How successfully was the Israeli-French-British collusion pact of October 1956 kept a secret?

One of the defining points of the Suez Crisis was the collusion pact. It was the moment where Britain, France and Israel formed a plan with the aim of ousting Gamal Abdel-Nasser and regaining control of the Suez Canal. After many days of secret meetings, the notorious Sèvres Protocol was the produced as the decided plan of action in late October. However the Protocol was not something that was intended to be public knowledge. The governments involved, initially, took great pains in keeping these meetings secret. However as time progressed the story began to leak out. This essay will look at the Sèvres Conference closely, why each of the countries did or did not need the collusion pact to be kept a secret, how much was known about collusion during the Crisis, and how much was known after its end.

Mid-October marked the start of a collusion plan that was forming between Britain, France and Israel. The French believed that the British government was taking too long to decide a course of action and needed to be pushed to do something immediately. General Maurice Challe, the French air force Chief of Staff, came up with a plan that would become the basis for the Sèvres Protocol. The basic idea was that Israel, who was almost always at odds with the surrounding Arab states, was invited to attack Egypt as a pretext for Britain and France to send their troops into Egypt after they issued a ceasefire ultimatum which would not be adhered to by the belligerents. This plan would allow them to regain control of the Suez Canal as the fighting would be near the area and eventually topple Nasser from power. At a meeting on the 18 October, Anthony Eden discussed with his cabinet the proposed French plan. Anthony Nutting, the minister of foreign affairs, argued against this action as it would “cause a rift with the United States, split the Commonwealth, jeopardise British oil supplies, and united the Arab world against Britain.” Selwyn Lloyd, the foreign secretary, agreed with him. Over the next few days extensive talks with the French occurred. However the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, was not impressed by what

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he called the “English plan”. It was Ben-Gurion’s dream to “capture the Straits of Tiran [in Egypt]...[to] ensure freedom of navigation to Eilat”, a southern port in Israel. However when Ben-Gurion learnt that the French and the British were planning a meeting to have serious discussions, he at once caballed the Israeli defence representatives in Paris to ask whether the conference could be tripartite. The secret meeting between the three countries was scheduled for the 22 October at a villa in Sèvres.

The first day of the Sèvres conference was a warm up session between the Israeli and French. Ben-Gurion wasted no time in discrediting the ‘English plan’. He did not want Israel to be seen as the aggressor whilst Britain and France would play the peacekeepers. Ideally, he would have liked Britain and France to have equal participation in the fighting. The French listened patiently without promising British support. When the British delegation of Lloyd and Donald Logan, his private secretary did arrive later, the Israelis found that they were not open to a shared military attack. Moshe Dayan, an Israeli official, came up with the idea to host a ‘preventative war’ where they would attack Egypt on the basis of an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in 1955. However Lloyd concluded that only a real act of war on the part of Israel, could Britain pose as an arbitrator. When the question of whether Cyprus could be used to base military for the protection of Israel, Lloyd ruled this out. Having heavy military in Cyprus would arouse suspicions of collusion and could potentially ruin the operation. The day ended with no significant achievement and the French Foreign Minister, Christian Pineau, went back to London with Lloyd to speak to Eden.

The second day of the conference was more relaxed without the British there. With various plans being tossed around for examination, nothing really was constructed as a solution. In London, Eden stressed that Israel would not be left in Egypt for very long without back up support. Lloyd could not return to Paris for another day of talks and Patrick Dean, a Foreign Office Assistant Under-Secretary, was quickly briefed and sent in his stead. The absence of the British seemed to have brought Ben-Gurion to accept the plan as long as

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Tel Aviv was protected. October 24 brought a closure to the conference. The plan was formally written and signed by each of the countries. However when Logan and Dean returned to London and showed Eden the document, he was pleased but did not expect anything to be committed to paper. Eden destroyed the British copies and sent Logan and Dean back to Paris to recover the copies of the Protocol but they were too late as the Israelis had already left with the document.

Britain was one of the world’s greatest powers and had one of the most extensive empires in modern times. It had various reasons why it needed collusion to be kept a secret. Peter Calvocoressi summarised four main concerns of the British government: first, the Arab nations; second, the United States; third, the British government; and finally, the British public. Britain had extensive links with the oil-rich Arab states. However many Arab countries were at constant odds with Israel as they thought that it did not have the right to settle and take over Palestinian land. If Britain was found colluding with the ‘enemy’ it was going to create many problems in diplomacy between Britain and the Arab nations. Also, Britain’s alliance treaty with Jordan meant that if Jordan and Israel went to war, which in the climate of the 1950s was very possible, Britain had to support the Jordanian kingdom. However Eden was recorded saying on the 12 October that “to plunge this country into war merely to satisfy the anti-Jewish spleen of you people in the Foreign Office” was not going to happen. It seemed that if Britain entered an agreement with Israel they could jeopardise their presence in the Middle East and be internationally humiliated. In fact, collusion was not suspected but in the aftermath, when collusion became general knowledge, the Anglo-Arab relations were damaged.

12 Thomas, Affair, p. 112-113.
United States had ‘special relations’ with Britain but throughout the Crisis they had continually stressed that force was not a solution.\textsuperscript{13} Calvocoressi mentioned that Britain did not want the United States to know about collusion because they did not want the operation to be “thwarted”.\textsuperscript{14} Also, evidence showed that British gold reserves were dramatically decreasing and on 30 October cabinet members recognised that they would need to rely on the United States for “economic assistance”.\textsuperscript{15} If the United States found out about that Britain had concocted a plan for military force and had not heeded their advice for peaceful solutions, it would be harder to ask for aid and to even harder to receive it.

However contemporaries and historians have come to different conclusions to the amount of information the Americans knew. Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury, a French official, stated in an account before October 18, 1957 that he would meet the American Ambassador Dillon every other week to buy arms and spare parts. He asserted that “the Americans knew just about everything that was going on in Paris... [and] quite aware that they were destined for Cyprus, from where a proportion was sent to Israel”. France bought a total of ninety pieces equipment. Britain was also asking the United States for weaponry and supplies at this time and received one hundred and sixty-seven pieces. Bourgès-Maunoury did consider that President Eisenhower may not have been informed as he was facing an upcoming election.\textsuperscript{16} To totally discredit that the United States did not have any idea that Britain, France and Israel were planning together would be incorrect and the evidence should, and probably did, give the United States some notion that a war may break out.

The United States were not left in the dark for very long though. When the Israelis had attacked Egypt, American Ambassador Alderich, asked Lloyd what Britain’s response was to be to this. “He replied that he thought Her Majesty’s Government would immediately cite Israel before the Security Council of the United Nations as an aggressor against Egypt.”

\textsuperscript{13} For instance see, ‘Dulles again Outlines the Consequences of the Use of Force, 5 October 1956’, in Gorst and Johnman, \textit{Suez}, pp. 87-88.
\textsuperscript{14} In Handel, ‘Deception’, p. 326.
However, a decision would be made when the French Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary consulted with Britain on their course of action. The hasty reply by Lloyd may have been another clue to the United States that the ultimatums may have been pre-planned. The following day the United States Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was reported saying that “he did not know whether the Israeli move came as any surprise to Her Majesty’s Government. It certainly was not to the French” and that it seemed odd that there was a quick mobilisation of forces in Cyprus and there must have been a “special reason for doing so.” Portions of Eden’s speech were read aloud that Britain was going to be in Egypt temporarily and did not urge Israel to mobilise, “Mr Dulles was quite unmoved”. The United States was quickly catching on that there was a plan that had been made before the attack by connecting the dots from all the information they had gained over the past few months.

Throughout the Suez Crisis the British government had been split over whether to take direct action in Egypt or to seek peaceful resolutions. Historian, Richard Lamb, saw the Prime Minister as being “specifically untruthful” when informing his cabinet of the collusion pact and did not tell of them any details of what occurred in Sèvres. Those that would oppose force in Egypt would cause a political confrontation and the plot would be ruined. However David Carlton argued that many of the top officials knew about collusion and the junior members were given hints even if did not know all the fine details, which Carlton saw as their own fault if they did not enquire directly.

The press is one of most powerful tools that can influence public opinion. The British public were, too, divided whether Britain should use force in Egypt but if they were presented with the option of entering Egypt with peacekeeping motives, it was more likely they would agree. Historian, Tony Shaw, looked at the media during the Crisis and stated that “any rumours in the press that the government even had foreknowledge of, let alone had taken a hand in fostering, an imminent Israeli invasion of Egypt would not only wreck

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20 Carlton, *Britain*, p. 68.
the whole project but would also threaten Eden’s political survival.” Any suspicion from the public could turn them against the government and humiliate them nationally.

Over the years historians have given significant attention to the way Eden dealt with the media. There does not seem to be significant evidence of suspicion of collusion during the Crisis. However in the immediate aftermath there are some voices in the press that point to collusion. On 11 November The Observer published an article about collusion and on the 14 November the editor, David Astor, wrote to a Minister for Labour that “the charge of collusion would be proved sooner or later, and that this would have a destabilising effect on the government.” The public were beginning to guess that there was some pre-planning in a plot to attack Egypt. However at this point they were only guessing. Time would bring out the solid facts.

The French and Israeli attitude was a vast deal clearer than their British counterpart. The facade was to ensure that the Egyptian army did not suspect an attack and so would be unprepared when Israeli paratroopers landed. The French and the Israeli’s did not need to conceal the collusion once the job was done as it would not affect their international standing very much, unlike Britain. Mordechai Bar-On, an Israeli official who was at the Sèvres Conference and later wrote about the Suez Crisis, stated that the French were the first who spoke about the collusion plot. Merry and Serge Bromberger told an accurate story from 1957 and Pineau published his memoirs in 1976. The Israelis also did not need to keep the collusion a secret any longer than the actual operation.

After the heat of the Suez Crisis had lessened, Eden had to deal with the increasing pressure at home regarding collusion. On 20 December Eden stated to the House of Commons that “that there was no foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt”, and maintained this until his dying day. However evidence describing the opposite was starting to emerge. The 1960s was the moment where collusion histories dominated and Terence

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Robertson’s *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (1965) being one of the most important. Various memoirs were being published by those who knew firsthand about collusion such as Moshe Dayan (1966) and Anthony Nutting (1967). The invaluable sources for historians shaped the way they thought about the Suez collusion. It was not until January 1987 that Suez archives were made available. This allowed historians, like Keith Kyle, to understand the Suez Crisis in a broad sense. They have also been able to focus on specific areas like the media and public opinion.

This essay has looked at the way collusion was kept a secret and how it emerged into the public. It first looked at the Sèvres Conference and how the collusion was formed. It then examined the reasons why Britain needed the collusion to be kept hidden and whether during the crisis secrecy was achieved. The range of factors that played into Britain was varied and collusion was sometimes hard to conceal, such as the French being very open with the Americans. The essay then focused on the other countries in the pact, France and Israel, and found that they did not need to keep secrecy long-term like Britain did. It finally looked at how the story had gotten out in the decades after the Suez Crisis and how historians have learnt about it. It can be concluded that the collusion pact was not a very well kept a secret, both during the Crisis and especially after it.

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Bibliography


Robertson, Terence, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (London: 1965)


