



SAISMUN VII

War Cabinet

The Suez Crisis of 1956

Executive Team Introduction

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the War Cabinet (WARCAB) at this year's Model United Nations conference. In this committee, you will be stepping into the shoes of the decision-makers who faced one of the defining geopolitical crises of the 20th century: The Suez Crisis of 1956.

This agenda places you at the heart of a high-stakes confrontation where national sovereignty, Cold War rivalries, oil security, and the legacy of colonialism all collided. As members of the War Cabinet, you are tasked not only with defending your nation's interests but also with navigating the fragile balance between military action, diplomacy, and international law.

The Suez Crisis offers a unique chance to grapple with questions that remain relevant today: How should nations respond when vital trade routes are threatened? What limits, if any, should exist on the use of force in pursuit of national interest? And how does a state maintain global legitimacy when its strategic goals conflict with international opinion?

This background guide does not provide every answer, but it sets the stage for your research and debate. As you prepare, remember that this is a historical simulation: decisions are yours to make, but you must ground them in the political, cultural, and military realities of 1956.

We encourage you to approach this simulation with creativity, realism, and above all, an appreciation for the complexity of history. The decisions you take in this room could rewrite the outcome of the Suez Crisis, and with it, the trajectory of the Cold War, decolonization, and Middle Eastern politics.

Sincerely,

The Executive Team at SAISMUN VII

About the Committee:

The War Cabinet (WARCAB) is a fast-paced crisis committee designed to replicate the decision-making body of a government during a time of war or emergency. Unlike traditional UN committees, WARCAB emphasizes real-time responses to evolving crises, with delegates representing ministers, generals, and advisors within a state's highest level of command. Delegates will not only debate but also draft directives, binding decisions on military, diplomatic, or economic actions, that may immediately alter the course of the crisis. Updates from the Crisis Team will introduce new developments, forcing members to adapt strategies quickly.

In the context of the Suez Crisis of 1956, delegates may assume the roles of key figures from nations involved (Egypt, the UK, France, Israel, the US, and the USSR). The committee's aim is not to recreate history step by step, but to allow delegates to explore alternative strategies and outcomes based on the decisions they take.

Key Functions:

1. Crisis Response - Assessing intelligence, proposing immediate measures, and managing escalation.
2. Strategic Debate - Balancing military, political, and diplomatic options in a high-stakes environment.
3. Drafting Directives - Issuing binding actions for armed forces, foreign ministries, or allies.
4. Revisiting History - Considering what could have been done differently to alter the balance of power.

Definition of Key Terms

1) Nationalization - The act of transferring private or foreign-owned assets into state ownership. In 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company, previously controlled by Britain and France.

2) Tripartite Aggression - The coordinated military invasion of Egypt in late 1956 by the United Kingdom, France, and Israel, following Nasser's nationalization of the canal.

3) Cold War Rivalry - The ideological, political, and military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, which influenced their responses to the crisis.

4) Decolonization - The process of dismantling colonial empires after World War II. The Suez Crisis became a symbol of resistance against imperial powers.

5) Oil Diplomacy - The use of oil resources, trade routes, and economic leverage as strategic tools in international relations.

6) Pan-Arabism - A political ideology promoting unity among Arab states, strongly advocated by Nasser, who sought to position Egypt as a leader in the Arab world.

7) Eisenhower Doctrine - A U.S. foreign policy announced in 1957 (in the aftermath of the crisis) aimed at containing Soviet influence in the Middle East.

8) Peacekeeping Forces - The Suez Crisis was the first conflict in which the United Nations deployed a large-scale peacekeeping mission (UNEF) to stabilize the situation.

Key Issues:

1) Nationalization of the Suez Canal

On 26 July 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company, previously under British and French control. To Egypt and much of the Arab world, this was a powerful act of sovereignty, reclaiming control over a resource that symbolized decades of colonial domination. The revenues from the canal were to be used for Egypt's ambitious Aswan High Dam project, a development effort that had been jeopardized after the U.S. and Britain withdrew funding. However, to Britain and France, nationalization represented both an economic and geopolitical threat. The canal was vital for transporting Middle Eastern oil to Europe, almost two thirds of Western Europe's oil imports passed through it. Delegates must grapple with whether Nasser's move was a legitimate assertion of independence or an aggressive challenge to international norms, and how foreign powers could have responded without escalating into open conflict.

2) Cold War Dimensions

Although the Suez Crisis was centered in the Middle East, it played out against the backdrop of the Cold War, making it a global event. Britain, France, and Israel pursued intervention primarily for strategic and regional reasons, but their actions clashed with the interests of the superpowers. The

United States opposed the invasion, fearing it would push Arab states into the Soviet sphere and undermine Western credibility in the Third World. Meanwhile, the USSR condemned the aggression, seeking to strengthen its ties with Egypt and present itself as the champion of anti imperialist struggles. Superpower rivalry thus constrained options for both the attackers and Nasser, as neither Washington nor Moscow wanted the crisis to spiral into direct East-West confrontation. Delegates must analyze how Cold War dynamics shaped responses to the crisis and consider whether alternative alignments could have produced a different outcome.

3) Decolonization vs. Imperial Interests

The Suez Crisis occurred during a critical stage of global decolonization. Egypt's defiance of Britain and France resonated strongly with newly independent states across Asia and Africa, who saw Nasser as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. For London and Paris, however, the crisis was as much about prestige as economics. Losing control over the canal highlighted their declining influence and accelerated the perception that European empires were in irreversible retreat. France was also motivated by its struggles in Algeria, where Nasser's support for the independence movement made him a direct adversary. Delegates must weigh these competing perspectives: was military action by the colonial powers a justified attempt to protect national interests, or did it expose the futility of clinging to outdated imperial dominance in a world moving toward self determination?

4) Oil and Trade Security

The Suez Canal was not only a symbol of power, it was also an economic lifeline. Around 1.5 million barrels of oil per day flowed through the canal in the mid-1950s, making it a cornerstone of Europe's energy security. Closure or instability risked crippling industries and driving up energy costs, especially at a time when alternative shipping routes around the Cape of Good Hope were far longer and more expensive. Israel also had vital concerns, as Egyptian blockades of the Straits of Tiran threatened its maritime access to the Red Sea. Delegates must consider whether military force to secure access to the canal and other waterways was a legitimate defense of global trade or whether international arbitration and legal frameworks should have been the preferred solution. The broader issue remains whether economic necessity can ever justify violating the sovereignty of another nation.

5) UN Involvement and Legitimacy

The Suez Crisis marked a turning point in the role of the United Nations. The Security Council was paralyzed due to the veto powers of its permanent members, but the General Assembly authorized the creation of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), the first large-scale UN peacekeeping

mission. UNEF successfully supervised the withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli forces and stabilized the region, but it also exposed the UN's limitations. Peace was maintained, but the deeper geopolitical rivalries between Western powers, Arab states, and the Cold War blocs remained unresolved. Delegates must debate whether UN intervention in this case was a groundbreaking innovation in international conflict resolution or whether it simply provided a diplomatic cover that allowed great powers to retreat without addressing root causes.

6) Domestic Political Pressures

The actions of leaders during the crisis were deeply shaped by domestic politics. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden saw Nasser as a threat to Britain's prestige and compared him to fascist dictators of the 1930s; his determination to act was fueled by fears of appearing weak to both his cabinet and the British public. French Prime Minister Guy Mollet viewed Nasser as an ally of Algerian independence fighters, making intervention in Egypt part of France's wider colonial struggle. Israel's David Ben-Gurion sought security guarantees, hoping to weaken Egypt militarily and secure access to the Straits of Tiran. Meanwhile, Nasser needed to demonstrate strength at home and to the Arab world, consolidating his leadership of Pan-Arabism. Delegates must weigh how political survival, public opinion, and ideological commitments influenced decision-making, sometimes even more than strategic logic.

Key Dates

26 July 1956 - Nasser announces the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

29 October 1956 - Israel invades Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

31 October 1956 - Britain and France launch aerial bombings against Egypt.

5 November 1956 - Anglo-French forces land at Port Said. **6 November 1956** - Under U.S. and Soviet pressure, Britain and France agree to a ceasefire.

November-December 1956 - United Nations establishes the first peacekeeping force (UNEF).

March 1957 - British and French troops withdraw; Egypt retains control of the canal.

Relevant Laws and Frameworks

UN Charter (1945) - Prohibits the use of force against the sovereignty of states except in self-defense or with UN authorization.

Geneva Conventions (1949) - Set rules for conduct in armed conflict. Bandung Conference

Principles (1955) - Promoted anti-colonial solidarity and non-alignment, shaping Egypt's political positioning. Customary International Law on Navigation - The principle of free passage through international waterways.

Major Parties and Their Views

Egypt (Nasser) - Asserted sovereign control over the canal, framing nationalization as both an economic necessity and a symbol of Arab independence.

United Kingdom - Feared loss of global prestige and vital oil supply routes; pushed for military intervention to protect interests. **France** - Motivated both by canal interests and opposition to Nasser's support for Algerian independence movements.

Israel - Sought to eliminate fedayeen raids, secure navigation in the Straits of Tiran, and weaken Egypt militarily.

United States - Opposed the invasion, prioritizing Cold War stability and avoiding alienating Arab states.

Soviet Union - Condemned the intervention, presenting itself as the defender of anti-colonial states while exploiting Western divisions. **United Nations** - Emerged as a key mediator, establishing UNEF as the first large-scale peacekeeping force.

Conclusion

The Suez Crisis of 1956 was more than just a conflict over a canal, it was a turning point in the decline of European colonial powers, the rise of Arab nationalism, and the evolution of UN peacekeeping. For WARCAB delegates, the challenge lies in balancing national interests, global legitimacy, and the constraints of Cold War geopolitics. Should Britain and France have risked international condemnation to protect their economic lifelines? Should the U.S. or USSR have intervened more directly? Could the UN have done more to prevent escalation? In this simulation, the answers lie in your hands. The choices you make may preserve history as we know it, or reshape it entirely.

Works Cited

- OpenAI. ChatGPT, version GPT-5 mini, OpenAI, 20 Sept. 2025. Response to query "WARCAB committee in MUN, WARCAB: The Suez Crisis of 1956." Youtube.com, 2025,
- United Nations. "The Suez Crisis (1956) - from the Archives | United Nations." *YouTube*, 30 May 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnkgrXHsxNQ.
- "Why Was the Suez Crisis so Important?" Imperial War Museums, 2018, www.iwm.org.uk/history/why-was-the-suez-crisis-so-important. Accessed 3 Oct. 2025.
- "Suez Crisis, 1956." State.gov, 2025, 2001- 2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/97179.htm. Accessed 3 Oct. 2025.
- "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian." State.gov, 2025, history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez. Accessed 3 Oct. 2025.

Curated By Vishwatha Venkatesan