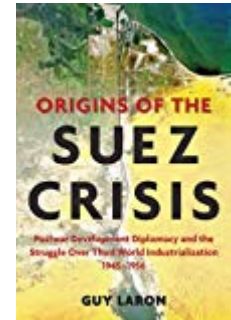


**Guy Laron.** *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945-1956.* Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013. xv + 260 pages \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1011-1.



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The received wisdom regarding the Suez Crisis generally tracks a straightforward, Cold War-driven narrative: Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser sought U.S. assistance in financing the Aswan Dam yet eschewed outright allegiance to Washington in the East-West Cold War. His pursuit of neutralism, in fact, went so far as to include refusal to join the Western-leaning Baghdad Pact, arms purchases from Soviet bloc member Czechoslovakia, and recognition of the People's Republic of China. When the United States registered its displeasure by withdrawing funding for the Aswan Dam, Nasser retaliated by nationalizing the Suez Canal; a joint Anglo-French-Israeli military operation to retake the canal (and possibly remove Nasser from power) followed, raising the prospect of Soviet intervention to restore peace. To prevent such an untoward eventuality, the United States pressured its allies to end the military operation lest Egypt become the first in a series of possible Middle Eastern dominoes. To ensure long-term Middle East stability and to keep the Soviets out of the region, President Dwight D. Eisenhower promul-

gated his 1957 doctrine justifying intervention in the region. While not entirely dismissing that narrative, Guy Laron's *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945-1956* makes a compelling case for its inadequacies and reveals that in the end much more was involved in the Suez Crisis than the traditional narrative suggests.

Laron adopts a gaze both long and wide, expanding the story of Suez in time as well as space, in what are ultimately mutually reinforcing ways and making excellent use of political science's sectoral conflict theory that considers foreign policy decisions as products of competing domestic societal pressures. Chronologically, he rejects near-term analysis that emphasizes the immediate causes of the crisis and takes his story back to early postwar economic, ideological, and political trends and developments. Geographically, he moves beyond the standard accounts' emphasis on British and American policy by also considering the Soviet Union and Egypt itself. He accords

Egypt far more agency than previous accounts, demonstrating clearly that, far from a pawn of superpower rivalry, it was an independent actor that at times was in the driver's seat. And in what is arguably the book's freshest historiographical contribution, he traces the role that differing internationalist and isolationist conceptions of development exerted on Egyptian, British, American, and Soviet policy in the years preceding the 1956 crisis. Although the Cold War conflict figures in Laron's account, it is by no means dominant or determinative. Instead, he paints a more complicated and decidedly more satisfying picture of the crisis than the well-worn narrative, one that roots it firmly within each major actor's larger postwar debate over Third World development.

Egyptian debates over development pitted internationalists who sought to secure outside contacts and assistance against isolationists who favored state-centered development à la the Soviet model. The latter view was especially popular among the Egyptian effendis, thousands of educated young men who blamed the British and the local elites who collaborated with them for the dismal state of economic opportunity in postwar Egypt and who saw massive state-funded development initiatives as their route to social and economic betterment. After assuming power in the 1952 Free Officers coup, Nasser placed himself firmly in the internationalist camp, which explains his repeated requests for Western arms to help to counter Israeli military power, and economic assistance, including funds for the Aswan Dam. Because domestic pressures prevented him from coming out definitively on the Western side in the Cold War, however, U.S. assistance never amounted to much and arms were out of the question. By 1954, continuing economic problems made Nasser's political position precarious, and he was beginning to consider state-financed development and Soviet bloc assistance; withdrawal of Western funding for the Aswan Dam led him to cross the Rubicon. In Laron's formulation, nationalization of the Suez Canal stemmed from much

more than simply the Western decision to withdraw funding for the Aswan Dam. It was also a bold attempt to shore up Nasser's sagging popularity at home, where his brand of internationally driven development had always been suspect among the effendis.

Concurrent postwar British debate over Third World development revolved around the efficacy of maintaining the nation's expensive imperial commitments in the face of shrinking revenues. Internationalists such as Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton advocated liberalization of the imperial preference system, contraction of the nation's colonial presence, and a scaling back of British military commitments. Isolationists such as Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin could not have disagreed more and were determined to maintain the nation's grand global presence, including the empire and its closed economic system, at nearly any cost. If Bevin's vision won out in the short term, resulting in refusal to retrench even as the cost of staying mounted, in the longer term it led to disaster, particularly when forced convertibility of sterling bled Britain's dollar holdings and U.S. financial assistance proved meager. With specific regard to Egypt, postwar British economic realities meant insufficient funds for much-needed development, at the very time that Egyptian demands for modernization were reaching a fever pitch. The return to Conservative rule in 1951 wrought no changes in Britain's imperial policies, which remained predicated on London's dominance even as the rise of nationalist ambitions in Egypt and throughout the formal and informal empires suggested the folly of such an approach. Leaders in both parties, in fact, woefully misread Egyptian domestic developments, underestimating the depth of anti-British sentiment and failing to appreciate that growing support for the state-centered economic modernization agenda of the effendis made London's position in the country untenable. By taking his analysis back to the immediate postwar period, Laron convincingly situates

Suez within the larger story of British political developments and evolving postwar international position.

Laron similarly adds a welcome new layer to American policy regarding Suez by moving beyond the heretofore dominant East-West paradigm and highlighting the domestic U.S. internationalist-isolationist debate and its effects on foreign policy. The former brought export-oriented and capital-intensive companies, the petroleum majors, and financial interests together in support of economic interaction with the outside world, especially peripheral nations emerging from formal or informal colonialism, whether in the form of sales contracts for heavy machinery, oil concessions, or investment opportunities. Labor-intensive enterprises, farmers, and companies that produced energy for domestic consumption (primarily coal and oil) joined together on the latter side, seeking to limit foreign contact and by all means to prevent the flood of cheap foreign goods into American markets. Although the Northeast-based internationalists gained increasing strength and political influence during the postwar period, particularly when it came to control of the White House, the Midwestern/Southern-focused isolationists held a disproportionately strong position in Congress. It was the isolationists who insisted on making foreign aid contingent on Cold War allegiance, essentially forcing leaders like Nasser to make a Catch 22-style choice between accepting such aid or retaining their nationalist credentials at home; doing both was impossible. When Nasser therefore refused unreserved support for the West, isolationists in Congress forced the Eisenhower administration to withdraw funding for the Aswan Dam, with well-known results. Laron's analysis of the domestic U.S. debate over development complicates current understanding and reminds scholars of the important role that domestic politics play in shaping U.S. foreign policy decisions.

As Laron effectively demonstrates, a debate between isolationist and internationalist perspectives on development also raged among contenders for power in the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. If all agreed on the need for more expansive economic contacts abroad, they differed greatly about where and in what areas to focus those efforts. Isolationists like Georgy Malenkov pushed for expanded trade with the developed Western world and a domestic emphasis on light industry for consumer production. Internationalists like Nikita Khrushchev dismissed such thinking as heresy and called instead for greater contacts with the developing world and continued emphasis on heavy industry, which could be used to fuel Third World development. The latter won out, and after Khrushchev consolidated control, the die was cast for a foreign policy approach that aimed to build Soviet ties to Third World nations through what amounted to developmental aid packages masquerading as extremely favorable equipment deals. Egypt, where the lack of both British and American assistance was whipping effendi-generated discontent at the lack of domestic development into a fever pitch, was just one of many areas for the new Soviet economic offensive. When the United States thus withdrew its offer of financial assistance for the Aswan Dam, the Soviet Union was more than ready to fill the void. In fact, doing so played right into the state's long-term economic plan.

To be sure, *Origins of the Suez Crisis* does not slight the regional Middle Eastern context—Nasser's rivalry with Western-leaning Iraqi leader Nuri al-Said for position in the region and his constant worries about the Israeli threat, for example, are well covered. But that context does not constitute Laron's primary focus, as he seeks to add to it a detailed exploration of the larger post-World War II debates over development that occurred in Egypt, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union; how each nation's debates redounded in policy; and how those four national policies came together to produce the Suez Crisis.

Laron's well-constructed and tightly woven account might therefore be seen as confirming the August 1954 words of President Eisenhower in the wake of isolationist congressional opposition to the sort of massive foreign aid bill he and other internationalists favored. "The difficulty," he ruefully lamented to C. D. Jackson, "is what is possible at home" (p. 103). Scholars of political economy, U.S. foreign relations, Middle East history, and international relations will find much food for thought here, as well as clear proof of the value of the new Cold War history's efforts to see the post-World War II period as more than merely the East-West struggle.

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