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Lessons for Libya?

Flawed Policy and the Inevitability of Military Failure: The Anglo-French Suez Expedition of 1956

by Brian C. Collins

If war is an extension of policy, then it can be naturally derived that wars will not succeed if based upon poor policy. No doubt the use of force in the modern geo-political environment is a delicate matter and, should armed intervention be advocated, the realization must exist among decision-making principals that no amount of tactical brilliance can overcome either gross political miscalculations or ambiguous strategy. The sum effect of bad policy is failure. Perhaps no lesson demonstrates this axiom more than the Suez crisis of 1956. The disastrous outcome of the Anglo-French expedition of that year was not the result of tactical incompetence, but rather a consequence of flawed policy.

Fundamentally flawed policy will inherently manifest itself in poor campaign design. The Anglo-French Suez expedition of 1956 - known as Operation REVISE - may have proven largely successful tactically, but its greater failure was a result of myopic administration at the national level. By not allowing the conduct of a military operation of scope necessary to achieve stated strategic objectives, the failure of REVISE was preordained. Political limitations are expected in the conduct of military operations; however, should those limitations become too great it becomes prudent to pursue other alternatives.

This paper will examine the Anglo-French Suez expedition in greater detail to illustrate this point. In order to do so, it will be necessary to first detail the events precipitating the Suez crisis of 1956. From this point it will be possible to address the development of the Anglo-French campaign plan itself, followed by a brief overview of the actual execution of the military operation. Using the principles of "campaigning" reflected in United States Marine Corps doctrine as a baseline, the relationship of strategy to the operational level of war in this instance will be considered.¹ In the end, the dissonance between the purpose of REVISE and the method to achieve it will be readily apparent.

Events Leading to the Suez Crisis

Three main events led the British and French governments to embark upon military action in 1956. The first was the rise of Arab nationalism as advocated by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. On 23 July 1952, a military coup in Egypt deposed King Farouk. The Free Officers, representatives of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), assumed power in the country and began to advocate a pan-Arab state to include portions of North Africa, the

¹To reference United States Marine Corps doctrine regarding campaigning, see U.S. Department of the Navy, MCDP 1-2 Campaigning (Washington, D.C.: USMC, 1997).

Arabian Peninsula, and Mesopotamia.² This was a disturbing movement to many. For Britain, Arab nationalism represented a threat to the Hashemite dynasty from which the majority of petroleum was imported to the United Kingdom.³ The French, fighting insurgencies in its North African possessions, also were concerned of the effect that rising Arab sentiment may have on its efforts to quell discontent and asset control over its colonial holdings. The Israeli reaction to this must also be noted given their later involvement in the Suez adventure. Similar to France, Israel was actively combating Arab partisans who were infiltrating from neighboring states and territories to launch strikes designed to destabilize the state of Israel. The potential that pan-Arab unity could exacerbate this trend was disturbing.

Equally disturbing was Egypt's other actions which were viewed as increasingly provocative to the status quo powers. In September 1955 and ostensibly in response to Israeli incursions into the Gaza, Egypt strengthened its blockade of the Tiran Straits which denied Israel access to the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aqaba. Perhaps more compelling however, was Egypt's announcement that same month of an arms deal with Czechoslovakia. Out of a growing fear that Egypt would become a direct client of the U.S.S.R. and ally with the Soviet bloc, the U.S. and Britain instituted Operation OMEGA in March 1956 to destabilize the Nasser regime by non-military means. Commensurate with OMEGA, the U.S. refused to provide funds for the construction of the Aswan Dam. In response, Nasser would take his most aggressive act of defiance by nationalizing the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956.

To this point the canal itself was operated by the Suez Canal Company, a private French-based consortium. Britain not only held a controlling interest in the Suez Canal Company, a full two-thirds of its oil imports traveled through the Canal.⁴ To the British and French this was the proverbial last-straw. As a consequence, both the British and French leadership decided that the Nasser regime must be removed. Vigorous efforts were now undertaken with this singular purpose in mind.

The Campaign plan in Origin

Having concluded that the government in Cairo needed to be dispensed with, it now became a question of exactly how to achieve that desired end-state. From British Prime Minister Anthony Eden's perspective, military action directed against the regime was viewed as the only viable course of action. Not satisfied with allowing OMEGA to run its course, Eden began to contemplate the details of a British military campaign into Egypt. Initially Eden proposed to quickly deploy the 16th Independent Brigade Group to capture and occupy the Canal Zone to exploit domestic support and preclude Egyptian reinforcement of the zone itself. The initial assault would soon after be followed by the occupation of the Canal Zone by thousands more British troops mobilized for the crisis. Unfortunately, inadequate air and naval lift rendered this idea moot. As well the British chiefs-of-staff noted that if the objective were to overthrow the Nasser regime, simply occupying the Canal Zone would not suffice.

²Derek Varble, *The Suez Crisis 1956* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2003), 12.

³ In 1955 Britain failed in an attempt to compel Jordan to join in alliance with Iraq in opposition to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Anthony Eden, having become British Prime Minister in April 1955 and who was never fond of Nasser's movement, became increasingly inclined to believe that the only means by which to deal with the growing pan-Arab influence was to take aggressive action against Nasser himself.

⁴ Varble, 12.

The chiefs-of-staff therefore proposed an alternative. This alternative, known as the Contingency Plan, shared aspects of Eden's proposition.⁵ The Contingency plan called for surface assaults to seize Port Said to enable follow-on occupation of the Canal Zone as originally suggested, but differed in one fundamental aspect. In addition to seizing control of the Canal, the Contingency Plan also called for strategic bombing against civilian economic centers and vital infrastructure. This bombing was viewed as the principal means by which to force the capitulation of the Nasser regime. As the Contingency Plan was presented to the task force commanders who had recently been assigned the responsibility of carrying out eventual action in the Suez, it was recognized that the proposed strategic bombing campaign would be inadequate in ensuring the collapse of Nasser's government. To be truly effective it was argued, the primary aim of the military operation must not simply be the occupation of the Canal Zone or the bombing of infrastructure, but rather must be the destruction of the Egyptian army itself.

The task force commanders' counter-proposal was titled Operation MUSKATEER. The critical difference between this operation and that of the Contingency Plan was the identified enemy center of gravity. Whereas the Contingency Plan demonstrated a belief that vital centers were the key to the survival of the Nasser regime, MUSKATEER was founded upon the presumption that Nasser's source of internal strength was his army. MUSKATEER did have its drawbacks though. Given that the objective would be the army, the number of forces required increased substantially over that of previous plans. Port Said was dropped as an objective given its lack of facilities for massive throughput, and thus it was decided that the main littoral penetration point should be Alexandria. Air assault and airborne operations were written in as supporting efforts to the main objective of engaging the Egyptian army in decisive battle west of Cairo. Air would maintain a prominent role, but focused on interdiction and close air support rather than strategic bombing. Given the nature of MUSKATEER, Britain realized that they could not execute the operation alone. France, sharing in Britain's zeal for Nasser's ouster, would prove a perfect partner. France agreed and, adding 30,000 troops to the 50,000 available from Britain, entered into formal cooperative agreement on 11 August.⁶ MUSKATEER would be commanded by General Charles Keightley of the British army who would have as his deputy Admiral Pierre Barjot of the French navy. Headquartered in Cyprus, the combined command began to make serious preparations for offensive operations. Several issues surrounding the campaign plan had yet to be settled however.

MUSKATEER in its current form required an immense amount of lead time given the extensive mobilization required. While diplomatic endeavors continued, Eden did not necessarily wish to further malign the international community by allowing military action to be perceived as a *fait accompli*. As well the French, specifically Barjot, advocated a return to the original British plan with its limited objectives and ability to be prepared under a much greater degree of operational security. Given these conditions, MUSKATEER would be modified to accommodate both the limitations as presented by Eden and proclivities of the French. Over the objections of General Hugh Stockwell and General Andre Beaufre, commanders of the British and French land forces respectively, a return to previous plans with a focus on strategic bombing was endorsed.

⁵ Varble, 21.

⁶ Varble, 22.

Campaign Design and Operation REVISE

Returning to the original vision of launching a campaign focused upon attaining limited military objectives, Operation REVISE was approved as the final plan for the eventual invasion of Egypt. REVISE was to be a three-phase operation. The opening phase was dedicated to gaining air superiority. The second phase was a return to the idea of focusing upon vital civilian infrastructure and consisted of a dedicated 10-day strategic bombing campaign. The third and final phase would consist of British and French forces conducting airborne and amphibious operations to occupy the Canal Zone. Gone was the objective of destroying the Egyptian army. The perceived political benefit of pursuing this course of action outweighed the reservation of the commanders whose task it would be to execute REVISE. This shift would later prove to be significant.

Eden was compelled to find cause in order to begin operations at the soonest. International pressure against the use of force was mounting and Eden, fearing the loss of advantage as time progressed, sought justification for launching the planned offensive before winter and the potential repositioning of Egyptian forces to the Canal Zone. The answer to this dilemma would lie in an alliance with Israel.

Israel certainly had its own reasons for wanting to take action against Egypt and had been preparing for such an occasion. Operation KADESH had originally been planned a year earlier and was intended to seize control of the Sinai, relieve the Tiran Straits blockade, and deny insurgent sanctuary in the Gaza. With KADESH the Israelis planned to gain air superiority, exploit the mobility advantage of their armed forces, and encircle the Egyptian army in the objective area to accomplish its goals.⁷ Recognizing the benefit of an alliance with the Anglo-French coalition, Israel agreed to meet in secrecy with Anglo-French representatives in the French city of Sevres to discuss the potential of a cooperative agreement.

The resultant Sevres Protocol established a timeline for offensive action. It was agreed that on 29 October Israel would attack Egypt and appear to threaten freedom of movement through the Suez Canal. On 30 October, Britain and France would publicly condemn the incursion and demand that both the Israelis and Egyptians withdraw from the Canal Zone. This demand would include an ultimatum that if within twenty-four hours neither had withdrawn, the British and French would intervene themselves. With the Israelis intending to hold firm to their gained positions, D-day for REVISE could now be set as 31 October. With this act of collusion military action became inevitable and at 1500, 29 October, Operation KADESH began.

KADESH commenced with air attacks targeting communications nodes, followed swiftly by the launching of a three-pronged ground attack into the Sinai. The Israelis had indeed achieved surprise and were making significant gains over the first forty-eight hours of their drive (see Map 1). As planned, the British and French made public their ultimatum and as it expired on the 31 October, Israeli forces had successfully achieved their expected objectives to that point (see Map 2).⁸

⁷ Varble, 26.

⁸ Israeli forces of the central axis, spearheaded by the 202nd Paratroop Brigade, were engaged with the Egyptian 2nd Infantry Brigade at Mitla Pass. The attack of the 202nd Paratroop Brigade is worthy of closer examination in itself. Commanded by Ariel Sharon, the 202nd first parachuted one battalion deep into the Sinai at the outset of KADESH. The remainder of the brigade crossed the line of departure motorized, reinforced with armor. While the lone battalion was left to its own, the brigade main body had a significant distance to cover in order to link-up. Given the number of miles and terrain to cover, this was by no

Britain, France, and Israel were not only pleased with events to 31 October, but so was Nasser. The Egyptian army was holding its own in the Sinai and diplomatic rhetoric calling for the cessation of hostilities was reaching deafening levels. Israel's actions met with widespread condemnation as the U.S. and U.S.S.R. each supported United Nations Resolutions to stop military action. Nasser was fighting on a single front, his air force remained largely in tact, and his army was acquitting itself fairly well. This would change as that evening British bombers began Phase I of REVISE. Now faced with the possibility of the bulk of the Egyptian army becoming trapped in the Sinai should a ground invasion from the west soon after follow, Nasser was forced to make a decision. Recognizing his own center of gravity to be the army, Nasser was left with no choice but to order the immediate withdrawal of the majority of Egyptian units from the Sinai to more defensible positions west of the Canal Zone. While allowing the Israelis to now quickly achieve the objectives of KADESH, this move would enable the regime to avoid becoming decisively engaged during a period in which international support was rallying on the side of Egypt insofar as the Sinai incursion was concerned.⁹

Phase I of Operation REVISE was executed as planned and within thirty-six hours the majority of Egypt's operational air force had been destroyed – about 200 planes.¹⁰ Phase II began and the Anglo-French air forces began to strike civilian infrastructure in earnest, as well as begin shaping the battlespace for the coming ground invasion. The success of the air campaign to this point would force the acceleration of the originally planned timeline and on 5 November, Phase III began.

Phase III started with Anglo-French paratroops, the bulk of whom were from the British 3rd Parachute Battalion Group, conducting airborne operation to seize three primary objectives. The first, securing Canal Zone territory was accomplished in relatively short order. The second, the seizure of the airfield at Gamil, was also accomplished but proved of little utility in follow-on operations given the nature of the field itself. The third objective was a bit more problematic. Assigned to take control of the harbor facilities in Port Said, the paratroops faced determined resistance and would not be able to claim control until reinforced by amphibious forces of the Royal Marines scheduled to arrive the next day.

On 6 November the 3rd Commando Brigade of the Royal Marines conducted a combined surface and helicopterborne amphibious assault on Port Said (see Map 3). Like the Paras, the Royal Marines faced determined resistance in the city and found advance to be slow going once ashore. While Egyptian forces traded space for time as they harassed the British advance, military action on the ground would quickly be outpaced by political developments. REVISE

means an easy task. Link-up did occur in time to mass the brigade before the main battle at Mitla Pass, however this action could be deemed as an unnecessary gamble given what was actually achieved. On the axis directed toward the direct relief of the Tiran Straits, the 9th Infantry Brigade met little resistance and continued their march along the east coast of the Peninsula. To the north, the 7th Armored Brigade continued their attacks, turned the Egyptian Infantry Brigade out of their position and had reached a point ten miles shy of the Suez Canal before stopping to abide by provisions of the Sevres Protocol. On this last point, see S.L.A. Marshall, Sinai Victory: Command Decisions in History's Shortest War. Israel's Hundred-Hour Conquest of Egypt East of Suez, Autumn, 1956 (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1958), 134.

⁹ Known as the One-hundred Hour War to the Israelis, Operation KADESH was a resounding success from their perspective. The Israeli armed forces had not only demonstrated a level of professional competence to be envied within the region, but it had achieved all of its stated objectives with little loss of life or resource. Though subsequent U.N. action and diplomatic pressure would result in the eventual withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Sinai, the Tiran Straits blockade had been lifted and suspected partisan training camps in the Gaza destroyed. In the end and unlike their British and French partners at Sevres, the Israelis could consider the events of 1956 to have been worth the effort.

¹⁰ Varble, 53.

had not reached an operational culminating point, but rather a diplomatic one.¹¹ Bowing to pressure, the Anglo-French coalition accepted terms of a U.N.-imposed ceasefire effective 0200, 7 November. REVISE was effectively over without the operation ever having achieved the Anglo-French purpose – the overthrow of the Nasser regime.¹²

The Strategic-Operational Disconnect

Three strategic errors, manifested in Anglo-French policy, account for the failure to ensure the collapse of Nasser's government. The first was the failure to anticipate the determined political backlash directed against military action.¹³ The second error was the manner in which the alliance, in particular the British administration, discounted options other than direct military action. The third and ultimate mistake was, once committed to offensive action, deciding to wage the wrong type of war. This latter error would result directly in an inadequate campaign design.

A principal assumption of British planning for intervention was that the U.S. would remain neutral. Frankly, they did not anticipate the American reaction being as strident as it was in opposition to direct action. Eden failed to recognize that the Eisenhower administration was actively seeking ways to establish alliances in the region to prevent Soviet expansion; as such, the U.S. did not want to undermine its own favor by supporting any action perceived to be imperialist.¹⁴ The British and French had yet to come to terms with the realities of the Cold War.

The reality that was the bi-polar global environment enabled the Eisenhower administration to effectively stop the war.¹⁵ While it was genuinely difficult for the U.S. to take the position that it did against its natural allies, Eisenhower felt little recourse but to do so given America's own policy in the region. Though the U.S. shared the British and French interest in the collapse of the Nasser regime, its policy was to take the more indirect and non-confrontational approach. The Anglo-French assumption that the U.S. would not seriously oppose military action did not allow for the full consideration of other options such as the continued, albeit patient, pursuit of options such as OMEGA.

¹¹ The eventual success of military action, in Port Said in particular, is open to some degree of debate. Given the short duration of actual ground operations ashore it is difficult to truly assess the manner in which the full campaign would have been waged had it been allowed to continue. In Port Said the British began to find that Egyptian irregulars could pose a significant threat within an urban environment. As well upon the invasion, all civil infrastructure collapsed, which left the British having to find ways to keep basic life support functions operable for the indigenous population. It would be fair to say that they were unprepared for this and little research can be found to support the idea that this sort of eventuality was anticipated at all.

¹² In late November an authorized United Nation's Emergency Force (UNEF) would arrive to separate the protagonists and on 3 December the British and French formally agreed to remove all military forces from Egypt. This retrograde was completed on 22 December.

¹³ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch assert that there are three causes for military failure; the failure to learn, the failure to anticipate, and the failure to adapt. By identifying the essential features of each campaign within the context of this framework, it becomes possible to distinguish the true cause of one military failure in relation to others. For more on their theory, see Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War, (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Martin McCauley, Russia, America & the Cold War 1949-1991 (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd., 1998), 29. In the immediate aftermath of the Suez Crisis the U.S. Congress passed legislation declaring the Middle East to be a region of national interest. Known and exercised as the Eisenhower Doctrine, this permitted the U.S. to come to the financial and/or physical aid of any state it determined to be under threat.

¹⁵ Kenneth Love, Suez: The Twice Fought War (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1969), 633.

Once planning for offensive action commenced with Prime Minister Eden, he fatefully failed to consider the incongruity between the strategic objective he had established and method by which to achieve it.¹⁶ By insisting that the objective was the removal of the Nasser regime, the governments of Britain and France failed to understand that only an annihilation strategy aimed against the armed forces of Egypt could achieve their unlimited political objective. It is clear in today's U.S. Marine Corps doctrine that if the policy aim of a nation is to destroy the political entity of another, then the military aim must be annihilation. The operational focus should therefore be focused upon the defeat of the enemy armed forces.¹⁷ In opposition to this principle REVERSE was built upon the misguided premise that striking infrastructure would cause a total collapse of the Egyptian government.

Military commanders involved in the planning process at the task force level and below recognized this contradiction. As General Beaufre believed, it was clear that the military operation "must therefore defeat the Egyptian army and go to Cairo. Any more limited operation would leave the dictator's government in being."¹⁸ Still, the conviction was upheld that strategic bombing would be adequate. The design of REVERSE was subsequently flawed in its failure to identify the Egyptian army as Nasser's source of strength – his center of gravity. The main effort, the strategic bombing phase of REVERSE, was not only inconsequential in the tactical outcome but had a detrimental effect by actually rallying support among the populace for Nasser.¹⁹

Conclusion

The failure of the Anglo-French expedition of 1956 was clearly the result of flawed policy, not tactical incompetence. The political establishment's failure to anticipate reaction in the context of Cold War balance of power politics, their discount of options other than military action, and insistence upon planning to obtain limited objectives, all contributed directly to the ignominy which would follow. Not only would Nasser remain in power but, as a consequence of Egypt's ability to withstand the Anglo-French intervention, he would achieve exalted status in the Arab world. Backlash from this misadventure cost Eden his job and became a factor in the overthrow of the French Fourth Republic in May 1958.²⁰ Tactical action cannot account for this, only the poor judgment of the British and French leadership can.

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¹⁶ Varble, 24.

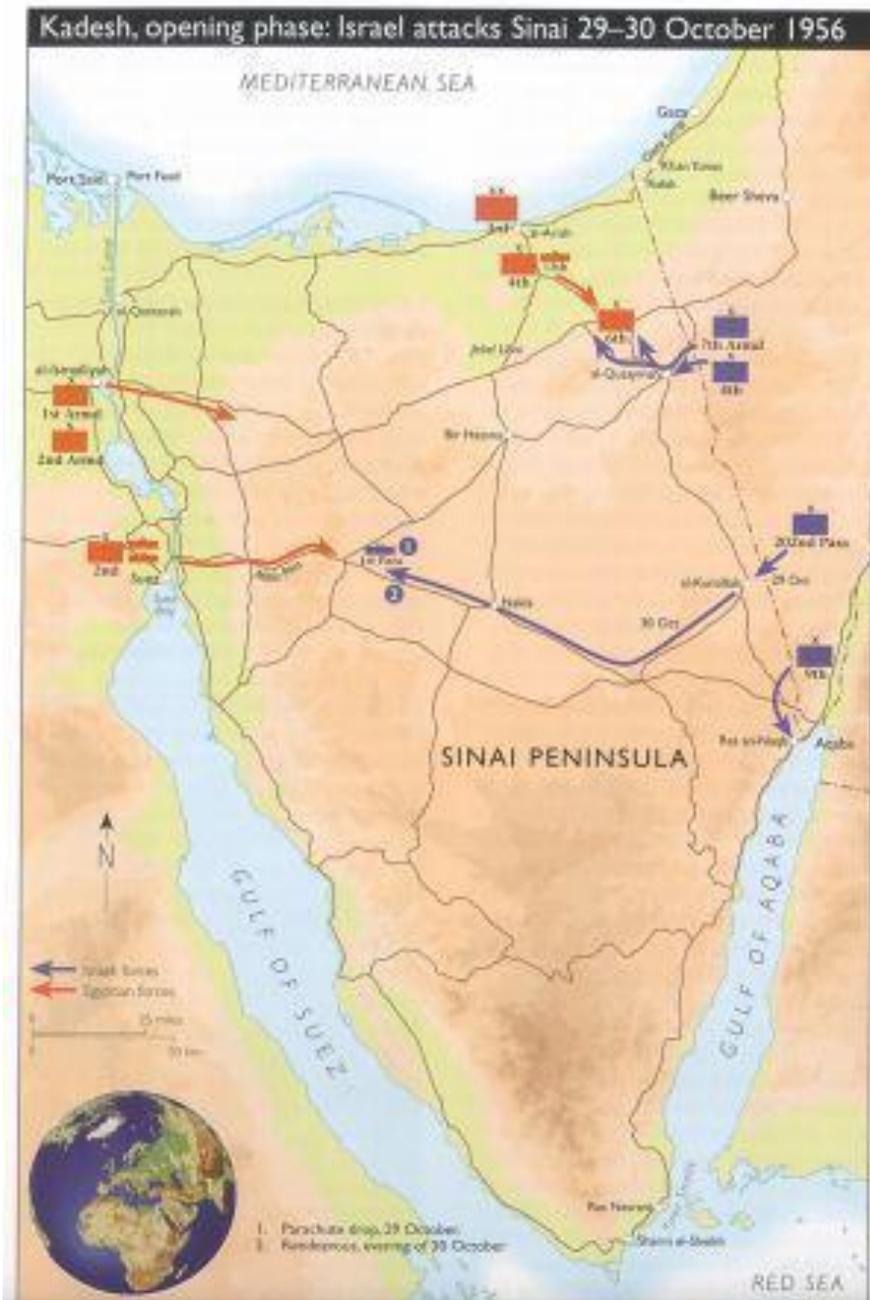
¹⁷ MCDP 1-2 Campaigning, 37-38.

¹⁸ Andre Beaufre, The Suez Expedition 1956 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1967), 31.

¹⁹ Varble, 90.

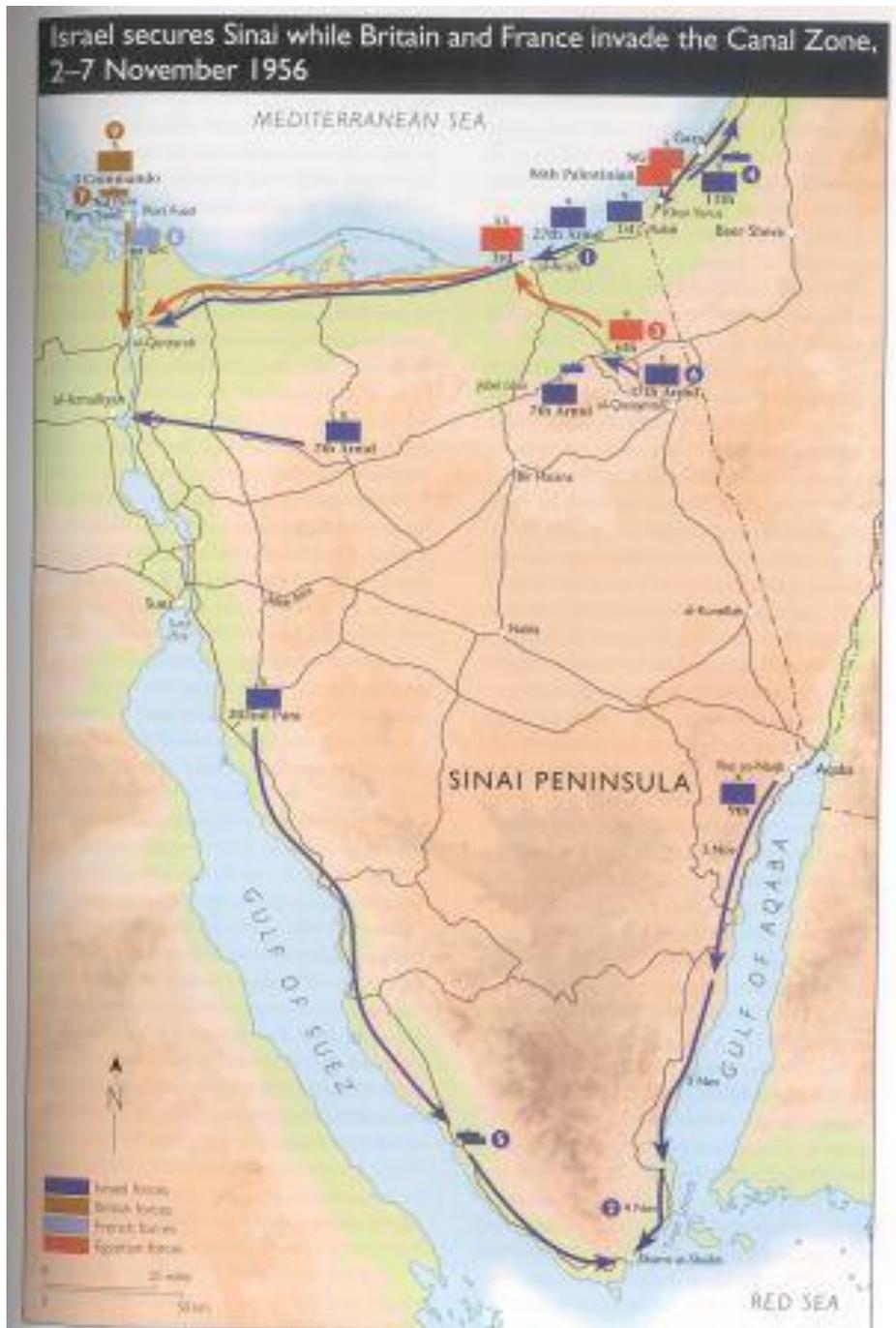
²⁰ Love, 655.

MAPS



Map 1

Source: Derek Varble, The Suez Crisis 1956 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2003).



Map 3

Source: Derek Varble, The Suez Crisis 1956 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2003).

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