraq and Transjordan, the British were able to establish a fairly cordial working relationship with the Arab ruling class. In 1922 Egypt nominally became an independent state, ruled by its own king, but in fact British rule continued unchanged. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 formalized the British military occupation of the Canal Zone and the naval base at Alexandria. Throughout the inter-war years, resentment simmered, with occasional outbreaks of violence. At the same time, the question of Jewish immigration to Palestine was a focal point for resentment against Britain by all Arabs.

After World War II the Jewish issue quickly became even more explosive. In the face of violence and terrorism from both sides, late in 1947 the British decided to withdraw from Palestine. The state of Israel was founded in the aftermath of their departure. At the same time, Indian independence marked another retreat from empire. Yet despite the apparent trend, the British were not willing to abandon their influence in the Middle East altogether, for two main reasons: first, with the onset of the Cold War, concerns about possible Soviet activities in the Arab world and Africa grew; and second, in the late 1940s and

early 1950s Middle Eastern oil supplies began to be tapped on a large scale. The British by now had long experience in Middle Eastern affairs, and they still retained their prestige in at least some Arab countries. The United States (US), on the other hand, had little experience or influence in the region, and because of its support for Israel, the US was widely disliked by Arabs. The Middle East therefore seemed destined to remain, with the tacit consent of the Americans, one of the last outposts of empire.⁸

This prospect was not welcome to Egyptian nationalists. In 1952 a revolution led by young military officers overthrew the ineffective King Farouk and replaced him with a new government, led at first by General Mohammad Naguib. However, the real power in Egypt was the charismatic Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, who became prime minister in 1954. Nasser consolidated his power and greatly enhanced his prestige throughout the Arab world when he successfully negotiated an agreement for gradual British withdrawal from the Canal Zone.⁹ By the terms of the original agreement for the construction of the canal, the concession granted by the Egyptian government to the Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez would expire in 1968, and the government was under no obligation to renew it. There was now no hope that after 1968 things would continue more or less as before.

All of this was a serious blow to Britain's (and possibly the west's) position, and to the pro-British upper classes in Iraq and Jordan. Nevertheless, both Britain and the United States were at first prepared to support Nasser. Nasser, however, demanded more than they were willing to give. He wanted arms to protect Egypt against Israel, but the Americans and British were committed to an arms balance between Arabs and Israelis. Nasser therefore turned to the Soviet bloc for weapons in September 1955. In January 1956 Nasser announced a new constitution for Egypt, with a one-party political system and himself as president. He wanted money to build the Aswan High Dam, but at the last

8 This summary is derived mainly from Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East 1914–1971*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981). A more recent general account is D. K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914–1958* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); see especially Chapter 3 on Britain's role in Iraq. On the complex status of the canal between the time of its construction and Nasser's takeover, see Arnold Wilson, "Some International and Legal Aspects of the Suez Canal," *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, 21 (1935): 127–47; and Caroline Piquet, "The Suez Company's Concession in Egypt, 1854–1956: Modern Infrastructure and Local Economic Development," *Enterprise and Society* 5, no. 1 (March 2004): 107–27, especially 111–13, 117–20. On the relationship between British and American policy in the Middle East during the 1950s, see Tore T. Petersen, *The Middle East between the Great Powers: Anglo-American Conflict and Cooperation, 1952–7* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

9 See Michael T. Thornhill, "Britain, the United States and the Rise of an Egyptian Leader: The Politics and Diplomacy of Nasser's Consolidation of Power, 1952–4," *English Historical Review* 119, no. 483 (September 2004): 892–921; and Barry Rubin, "America and the Egyptian Revolution, 1950–1957," *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 73–90.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

moment American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles decided against the deal. In July 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, declaring that he would use the revenues to finance the dam.

To British prime minister Anthony Eden, this move was clear proof that Nasser was another Hitler, who would continue to push for concessions until he was met with force. Though there were pragmatic reasons for the course the British followed, there can be little doubt that Eden and his supporters were influenced by nostalgia for the glory days of empire, and by fears of losing what power and prestige they still retained in a world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. The British entered into a secret plan with the French (who feared the growth of Arab nationalism in Algeria) and the Israelis. On 29 October 1956 Israel attacked Egypt. The British and French then sent in their own troops, ostensibly to separate the two sides and protect the canal. The ruse deceived no one. Eden and his supporters had expected the sympathy and support of the Americans, and they were both amazed and outraged when they did not get it.¹⁰

St. Laurent, Pearson, and the members of the Department of External Affairs were, in turn, astonished and offended by Eden's display of imperial arrogance. However, in refusing to support British actions, they did not see themselves as asserting Canadian freedom from imperial control. Instead, Pearson and his colleagues kept their eyes steadily on what they perceived as the best interests of the western alliance, which were the best interests of Canada and of Britain itself, even if the British had for the time being lost sight of this crucial fact.¹¹ Events in the Middle East had become of vital interest to Canada because of their implications for the Cold War and the Commonwealth, and this, not the quest for a foreign policy independent of Britain or for enhanced standing at the United Nations (UN), was Pearson's motive for becoming actively involved in the crisis. As Canadian diplomat John Holmes noted, "About the last thing anyone involved had time to think of was the fulfilment of 'Canada's role as a middle power.'"¹²

For the pragmatic internationalist Pearson, the ideal situation was that Canada and other members of NATO should be able to follow the joint Anglo-American line at the UN without undue conflict or controversy. In the early stages of the crisis, Pearson fretted that the British had lost their diplomatic "sureness of touch." He and Norman Robertson, the Canadian High

10 The best general account of the crisis is Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

11 As early as September 1956 the possible effect of British and French policy on the solidarity of the western alliance was the focus of Pearson's concerns and a source of intense anxiety to him. See Geoffrey Pearson, "Seize the Day: Suez, 1956," in *Seize the Day: Lester B. Pearson and Crisis Diplomacy*, Geoffrey Pearson (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 142.

12 John W. Holmes, *The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the Search for World Order, 1943–1957*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 357.

Commissioner in London, did not attempt to tell the British what they ought to do about Suez. However, Pearson and Robertson strongly urged the Eden government not to act without the support of the United States and other western countries. Surely, Pearson thought, the British could not fail to heed this advice. But they did, and the widening gap between Britain and the US was “a nightmare” to Pearson and many other Canadians.¹³ On 31 October the Canadian ambassador in Washington, Arnold Heeney, reported that the failure of Britain and France to consult with the US “has been as severe a shock to the USA Government, from the President down to the most junior State Department officials, as the nature and circumstances of the Franco-British action itself. There is no doubt whatever that this is regarded here as a very serious blow to the Western alliance and to the cohesion of the free world.”¹⁴

Pearson condemned the British action not so much because it harked back to the days of European colonial power as because “[t]his ill-conceived and ill-judged enterprise ... revealed a complete misappreciation of world response.” The British were not even astute enough to realize what the American reaction would be. This, Pearson noted, “was no situation for ‘Ready, Aye, Ready’”¹⁵ — not because “Ready, Aye, Ready” had become unthinkable as a Canadian response, but because, as Prime Minister St. Laurent wrote to Eden, it would be “a tragedy beyond repair”¹⁶ if Anglo-American cooperation came to an end. Norman Robertson told Lord Home, the secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, that the UK and France “had somehow got themselves into a truly tragic position. Neither of them had any closer friend and ally than Canada, but at this pass I could not see what we could do to help.”¹⁷ What was unthinkable was that Canada should do anything to widen the growing distance between its two most important allies.

The possibility of constructive Canadian action to bring the United States and United Kingdom back together was quickly opened up by a telegram from Robertson. After his conversation with Lord Home, Robertson was told by another British official, Ivone Kirkpatrick, that “no one would be better pleased than we” if the United Nations agreed to take over the task of maintaining

13 John A Munro and Alex I. Inglis, eds., *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, Vol. 2: 1948–1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 232, 227-8.

14 Heeney to Pearson, 31 October 1956, in Greg Donaghy, ed., *DCER*, Vol. 22 (1956–57 Part I) (Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2001), document 111.

15 Munro and Inglis, *Mike*, 241, 238. In a private letter written on December 5, Pearson summed up the entire crisis by saying that he had “great sympathy” with the British because of “their frustrations and provocations in the Middle East over recent months” and because Dulles’ policy had been “ambiguous and inconsistent.” But, Pearson concluded, “how they expected to correct the situation by the kind of action they took, without consultation with anybody and in the sure knowledge that a large majority of the UN would be mobilized by the Asians and Arabs against them, is beyond my understanding.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 273-4.

16 St. Laurent to Eden, 31 October 1956, *DCER*, Vol 22, document 113.

17 Robertson to Pearson, 1 November 1956, *ibid.*, document 116.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

peace.¹⁸ Pearson had already been mulling over plans for a UN peacekeeping force, and this assurance that such a development would be accepted by Britain spurred him into action. According to John Holmes, under the circumstances it would have been “harder for Canada to sit on the sidelines than to act boldly.”¹⁹ Pearson faced a delicate and difficult task: he had to initiate United Nations action on Suez, while at the same time ensuring that no resolution condemned Britain and France as aggressors. He also came to realize that the British were not wholeheartedly committed to his plan to save their face. Instead, they hoped that their own troops would be among the peacekeepers, thus in effect giving UN sanction to what they had done.

This Pearson was determined to prevent: again, not because he considered the British action inherently immoral, but rather because he knew how strongly such a development would offend the Asian members of the Commonwealth.²⁰ It was the Indians and Pakistanis, not the Canadians, who considered the Suez primarily as an attempt to return to nineteenth-century colonial methods. Once more, in Canadian eyes the British had lost sight of their own true interests, for to damage the Commonwealth would ultimately be to damage both their standing in the world and their ability to keep former colonies out of the Soviet sphere. A division within the Commonwealth was an especially dismaying prospect for Canada, since membership in this international association was seen in Ottawa as an important counterweight to the strong continental pull exerted by the United States. The two other white nations of the “Old Commonwealth,” Australia and New Zealand, firmly supported British actions. While the South African government officially remained aloof and uncommitted on Suez, popular sentiment among the whites there ran strongly in favour of Britain. This added urgency to Canadian concerns about the Commonwealth, and Pearson was determined to demonstrate that at least one white member of the association was sympathetic to the Afro-Asian point of view.²¹

Pearson was certainly hurt that neither the British themselves nor the Canadian public²² appreciated that his efforts were made on Britain’s behalf. So focused, in fact, had he been on saving Britain’s face that there was little time to spare for the other major crisis of 1956, the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The Canadian High Commissioner in New Delhi, Escott Reid, sympathized with

18 Robertson to Pearson, 1 November 1956, *ibid.*, document 118.

19 Holmes, *The Shaping of Peace*, 357.

20 Munro and Inglis, *Mike*, 244, 253.

21 On Pearson’s success in achieving this goal, see Escott Reid, *Hungary and Suez 1956: A View from New Delhi* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1986), 72. On the Commonwealth and Suez, see also Peter Lyon, “The Commonwealth and the Suez Crisis,” in *Suez 1956: The Crisis and its Consequences*, ed. William Roger Louis and Roger Owens (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 257–3.

22 Munro and Inglis, *Mike*, 273–4.

Indian anger over Suez, believing that due to an unjustifiable double standard Canada had judged British aggression far less harshly than it deserved. Reid was convinced that if a more balanced stand had been taken, Canada could have inspired a prompt public condemnation of the Soviet action from India. For the expression of these views, Reid earned only a sharp rebuke from Pearson (so sharp that an aghast Robertson protested on Reid's behalf).²³

There is no reason to believe that Pearson became in any way embittered against the British because of Eden's thankless attitude. Pearson was well aware that there was strong opposition to Eden's action in Britain, and even among members of Eden's own government. "There is no doubt in my mind now that the whole ill-conceived and ill-judged enterprise, at least on the British side, was Eden's," Pearson reported after a visit to London in December.²⁴ In January 1957 Eden resigned and was replaced as prime minister by the more realistic Harold Macmillan (who had abandoned the pro-Suez group during the later part of the crisis). The way was now clear for Canada to rebuild a cordial relationship with the United Kingdom, and had the Liberals remained in power, they would undoubtedly have done so.

The Conservative Government and Anglo-Egyptian Relations

When John Diefenbaker was elected in 1957, his government's interactions with British officials did not initially include any significant discussions of Middle Eastern affairs. But even before the change of government, Arnold Smith had envisioned enhanced communication and consultation on the post-Suez situation in Egypt, and his initiatives would ultimately lead to close cooperation between Canada and the United Kingdom on the Middle East.

Smith fits the stereotype of an "Ottawa man" in the Pearson era almost perfectly. He came from a privileged background, was well-educated, and moved easily in the upper levels of British and international society. The British and Commonwealth connections were extremely important to him, as his work for the Commonwealth Secretariat in the 1960s would demonstrate.²⁵ Born in Toronto in 1915, Smith was educated at Upper Canada College, with a year at a Swiss lycée in 1927–1928. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1935 and won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. In 1939–1940 he taught political economy at the University of Tartu in Estonia and acted as press attaché of the British Legation. In 1940–1943 Smith was in Cairo, where he taught at the

²³ Reid, *Hungary and Suez 1956*, 40–1, 133, 142.

²⁴ Pearson to St. Laurent, 18 December 1956, *DCER*, Vol. 22, document 202; see also Munro and Inglis, *Mike*, 253, 241.

²⁵ See Arnold Smith (with Clyde Sanger), *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1981). In 1965 Smith became the first Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

Egyptian State University. Again, he worked for the British Embassy. He joined the Canadian diplomatic service in December 1942 and was posted to the Soviet Union in 1943–1945. Later postings included New York, Brussels, and Cambodia. Early in 1956 he was appointed counsellor at the Canadian High Commission in London. In London Smith was very much at home, being on close personal terms with senior members of the Foreign Office. He was well placed to observe the deterioration of British-Canadian relations during the Suez crisis. And, at a time when official contact was at an all-time low, Smith was able to provide crucial information on British thinking. Early in the crisis Smith sent Norman Robertson a detailed and accurate appraisal of British motives, based on conversations with a Foreign Office associate.²⁶

Smith had a particular interest in the Middle East and the Islamic world, arising from his years in Cairo and from the influence of his brother, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the author of *Modern Islam in India* (1943) and *Islam in Modern History* (1957).²⁷ After Suez, Smith was quick to see the opportunity for Canada in the absence of British diplomatic representation at Cairo. Cairo, as he later wrote, was in his eyes “one of the most fascinating of diplomatic posts,”²⁸ the key to the Middle East and North Africa. With this important listening-post unavailable to the British, there was a gap which Canadian reports might fill, thereby helping to heal the breach in Anglo-Canadian relations created by Suez.

Such a policy could also give Canada the opportunity to subtly shape British perceptions of and responses to the Middle Eastern situation. An April 1957 telegram from the High Commission to Ottawa, probably written by Smith, suggested that there were “particular reasons for giving info on Egypt to the UK where this seems likely to assist them in developing constructive policies, or avoiding rash ones.”²⁹ When the Middle Eastern heads of posts met with Pearson in London in May 1957, Smith “emphasized the desirability of

26 The memo was immediately forwarded to Pearson and clearly played a role in his assessment of the situation. Smith reported that the decision had been “imposed from the top by Eden and Macmillan” and that Eden was “in a highly emotional state.” Smith’s informant had gone so far as to call Eden “neurotic,” but he also noted the intense frustration caused in London by Dulles’ mixed signals. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Lester B. Pearson Papers, Series N5, Vol. 26, Robertson to Pearson, 1 November 1956, and enclosure, Smith to Robertson, 1 November 1956.

27 Wilfred Smith was the founder of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. He also taught at Harvard and Dalhousie. In the aftermath of the Suez crisis, he wrote a letter to the Conservative Montreal *Gazette* expressing support for Pearson’s policies. Wilfred Smith was dismayed by the caricatured view of Egypt so prevalent in the west, a feeling which it may fairly be inferred was shared by his brother. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Solution Not Adjudication Need In Mid-East,” *Gazette* (5 February 1957), 8.

28 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 5840, file 50134-40, Arnold Smith, Cairo letter 283, 17 May 1960.

29 Ibid., Vol. 7794, file 12554-E-40, London to External telegram 755, 15 April 1957.

increasing the amount of material passed to the United Kingdom Foreign Office.” He argued that “quite apart from the desirability of reciprocating the flow of material which Canada House traditionally receive[s] by reason of its special relationship with the C.R.O. [Commonwealth Relations Office] and the Foreign Office, we should not overlook the fact that the timely transmission of Canadian information emanating from sources, such as Cairo, where the United Kingdom is not represented, would enable us on occasion to exercise a useful influence on United Kingdom policy.” This was agreed to.³⁰

The first secretary in Cairo, Arthur Kilgour, summed up the consensus at the meeting when he observed that Nasser was “not to be ‘brought around’ by economic pressure.” Efforts to isolate Nasser “economically or for that matter politically” had “just the wrong effect.” Such efforts merely “tended to increase his obduracy and to estrange him further from the West.” Kilgour added that it was “doubtful if such pressure had a desirable effect on other Arab leaders, who might feel driven to give some support to Nasser in his difficulties although fundamentally they would prefer to have friendly relations with the West.” Nasser’s regime “was undoubtedly exasperating to deal with,” but this was no reason to conclude that a satisfactory relationship with it could never be attained. The Canadians evidently saw their role as that of persuading the British to take a similar view. John Watkins, the ambassador to the Soviet Union, remarked that the British “probably had retained much more influence than they thought in the Middle East,” and that their position there might yet be restored. Even the Soviets, he suggested, would prefer this to American domination of the region.³¹

The ambassador to Egypt, R. M. Macdonnell, raised the issue of the possible resumption of diplomatic relations between the UK and Nasser’s government. The implication that Canada might take on the role of facilitating this outcome was clear, but Pearson quickly intervened, warning that “Canadian representatives should be careful about any United Kingdom approach designed to have Canada act on behalf of the United Kingdom with a view to the resumption of relations with Egypt.”³² Pearson did not give his reasons for this view,

30 Ibid., H. B. Robinson, “Meeting of Heads of Canadian Posts in the Middle East, London, May 5 to 7, 1957. Exchange of Information on the Middle Eastern Question with Other Governments,” 16 May 1957.

31 Ibid., H. B. Robinson, “Meeting of Heads of Canadian Posts in the Middle East, London, May 5 to 7, 1957. Relations with Egypt.” Kilgour’s comments refer to the British belief that by not concluding a financial agreement with Nasser, thus keeping Egyptian assets in the United Kingdom and United States blocked, they could weaken his regime. The British were determined that any financial settlement must not be on terms that could be interpreted as a victory for Nasser.

32 Ibid. On British discussions during 1957 regarding the possible resumption of relations, see Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, 1952–1967* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), 71-3.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

but it is easy to guess that he feared the matter would not go smoothly, leading to further divisive debates at home in Canada. As a result of Pearson's stance, the increased communication advocated by Smith was not immediately matched by any rise in active Canadian involvement with British policy on the Middle East.

However, the amount of information to be shared was growing at a significant rate. At the time of Suez, Middle Eastern questions were the responsibility of a single External Affairs officer in Ottawa. By the time of Smith's appointment as ambassador to the United Arab Republic in the fall of 1958, there was a Middle Eastern Division with a staff of seven officers. Canada had established embassies in Israel and Lebanon, and was about to open a legation in Iran. Sir Roger Stevens, the British deputy under secretary responsible for the Middle East, was a keen advocate of the new Canadian missions, and expressed a strong wish that Canada should also be represented in Iraq.³³ The volume of reporting from the Middle East had risen enormously.³⁴ However, the Conservative government had not yet used these reports as the basis for a strong new line on Middle Eastern policy.

A few months before Smith went to Cairo, the British position in the Middle East suffered another major setback with the Iraqi revolution of July 1958. The pro-British regime of Nuri as-Said could not endure once Britain had fought against an Arab country in collusion with Israel. Nuri, the young King Feisal II, and several other members of the Hashemite royal family were brutally murdered. An army officer, Abdel Karim Qasim, became the country's new ruler. Initially, it seemed that Iraq might move towards a union with Egypt.

By the autumn of 1958 the British view of Nasser was more restrained than in 1956, but still one of suspicion and intense dislike. The foreign secretary, John Selwyn Lloyd, had supported Eden during the crisis. He now remarked that Nasser "suffered from schizophrenia: there was one side of him which would like to have an accommodation with the West, but there was another which had dreams of a Middle Eastern and African Empire which could only be procured at the expense of Western interests."³⁵ The British particularly feared and resented Nasser's reported attempts to undermine the governments of neighbouring countries. If the majority of Arab countries were ruled by nationalist governments closely allied with Nasser's Egypt, then cooperation among them might result in an increase in the price of oil. For Britain, dependent on Middle

33 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7794, file 12554-40, London to External telegram 4649, 19 December 1958.

34 See Alan Harvey, "Canada Bolstering Middle East Diplomacy," *Ottawa Journal* (31 December 1958). Some journalists called for even more extensive Canadian representation in the region. For example, see Peter Worthington, "Wanted: Canadian Diplomats in the Middle East," *Saturday Night* (1 August 1959): 14-15, 39.

35 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, Conversation between the Secretary of State and the Israeli Ambassador, 2 May 1958 (extract from United Kingdom Foreign Office paper).

Eastern oil supplies, this possibility was far more worrisome than it was for the United States. A Nasser-inspired coup in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait could have severe economic consequences for Britain. Smith was made aware of these views in a meeting with Stevens just before he left London for Cairo.³⁶

The British welcomed reports that Qasim intended to resist closer association with the United Arab Republic, and downplayed his reliance on Communist elements within his government. Since “many of their old contacts were still in responsible positions in Iraq,”³⁷ the British hoped eventually to establish cordial relations with Qasim. The British ambassador in Iraq, Sir Michael Wright, argued that Qasim was only using the Communists and that once he was more firmly established he would take action against them, maintaining a neutral stance between east and west. A second revolt might well bring a pro-Nasser faction to power, and so must be avoided “for [Britain’s] own good and for the good of Iraq.”³⁸ The British now wanted a financial settlement and diplomatic relations with the UAR, but had “no intention of treating Nasser as a white-haired boy and their best friend in the Mideast.”³⁹

The Americans, in contrast, hoped to bring about a substantial improvement in western relations with Nasser. They were also far more apprehensive than the British about the apparent drift of Iraq into the Soviet orbit. The visit of American Assistant Secretary of State William Rountree to Cairo in mid-December 1958⁴⁰ gave rise to cautious optimism in Washington. President Eisenhower “admitted that Nasser has grown up a little” and thought that the Egyptian leader “could oppose [Middle Eastern] Communists better than the U.S.”⁴¹ The Americans were highly gratified when Nasser denounced Communism as the enemy of Arab nationalism in a speech delivered on 23 December. American aid to the UAR, which had been only about a million dollars a year in 1957 and 1958, rose to 150 million dollars in 1959.⁴²

At this time Smith and other Canadian officials were “increasingly concerned” about “the growing divergence of opinion ... between the UK and the USA assessments.”⁴³ Smith’s own opinion was initially much more

36 Ibid., Arnold Smith, London to External letter 1142, 4 June 1958, and London to External telegram 3834, 2 October 1958. Stevens, who impressed Smith very favourably as “intelligent, vigorous, and open minded,” emphasized “the handicap under which the UK labours through lack of a mission in Cairo and said that he would appreciate our passing to the FO as many reports from Cairo as we can.”

37 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7812, file 50351-40, London to External telegram 4281, 14 November 1958.

38 Ibid., London to External telegram 4566, 12 December 1958.

39 Ibid., Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, London to External telegram 3, 2 January 1959.

40 See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Vol. XIII* (hereafter *FRUS*) (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), document 229.

41 Ibid., document 230.

42 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 5549, file 12653-I-40, Cairo to External telegram 14, 7 January 1961.

43 Ibid., Vol. 7154, file 9200-40, London to External telegram 4590, 16 December 1958.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

in harmony with the American view. He believed the Communists were steadily strengthening their position in Iraq, and noted that Egyptian leaders were “disquieted” to find that the result of the Iraqi revolution might not be “an extension of Arab nationalism as they have understood it,” but rather the “advance into [the] Mideast of a new Russian imperialism which takes over from British the tactics of supporting an anti-Egyptian régime in Iraq.”⁴⁴ He was dismayed to hear that Sir Michael Wright in Baghdad had warned Qasim of a planned coup. (The Americans shared this view of the incident, observing that Wright had “played [the] Communist game.”)⁴⁵ In Smith’s view the situation afforded the western powers an ideal opportunity to rebuild their relations with Nasser, and any British support for Qasim was, under the circumstances, extremely ill-advised. He warned that the “present malleable situation, if misunderstood and mishandled, could result in a still further deterioration of western position in [the] UAR.”⁴⁶ To prevent such an outcome, Arab nationalism should be discreetly encouraged as the best alternative to Communism.

In January 1959 a British mission led by Colin Crowe arrived in Cairo, hoping to finalize the financial agreement and to negotiate the resumption of full diplomatic relations with the UAR. The British feared that the Egyptians would offer only consular representation, and that without full diplomatic privileges they would not be able to protect the interests of British nationals seeking the return of their confiscated property. Crowe was in constant touch with the Canadian embassy, not least because the British urgently required the use of Canadian cipher facilities. All confidential communications between the mission and the Foreign Office were sent from the Canadian embassy to Ottawa, and from Ottawa to London.

Relations between Smith and Crowe appear to have been extremely cordial on both the personal and the professional levels. Crowe read some of Smith’s despatches to Ottawa and encouraged the idea that they should be shared with the Foreign Office.⁴⁷ He consulted Smith as well as the American ambassador, Raymond Hare, on many details of the negotiations. In talks with various Egyptian officials (with whom he had established excellent relations), Smith sought to allay the profound suspicion of the UK as the enemy of Arab nationalism that still prevailed in Cairo.⁴⁸ Ali Sabry, the Egyptian minister for presidential affairs, told Smith that he feared the British intended to encourage

44 Cairo to External telegram 3, 12 January 1959, *DCER*, Vol. 26, document 363.

45 *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, document 229.

46 Cairo to External telegram 3.

47 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7812, file 12653-AB-40, Cairo to External telegram 48, 26 January 1959.

48 For example, see *ibid.*, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, Cairo to External telegram 25, 21 January 1959; Cairo to External telegram 57, 28 January 1959; and Cairo to External telegram 253, 26 March 1959.

Communism in Iraq, resulting in a western boycott of Iraqi oil, which would in turn reduce the country to “bankruptcy and social chaos.” Then the British would support a coup by a “strong man ... who would reestablish a regime rather like that of Nuri Said.” Smith replied “that personally I had considered some aspects of UK Mideast policy at times unwise and even foolish, but that I knew it was not ... deviously Machiavellian Every responsible and intelligent person in the west recognized that the future of Mideast would be determined by actions of Mideast peoples themselves, unless of course they invited in the Russians.” He pointed out that the British were “very much on [the] defensive” in the region.⁴⁹

The financial agreement was signed on 28 February. However, there was no provision for the resumption of formal relations even at the consular level. Crowe, therefore, remained dependent on Canadian facilities as he worked to implement the agreement. Despite the excellent relations between the two men, when Smith heard rumours of another impending coup attempt in Iraq (possibly with Egyptian and American backing), he did not pass this information to Crowe. To Ottawa, Smith explained that he did not “think it would be in UK interest or that of the west in general to tip off [Qasim] again, and I would not ... want to be a party to any such action.” He feared that any leak to the British might compromise Canada’s “reputation here for independence of view.”⁵⁰ However, this action clearly went against the grain: Smith wrote that he “greatly dislike[d] the idea of withholding from our UK friends reports of developments in which they would presumably be closely interested.”⁵¹

The attempted coup took the form of a revolt in the Iraqi city of Mosul. It was quickly put down by forces loyal to Qasim. From this point forward, Smith was increasingly receptive to the British view that, whatever his failings, Qasim had the ability to maintain power and was, therefore, the best hope for stability in Iraq. At the same time, the failure of the Mosul revolt to topple Qasim forced Nasser to acknowledge what Smith called the “inadequacy if not ... indeed the bankruptcy of his essentially revolutionary foreign policy of recent years.”⁵² As a result, the Egyptian president became slightly more willing to pursue a moderate policy towards both Iraq and the United Kingdom.

Near the end of March, the British High Commission in Ottawa informed External Affairs that the UK intended to sell military equipment, including Canberra bombers and Centurion tanks, to Iraq in order to keep Qasim from any further drift towards Moscow. “UK government accepts that UAR will misinterpret or misrepresent their action, but [Sir Humphrey] Trevelyan thinks

49 Ibid., Vol. 7154, file 9200-40, Cairo to External telegram 56, 28 January 1959.

50 Ibid., Cairo to External telegram 89, 7 February 1959.

51 Ibid., Cairo to External telegram 94, 9 February 1959.

52 Ibid., Vol. 5840, file 50134-40, Cairo to External telegram 654, 4 August 1959.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

there is a good chance that Cairo will not learn of action for some time,” Smith was informed. Ottawa considered it “unlikely” that the sale would remain secret for long, and accordingly encouraged the British to give Nasser advance notice.⁵³ Smith emphatically agreed, as did Crowe.⁵⁴

Several of Smith’s telegrams on this matter were read by Selwyn Lloyd, and they influenced his decision to make an approach to Nasser.⁵⁵ The British informally inquired whether Smith “could be used as the channel of communication.”⁵⁶ Ever mindful of the need to keep Anglo-American relations on a cordial basis, External Affairs first ascertained through the embassy in Washington that the Americans, though not enthusiastic about the British plan, were willing for it to go ahead. Ambassador Heeney reported that the Americans readily admitted they had “virtually no capacity to influence the course of events in Iraq, as the UK still has,” and that they were, therefore, “content to let the UK make the running there.”⁵⁷ However, Ottawa pointed out to Smith that “the use of a purely Canadian channel would defeat much of the purpose of having the U.K. inform the U.A.R. in advance.” Prime Minister Diefenbaker was consulted, and he decided that Crowe should deliver the message if possible; Smith would, if necessary, arrange an interview with “a suitably senior UAR minister.”⁵⁸ But when the British message was ready, Selwyn Lloyd – evidently fearing a rebuff or insult related to Crowe’s lack of diplomatic status – again “urgently” asked that Smith deliver it.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, Smith was absent from Cairo when permission to do so arrived from Ottawa. Crowe’s request for a meeting was flatly rejected by the Egyptian foreign minister, Zulficar Sabri, one of the most anti-British members of the government. Smith, however, was able to obtain a two-hour interview with Nasser, who “received thoughtfully and very well the letter and my amplifying comments.” Nasser “appeared to understand and respect” the British decision and “expressed warm appreciation of our action in delivering UK message and discussing matter with him.” On the subject of diplomatic relations, Smith argued that without an exchange of ambassadors and views, the UK and the UAR would only become more estranged. As matters stood, the Egyptians

53 Ibid., Vol. 8412, file 11044-CF-40, External to Cairo telegram ME-62, 27 March 1959. See also M. K. Ewans to E. R. Rettie, 31 March 1959, on the same file.

54 Ibid., Cairo to External telegrams 213 and 264, 28 March 1959.

55 Ibid., Washington to External telegram 807, 3 April 1959.

56 See *ibid.*, London to External telegrams 956 and 957, 31 March 1959; and External to London telegram ME-69, 3 April 1959.

57 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 6093, file 503510-40, Washington to External telegram 915, 16 April 1959.

58 Memo for the Prime Minister, 2 April 1959, *DCER*, Vol. 26, document 364.

59 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, Foreign Office to UK Delegation Cairo 172, 6 May 1959. The message (Foreign Office to UK Delegation Cairo 173, 6 May 1959) and Selwyn Lloyd’s suggestions for additional points Smith might make in conversation (Foreign Office to UK Delegation Cairo 174, 6 May 1959) are also on this file.

had to rely on possibly inaccurate press reports for their picture of British policy. Smith suggested that Nasser “could gain a great deal by having an intelligent and able representative in London ... [and] a good UK ambassador in Cairo.” He told Nasser that “[a]mbassadors of democratic countries usually tended to grasp and sympathize with the legitimate interests and viewpoints of the countries in which they live, and were thus often the most persuasive and effective advocates within their own government machine of the views of the governments to which they are accredited.”

Nasser acknowledged the truth of Smith’s statements but asked, “What do you want me to do? Do you expect me to welcome the British in Cairo with open arms after all that they have done, not ... only in November 1956 but subsequently?” This question, Smith noted, seemed to reflect “genuine perplexity,” and Nasser appeared eager for a discussion of the matter. Smith replied that policy disagreements should not preclude diplomatic relations. “Exchanging representatives,” he argued, “should not ... be considered the reward for acceptable behaviour, or a point for bargaining to induce a more welcome policy, but rather an essential instrument and first step in making possible a gradual improvement in relations.” Nasser “listened thoughtfully to this and [said] that he intended to undertake a re-examination of the whole subject of relations with [the] UK.”⁶⁰

Selwyn Lloyd observed that this response was “much more favourable than we could reasonably have hoped.”⁶¹ He reported to Macmillan that “it seems as though Colonel Nasser and his colleagues are prepared to think again about their relationship with this country. Although I still fundamentally distrust him, I think it is wholly to our advantage to procure a détente in our relations.”⁶² Sir Roger Stevens told Canadian officials in London that he “regarded Nasser’s reaction to Smith’s approach as a fact of the greatest political importance.”⁶³ Excerpts from Smith’s reports were also passed on to the Americans, and the embassy in Washington reported that the State Department was “surprised and gratified [by] Nasser’s well-balanced reaction to the UK proposal ... and paid tribute to our ambassador’s part in bringing about this favourable reaction.”⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the more harmonious atmosphere was quickly destroyed by an indiscreet comment from John Profumo (then minister of state for foreign affairs) in the British House of Commons. In response to charges from the opposition that the arms sale would damage British relations with Egypt, Profumo revealed that Nasser had been told about it in advance and had not

60 Cairo to External telegram 419, 11 May 1959, *DCER*, Vol. 26, document 365.

61 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, Foreign Office to UK Delegation Cairo 199, 15 May 1959.

62 Quoted in McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power*, 154.

63 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, London to External telegram 1486, 12 May 1959.

64 Ibid., Vol. 7812, file 12653-AB-40, Washington to External telegram 1280, 28 May 1959.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

objected.⁶⁵ Nasser was infuriated by the implication that he had endorsed the British action and, for a time, he claimed to believe that he had been deliberately duped. In the subsequent media coverage, an Egyptian radio station revealed that Smith had acted as the channel of communication. Smith strongly recommended that no statement be made on the matter in Ottawa, since further publicity could only damage Canada's generally very positive image in Egypt.⁶⁶ The British took a conciliatory and apologetic line, with the result that Nasser's resentment quickly subsided.

In response to Smith's report that Nasser seemed willing to review and reconsider his policy towards the United Kingdom, Selwyn Lloyd requested that Smith "take a suitable opportunity of pursuing the matter with the Egyptian government." He noted that it would be extremely useful if Smith could correct Nasser's "apparent misconceptions of United Kingdom policy."⁶⁷ Smith accordingly had "a number of talks" with various ministers and officials, in which he emphasized his hope for more normal relations between the UK and the UAR. He usually received "indefinite, though not ... discouraging, rejoinders," and was repeatedly assured that Nasser "really was studying seriously the question of relations with [the] UK."⁶⁸ In October 1959 Smith had another long discussion with Nasser, who told him that diplomatic relations with the UK were "definitely on the agenda," since without British and French representation in Cairo, the UAR might develop an undesirable bias towards the Communist view.⁶⁹ Smith summed up Egyptian feelings on the matter by saying that the government's decision was caused not by "any particular affection for British blue eyes," but rather by "their analysis of the dangers of Communism in Mideast and Africa, their assessment of the general balance of political forces, and their appreciation of long term UAR interests."⁷⁰

65 United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Debates*, Vol. 605 (1958–1959), 839.

66 Smith's role as intermediary between the United Kingdom and Nasser received little publicity in Canada. For one of the few Canadian articles on the subject, see David Willcock, "How Mr. Smith Helped Britain and Nasser Make Up," *Weekend Magazine* 10, no. 21 (21 May 1960): 2–4. The episode was subsequently forgotten. It is not discussed in the major works concerned with Diefenbaker's foreign policy: Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1995); Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); and John F. Hilliker, "The Politicians and the 'Personalties'": The Diefenbaker Government and the Conduct of Canadian External Relations," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* (1984): 152–67. Nor is it mentioned in John Hilliker and Donald Barry, *Canada's Department of External Affairs, Volume II: Coming of Age, 1946–1968* (Ottawa: The Institute of Public Administration of Canada/ McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

67 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7810, file 12653-Y-40, F. E. Cumming-Bruce to Norman Robertson, 8 June 1959.

68 Ibid., Vol. 7811, file 12653-Y-40, Cairo to External telegram 642, 3 August 1959.

69 Ibid., Vol. 5840, file 50134-40, Cairo to External telegram 948, 19 October 1959.

70 Ibid., Vol. 7807, file 12653-I-40, Cairo to External telegram 1071, 24 November 1959.

The resumption of diplomatic relations was announced on 1 December.⁷¹ On the same day, Selwyn Lloyd sent a personal message to Howard Green, thanking him and Smith for their assistance, and noting that “[w]ithout your aid we should have had a great deal more difficulty in arranging for the resumption of relations and over other problems.” Green replied, “We welcomed the opportunity to extend any help within our capacity.”⁷² This satisfactory conclusion to joint British-Canadian efforts in Cairo did not, however, signal a period of complete harmony either in the two countries’ views on Middle Eastern policy or in British relations with the UAR.

By the autumn of 1959 Ottawa was increasingly reluctant to endorse British views on Iraq. This trend was apparently sparked by G. G. Riddell of the Middle Eastern Division, who peppered the margins of various documents on the subject with sardonic comments on Qasim and on British diplomacy. At the same time, disagreements over Iraq and Israel slowed the progress of better British relations with the UAR. Privately, Nasser and other Egyptian politicians confided to Smith that they would be willing to make a peaceful settlement with Israel, but they did not as yet dare to mention such a possibility in public. Many formidable obstacles stood in the way of a settlement and there were, in Smith’s words, “no grounds at all for complacency” about either UK-UAR relations or the Middle Eastern situation in general.⁷³ In May 1960 Smith noted the “evident hesitation by the U.A.R. leaders to consolidate further the improved political relations with the U.K.”⁷⁴ All this, however, mattered less and less in terms of Anglo-Egyptian relations because, as Selwyn Lloyd informed the meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in the same month, the United Kingdom had decided “to disengage from the political conflicts between Arab States.” The problems of the Middle East, Lloyd conceded, “could best be tackled through the United Nations since any unilateral approach seemed inevitably to rouse suspicions.”⁷⁵

When Smith left Cairo in January 1961, he reported unhappily that in his last conversation with Nasser, the Egyptian leader had taken a highly belligerent and anti-western stance. Nasser remarked that he did not “really need [London] or [Washington], whereas they did need to preserve their interests in the Middle East.” In response, Smith expressed concern about the possibility of a “downward spiral” in relations, and he once again pointed out that there was

71 *Debates*, Vol. 614 (1959–1960), 1011–13.

72 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7811, file 12653-Y-40, Selwyn Lloyd to Green, 1 December 1959, and Green to Selwyn Lloyd.

73 Arnold Smith, memo for the Prime Minister, 8 September 1960, in Janice Cavell, ed., *DCER*, Vol. 27 (1960) (Ottawa: Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2007), document 518.

74 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 5840, file 50134-40, Arnold Smith, Cairo despatch 283, 17 May 1960.

75 *Ibid.*, Vol. 5825, file 50131-40, Extract from minutes of tenth meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers, 11 May 1960.

SUEZ AND AFTER: CANADA AND BRITISH POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1956–1960

“an underlying common interest between the UAR and the West,” that of preventing Communist domination of new nations in the Middle East and Africa. Though Smith’s arguments did not seem to have much effect on this occasion, the interview ended with “kind and rather flattering comments by Nasser about Canada’s goodwill.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

As Smith summed it up in a memo to Diefenbaker, the year 1959 had seen major progress in British and western relations with the UAR. Canada’s interest in the situation was “political, and more as a member of ‘the West’, than bilateral.” The immediate danger in the Middle East was “a sudden crisis which could lead to military hostilities on some scale, small or great, with the possibility of direct great power intervention.” The other — and, in the long term, perhaps even more significant — question involved was that of the west’s relations with former colonies.⁷⁷ In the Arab world and elsewhere, as Smith had pointed out in an earlier document, there was a very strong “emotional antipathy” to and suspicion of the west, arising from the past imperial activities of Britain and France. Canada, as a former colony itself, had “a significant opportunity and hence responsibility” to act as an intermediary, soothing such fears for the sake of the western alliance.⁷⁸

In supporting British policy during 1959, therefore, Smith, Green, and Diefenbaker — for all their emotional ties to Britain — believed that they were promoting Canada’s national interest, which was inextricably bound up with the success and prestige of its Cold War allies. If what the British wanted from Canada had seemed not to be ultimately in the best interests of the west as a whole, or if the Americans had strenuously objected, the Canadians would not have done what they did. The Conservative government’s position was, therefore, surprisingly close to the much better known stance taken by Pearson and St. Laurent in 1956. The Liberals did not necessarily look forward to a world in which all the bonds with Britain would be broken, nor did the Conservatives want to retain the last vestiges of colonial subordination. Instead, the two parties shared a vision of Britain as one of Canada’s closest partners in world affairs. To Liberals and Conservatives alike, the multilateral systems to which the mother country and the former colony both belonged mattered far more than did the bilateral relationship with Britain itself. The gradual loosening of ties between Canada and the United Kingdom was a process full of unexpected turns and seeming contradictions, due to the tense and complicated international framework in which it took place. Close political cooperation between

76 Cairo to External telegram 693, 28 December 1960, DCER, Vol. 27, document 519.

77 Smith, memo for Prime Minister, 8 September 1960.

78 LAC, RG 25, Vol. 7602, file 11253-B-40, Cairo to External telegram 881, 6 October 1959.

Canada and the UK did not end with Suez, but it was as a fellow member of the western alliance and the Commonwealth, not as a mother country, that Britain received Canadian support and assistance in the Middle East at the end of empire. The story of Canada's development "from colony to nation" is incomplete without this international dimension.

JANICE CAVELL works in the Historical Section, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, where she edits the series *Documents on Canadian External Relations*.

JANICE CAVELL travaille à la Section des affaires historiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce international du Canada, où elle dirige la publication sérielle des *Documents relatifs aux relations extérieures du Canada*.