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THE CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

October-December, 1956

The invasion of Egypt by Israel on October 29, 1956 precipitated an international crisis of major concern to Canada as to other states. The United Nations, the first purpose of which was "to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace", was quickly seized of the situation, and urgently examined various proposals for dealing with it. It is the purpose of this paper to record in brief form the actions taken by the United Nations, and the part played by the Canadian Government. Texts of the most significant documents will be quoted in whole or in part.

It is proposed first to outline the troubled conditions which form a background to the crisis immediately arising in October and which help to explain it.

From the time the United Nations established the State of Israel in 1948 following the termination of the British mandate, there had been no real peace between that country and its Arab neighbours. Until the first week of January 1949 there was open warfare between them, punctuated by a series of cease-fire arrangements, an agreed truce of limited duration and a subsequent truce imposed by the Security Council, which broke down in mid-October 1948. Between January and July 1949 armistice agreements were negotiated between Israel and its four Arab neighbours with the assistance of the United Nations Acting Mediator on Palestine. These armistice agreements, though varying slightly in wording, all ruled out aggression by either party against the other, and established demarcation lines which bore a relation to the military positions as they stood at the time of signature of the various agreements. Neither civilian nor armed forces of the parties were to cross these lines. Furthermore, there were set up four mixed armistice commissions, each composed of nationals from both parties together with a senior officer of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization as Chairman. Each commission, too, was to employ such observers as it required, drawn again from the parties and the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization. The agreements were explicitly described as not prejudicing the claims of the parties in the peace settlement which was to follow.

It can be credited to the armistice agreements that for seven years they prevented major hostilities from being resumed, but they proved inadequate to prevent civilian and military raids and counter-raids across the demarcation lines. Such occurrences, which were all too frequent, caused a heavy loss of life to both Arabs and Israelis, served to maintain a sense of unrest and apprehension, and symbolized the failure of the states concerned to make progress toward a political settlement. The cause of failure was more basic than a difference on the details of frontiers. On the one hand the Arab States continued to regard Israel as an illegal creation whose very existence they believed to be a threat to their own economic and political security. On the other hand Israel saw what she believed to be her just right to live and develop threatened by inveterate Arab hostility, including threats to exterminate her.

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