

THE SITUATION IN EGYPT

*Speech by the Prime Minister of Australia in the House of Representatives,
Canberra, on 1 November 1956*

The facts in relation to the Middle East are not as yet completely clear, though events are obviously developing very rapidly.

The movement of Israeli troops across the Egyptian frontier occurred only a few days ago, but it was preceded by events going back over some years. Twelve days ago the Israeli Prime Minister made a speech in which he discussed the charges made against Israel of conducting forays across her frontiers. He countered this by saying that Israel had a perfect right to self-defence to seek redress for attacks made inside her own frontiers. He complained that the United Nations authorities had shown a tendency to transform the armistice agreements into unilateral obligations by Israel to the United Nations and ignore breaches of them by the Arab States. He said that the helplessness of the United Nations regarding Israel's passage through the Suez Canal had been obvious for years. There can be little doubt that around the Israeli frontiers the faults have by no means been all on one side.

The plain fact is that Israel exists in a state of international tension. Egypt claimed months ago to be technically at war with Israel and has, in fact, throughout used that as the justification for her exclusion of Israeli ships from the Canal.

Following upon his recent coup in respect of the Suez Canal, the Egyptian President has increasingly felt that he can defy the great and interested nations. It is well known that he has established military contacts with Syria and has been actively developing his own position by propaganda in the states east of Jordan.

It is not my intention at the present time to examine whether the Israeli invasion of Egypt falls within either the letter or the spirit of the relevant agreements. But it seems to be only just to point out that the geographical and political situation of Israel is such as to give the Israeli people the greatest feeling of apprehension.

However, when the invasion occurred, Egypt, as was to be expected, put in train military measures to repel it. Within a relatively few hours it therefore became clear that, if the invasion were resolutely pursued and resolutely resisted, there would, almost inevitably, be fighting over and around the Suez Canal with quite probably a complete interruption of traffic, loss of ships and lives, and a high degree of danger that the Canal itself might be effectively closed for a long time. In this state of affairs, the matter was promptly taken to the Security Council. What happened there is fairly well known but I will briefly recall it.

When it first became known to us that the Security Council was meeting urgently, our instructions to our representative on the Council, Dr Walker, were that before any resolution was passed the Council should satisfy itself about the facts which, at the time, were in Canberra completely obscure; we pointed out to him that judgment by the Security Council should not be too hasty and should follow a quick ascertainment of the facts rather than precede it. The Council had placed before it by the representative of the United States a resolution in the following terms:

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Security Council noting that the armed forces of Israel have penetrated deeply into Egyptian Territory in violation of the Armistice Agreement between Egypt and Israel, expressing its grave concern at this violation of Armistice Agreement:

- (1) Calls upon Israel and Egypt immediately to cease fire.
- (2) Calls upon Israel immediately to withdraw its armed forces behind established Armistice lines.
- (3) Calls upon members, (a) to refrain from use of force or threat of force in the area in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations, (b) to assist the United Nations in ensuring integrity of Armistice Agreements, (c) to refrain from giving any military, economic or financial assistance to Israel so long as it has not complied with this resolution.
- (4) Requests the Secretary-General to keep the Security Council informed in compliance with this resolution and to make whatever recommendations he deems appropriate for the maintenance of international peace and security in the area by implementation of this and prior resolution.

It will be seen that this resolution called upon Israel to withdraw its armed forces behind certain Armistice lines, called upon all members to refrain from the use of force or threat of force, and to refrain from giving any military, economic, or financial assistance to Israel so long as it had not complied with the resolution.

Great Britain and France voted against this resolution, being plainly of opinion that it was aimed at imposing disabilities upon Israel, and Israel only. The Australian representative abstained from voting for, by the time the resolution reached us, it was too late to add to the instructions already given and, in any event, the investigation of the facts asked for by Dr Walker had not occurred. His abstention was, therefore, the sensible and proper course. Subsequently the Soviet Union proposed a resolution in the following terms:

Security Council noting that the armed forces of Israel have penetrated deeply into Egyptian Territory in violation of the Armistice Agreement between Egypt and Israel, expressing its grave concern at this violation of Armistice Agreement:

- (1) Calls upon Egypt and Israel immediately to cease fire.
- (2) Calls upon Israel immediately to withdraw its armed forces behind established Armistice lines.
- (3) Requests to Secretary-General to keep the Security Council informed in compliance with this resolution and to make whatever recommendations he deems appropriate for the maintenance of international peace and security in the area by implementation of this and prior resolution.

This was voted for by Dr Walker, since it appeared to embody acceptable general principles but it was, having regard to the developments which were then occurring, voted against by Great Britain and France with the United States abstaining.

The disability attending the Security Council's deliberations is not so much that there were vetoes, since these are to be expected in cases where international tension is high and where the permanent members do not find themselves all on one side. But it is, in our opinion, a great misfortune that differences of view should have occurred between Great Britain and

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France on the one hand, and the United States on the other. Such differences, which proceed from honest divergences upon matters of judgment, can easily be fanned into bitterness by intemperate statements by observers in both continents.

We have, in these circumstances, heard with pleasure the statement made this morning by President Eisenhower. True, in that statement he has clearly maintained the American view that force in the Middle East is both unwise and improper. But he went on to say that what he had said on that point was in no way to minimize American friendship for Great Britain and France, and American determination to maintain that friendship. He added, no doubt with lively recollection of the events in August and September, that Britain and France have been subject to repeated provocation.

To return to the narrative, we were early yesterday morning advised from our Acting High Commissioner in London that the United Kingdom had in mind calling upon both Israel and Egypt to cease fighting and to withdraw their forces from the neighbourhood of the Canal. At 1 p.m. yesterday, we were advised that the matter was under most urgent consideration by the United Kingdom Cabinet. At 1.30, we learned that Great Britain and France had delivered what was in effect an ultimatum to both Egypt and Israel calling for an answer within twelve hours.

The terms of that ultimatum required that both sides should stop all fighting immediately and withdraw their forces to a distance of ten miles from the Suez Canal. Furthermore, in order to separate the belligerents and guarantee freedom of transit through the Canal, the Egyptian Government was asked to agree that Anglo-French forces should move temporarily into key positions at Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez.

Immediately thereafter, we learned that Egypt had rejected the ultimatum, though Israel was prepared to act upon it if Egypt was also agreeable. It is, as yet, not clear what military operations have been instituted by Great Britain and France but the House will be informed of any developments.

I now proceed to say something about two questions which will present themselves to the minds of honourable Members in relation to the actions of Great Britain.

First, is the United Kingdom at fault in not having engaged in a pre-consultation with the other British Commonwealth countries? Our answer to this question is that she was not at fault at all. The circumstances were those of great emergency. Hostile armed forces were rapidly approaching each other, and extensive combat was imminent. As I have said, in that combat vital interests in the passage of the Canal were quite likely to suffer the most serious damage. The Canal is an international waterway with a guaranteed freedom of passage for the ships of all nations; but that guarantee would cease to have much value if the Canal itself were put out of action by becoming part of a theatre of active war. There was literally no time to be lost if any action was to be taken to keep the combatants out of the Canal area, and afford it proper protection.

Effective consultation (and I say 'effective' because a mere 'form of consultation' would have been quite useless) would plainly have occupied considerable time and the urgent position might have fallen into irretrievable disaster. In our opinion, therefore, Great Britain, whose Canal and other Middle East economic interests are so vast, was correct in proceeding upon

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her own judgment and accepting her own responsibility. We are not living in an academic world. The normal processes of consultation should always be followed wherever possible but there are instances like the present one in which events move too fast for normal processes.

The second great question that arises is as to the propriety of the action taken by Great Britain and France. Upon this point the Government of Australia believes that the action was proper. It had already been demonstrated, in the case of the Israeli ships, that a resolution passed by the Security Council and condemning Egypt can be set at nought in the absence of strong executive action. Israel has also ignored some United Nations views. It was quite clear that the procedures of the Security Council were such that even assuming that some resolution could be carried, the Canal would have been involved in war long before any United Nations' action could become effective. Great Britain and France, therefore, decided that they would, so to speak, 'hold the pass'. Their purpose, as they plainly state, was to have the Israeli and Egyptian forces withdrawn from the Canal for a distance of ten miles on either side so that the operation of the Canal would not be menaced. Their action, so considered, was a police action taken in a state of great emergency and was in fact calculated to keep the combatants apart and to enable counsels of moderation thereafter to prevail.

We see nothing sinister in all this. On the contrary, it seems to us to be quite realistic and to pay due regard to the moving and inexorable facts of life.

As I have said, it is a great misfortune that there should have arisen public differences between those great democracies whose friendly co-operation is so vital to us all and any breach between whom can give satisfaction only to Communist powers in their continuing 'cold war'.

I have myself urged upon British and American leaders that consultations should speedily occur on a high level, in order to reconcile any differences of opinion and produce a result satisfactory to all. I have a profound respect for the efforts made by both President Eisenhower and Mr Dulles to keep the peace of the world. Mr Dulles has, in particular, been the subject, in my opinion, of a great deal of hostile but uninformed criticism. But I would like to urge with all humility that our friends in America should understand the pressure of events upon both Great Britain and France, and the true nature of the action taken by them; action which, if both resolute and prompt, may well be the only means now existing for preventing a general conflagration in the Middle East.

I could perhaps sum this aspect of the matter up by saying that the Anglo-French action represents an emergency measure by two of the great democratic powers. Their object is not to make war but to prevent war by separating two belligerents.

They are not seeking territorial advantage or subjugation of peoples but are aiming to assure to the whole world the treaty rights of continued free access to the international waterway by protecting its installations, the ships that use them, and the people who travel in those ships.

They are not seeking to impose an arbitrary settlement on the Egypt-Israel dispute but to discharge a limited function which will enable a settlement to be reached.

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They have made it clear that they are not seeking to maintain forces permanently in Egypt but will withdraw them as soon as the immediate purpose has been achieved.

They are not seeking to usurp the right of the Security Council to attempt to settle the Egypt-Israel dispute but are determined to ensure that when choosing a method of settlement the Security Council will not have to face the fact of the prior destruction or dislocation of the Suez Canal.

Above all there is, as I believe, no desire to involve or confuse a settlement of the dispute about the operation of the Suez Canal with other Middle East disputes, but to prevent that involvement.

The practical effect of allowing hostilities between Egypt and Israel to develop over the Canal would be that, in future, efforts to obtain agreement on the vitally important Suez Canal question would be disastrously affected by the efforts of the present belligerents to use their military position as a factor in the settlement of a problem in which these considerations would be entirely out of place.

I remind the House that all the negotiations with Egypt about the Canal have been designed to produce a peaceful settlement giving effective guarantees of a non-political administration of the Canal. It would be tragic if this great matter became obscured.

I advise the House, if I may, against hasty judgments on the facts. Notwithstanding the elaborate provisions made by the Security Council for observers, there has yet been no report from these observers; and there is still much room for doubt as to the precise nature of aggression and the identity of the people responsible.

In this statement, I am indicating the views of the Australian Government. We have not been asked to make any commitments ourselves nor have we made any. But I hope and believe that Australia will never be unwilling to offer its opinion upon a matter which so vitally concerns the United Kingdom and all those countries of the British Commonwealth to whom the Suez Canal is of vital economic importance.

May I remind the House that it is still open to Egypt, as Sir Anthony Eden has made clear, to end the present military operations by accepting the proposition that, like Israel, it should withdraw its troops for ten miles from the Canal so that great international interest will not be subordinated to what might, under other circumstances and in another place, be regarded as a purely local dispute.