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The Suez Crisis and Dag Hammarskjöld's Mediation: Biased or Balanced? A View from Cairo

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ABSTRACT

This article fuses existing theory on conflict mediation with new historical analysis and underused Arabic-language sources to evaluate Dag Hammarskjöld's degree of partiality in the Suez Crisis, and the effect of this partiality on the developments. It finds Hammarskjöld was 'partially partial': he was partial in his prejudice and conduct, but impartial in his goal. Paradoxically, his 'partial partiality' allowed him to influence the policies of both parties effectively.

KEYWORDS

Sinai campaign;
Arab-Israeli conflict;
Egypt; United Nations;
impartiality

Introduction

The United Nations (UN), headed by its Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, played a major role in the 1956 Suez Crisis between Egypt and its three adversaries: Britain, France, and Israel. This article investigates the Secretary-General's mediation performance. More specifically, it explores his degree of impartiality toward the disputants, and the effect of his bias/neutrality on the quality of his mediation.¹

Impartiality is a freedom from favoritism or bias, either by word or by action, and a commitment to serve all parties as opposed to a single party.² An impartial mediator is capable of an unbiased relationship with the disputants, ergo to handle the case without favoring any of them.³ On the other hand, a partial international mediator is someone who has something at stake and is closer to one side than the other – politically, economically, and culturally.⁴ The attributes of impartiality are further developed later in this article, where appropriate.

The issue of Hammarskjöld's impartiality stirred a controversy between the Secretary-General's Israeli and Egyptian contemporaries. The Israelis harshly criticized the Secretary-General's approach. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion lamented in real time that Hammarskjöld 'behaves like the Secretary-General of Egypt instead of a UN envoy'⁵; Israeli UN Representative Abba Eban blamed him for demanding a return to a 'sinful and illegal status quo'⁶; and Foreign Minister Golda Meir went as far as to claim he was not only weak-charactered but also anti-Israeli and possibly even antisemitic.⁷

The Egyptians had warmer words to share about the Secretary-General. President Gamal Abd al-Nasser prided himself with having dissuaded Hammarskjöld from resigning at the onset of the Crisis, convincing him instead to fight beside the Egyptians for their 'peace, humanity, and freedom'⁸; an official Egyptian obituary published after Hammarskjöld's death in 1961 noted 'his honorable positions in the service of justice and peace, and his opposition to the colonial aggression against Egypt in the year 1956'⁹; and Foreign Minister Mahmoud Fawzi defended Hammarskjöld

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in his book from 'Some colonialist, and more particularly Zionist circles' who blamed him for lacking impartiality and integrity.¹⁰

Despite the Israeli-Egyptian contention, the question of Hammarskjöld's impartiality remained unexplored in the abundant literature available on the Secretary-General and the Suez Crisis. Nevertheless, existing scholarship lays the foundations to investigate this point. The first bulk of literature is that which provides the diplomatic context for the Suez Crisis. Cairo decided to nationalize the predominately Anglo-French Suez Canal Company to advance Egyptian independence from colonial power; weaken the regional influence of its British and French adversaries; and gain control of the Canal Company's revenues.¹¹ The Western Powers meanwhile considered this act to be the last straw in Egypt's series of refusals to collaborate with the Western agenda in the Middle East. After a round of failed Anglo-American diplomacy outside the UN, meant to press Egypt to surrender control over the Suez Canal Company, Britain and France teamed up with Israel for a joint military strike on Egypt.¹² Israel was willing to participate in the attack for its own reasons: it hoped to deter Egypt from further allowing and conducting cross-border attacks against it, and to force Cairo to abandon its naval blockade against Israeli vessels in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran.¹³

A second useful body of scholarship, written by Hammarskjöld's biographers, focuses on the Secretary-General's UN activity and the guiding principles behind them. Given the independent Anglo-American diplomacy in the early stages of the crisis, Hammarskjöld called to bring the question of Suez before the UN. Later, while the Security Council was deliberating, the Secretary-General simultaneously held private consultations with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Egypt. Once war broke out, Hammarskjöld assisted the work of the different UN organs to bring about the cessation of hostilities. And finally, he oversaw the evacuation of the invading armies from Egypt and the creation of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), stationed in the Suez area and later in Sinai.¹⁴ His involvement in the Suez episode, as well as in other UN affairs, was inspired by guiding principles such as Western liberal and democratic values, commitment to impartiality, the will to enhance smaller states and the UN organs in international affairs, and adherence to international law. At least some of these tenets were informed by his spiritual and religious creeds.¹⁵

The third group of relevant repositories is dedicated to Hammarskjöld's relations with some of the parties to the Suez Crisis around the 1950s. London was displeased with the Secretary-General's proactive and broad approach to his position, feeling that the UN Secretariat should confine itself to executing the policies dictated by the member states. This was one of Britain's reasons for attempting to marginalize Hammarskjöld in the Suez Crisis.¹⁶ With Ben-Gurion's Israel, Hammarskjöld's UN developed ambivalent relations. While the two parties respected each other and never completely denied one another, their interaction was often accompanied by suspicion and disagreements. Hammarskjöld encouraged Israel to make concessions for the sake of regional peace, whereas Ben-Gurion insisted that Israel must maintain its independent policy to ensure its national security. Despite his rhetoric dismissive of the UN, Ben-Gurion was in practice respectful and mindful of the UN and its decisions.¹⁷ It was impossible to locate similar research about Hammarskjöld's relations with France. The Egyptian angle will be discussed in this article.

Building on these fundamentals, this article sets out to address the scholarly lacuna of Hammarskjöld's degree of impartiality in mediating the Suez Crisis. Although it is anchored in the field of Middle Eastern History, it borrows terms and ideas from the field of Conflict Resolution to develop criteria for the assessment of mediation bias. As shown throughout this article, three main types of standards for evaluating a mediator's impartiality could be extracted from pertinent literature: prejudice, conduct, and goal. Each section explores one of these concepts and employs historiographical analysis to ascertain whether Hammarskjöld qualified as impartial.

A second lacuna is methodological: an abundance of useful primary and secondary Arabic-language material exists on the Suez Crisis, often underused in Western scholarship. One particularly helpful primary source employed here is an Egyptian Foreign Ministry edited volume

of internal telegrams sent between the Ministry in Cairo and the Egyptian UN Delegation in New York during the events.¹⁸ As is demonstrated throughout this article, Hammarskjöld developed unique relations with Cairo, and therefore, Egyptian materials offer new, interesting insights into his degree of bias. These materials challenge the assertion found in some British sources, that Hammarskjöld detested Nasser and his regime.¹⁹

This article shows that contrary to the Israeli-Egyptian black-and-white descriptions, Hammarskjöld's policy was more complex than simply 'biased' or 'balanced' and could be defined as 'partially partial'. On the one hand, he was seemingly biased in both prejudice and conduct, favoring and aiding the Egyptian party. On the other hand, he demonstrated an impartial goal in that he aimed to prevent and reverse the escalation to war, more than he sought to defend Egyptian interests.

Arabic transliteration throughout this article follows the IJMES transliteration system.

Hammarskjöld's partial prejudice: proclivity toward the Egyptians before the Suez Crisis

The first standard provided by scholarly literature for evaluating whether a mediator is impartial concerns their prejudice, that is, whether they enter the conflict free of any predisposition. Potential causes for such prejudice might be personal opinions that infringe upon the mediator's ability to interact in the absence of feelings or agendas,²⁰ or circumstances such as personal ties or prior association with one of the parties.²¹ Certain writers argue that although some degree of personal bias might be inevitable, a mediator aspiring to be impartial could take certain steps to mitigate it and/or to communicate it to the disputants.²² It appears that in addition to his uneasy relations with Britain,²³ Hammarskjöld also developed significantly better collegiality with his Egyptian peers than with the Israelis in early 1956. This network of contacts possibly led him into the Suez Crisis carrying some degree of pro-Egyptian prejudice.

Determining whether Hammarskjöld began his engagement with Middle Eastern affairs carrying some sort of prejudice is hard. Hammarskjöld's biographers²⁴ fail to provide an answer, because they rarely pay attention to his attitude toward the Middle East before his appointment as Secretary-General, when he was required to assume the mantle of professed neutrality and globalism. Locating any private paper produced by Hammarskjöld that outlined his honest opinion about any of the peoples of the Middle East before his entry to office was impossible.

At least outwardly, Hammarskjöld approached Middle Eastern affairs relatively free of prejudice. Regarding former association with the disputants, before becoming UN Secretary-General, he mainly occupied bureaucratic and political positions within Sweden and had little to do with either Egypt or Israel.²⁵ Concerning his personal opinions, he repeatedly stressed that he strongly advocated impartiality. Scholars have attributed this objectivity to Hammarskjöld's background: brought up in Swedish noble family, he was raised and later trained to selflessly dedicate himself to a life of civil service. The Secretary-General later developed these notions into a work ethic of impartiality.²⁶

As stated in the Introduction, some in Israel (including Ben-Gurion²⁷ and Meir²⁸) blamed him on some occasions for harboring anti-Israeli and/or antisemitic sentiments. The antisemitism argument is easier to refute: Zacher notes Hammarskjöld identified as a faithful Christian in service of humanity in its entirety.²⁹ Moreover, the Secretary-General publicly condemned antisemitic incidents.³⁰ As for anti-Israeli bias, Israeli decision-makers were upset with Hammarskjöld's insinuation one time that the partition plan, which involved the creation of Israel, may have retrospectively been a mistake.³¹ But apart from this minor incident, explicit statements suggesting the Secretary-General inherently opposed the existence or the well-being of the Jewish state

is scant. Upon his appointment as UN Secretary-General, one Israeli newspaper described him as 'neutral even in [relation to] neutral Sweden'.³²

Notwithstanding, this article seeks to go beyond the declarative and symbolic levels. A close examination of the prelude to the Suez Crisis reveals that, in practice and not necessarily due to any meaningful prior bias, Hammarskjöld did behave in a way that could be interpreted as prejudicially anti-Israeli and developed distinctly better relations with the Egyptians than with the Israelis.

Hammarskjöld's up-close dealing with Egypt and Israel began with his first two visits to the Middle East, in January and April 1956. The January visit was strictly introductory, although Hammarskjöld did end up discussing developments in the al-Auja Demilitarized Zone with Nasser and with Ben-Gurion.³³ On the other hand, the April visit was an explicit Security Council mission to survey Arab-Israeli compliance with the General Armistice Agreements and to arrange for the adoption of tension-reducing measures between the parties.³⁴

On these occasions, Hammarskjöld was outspokenly neutral, negotiated with both sides, and proposed tension-reducing arrangements that necessitated mutual concessions.³⁵ But personally, the Secretary-General developed uniquely positive relations with the Egyptians. Although Hammarskjöld did intimate to British officials that Nasser was comparable to 'Hitler in 1935' and to a paranoid, 'junior Nazi officer',³⁶ Joseph Lash, who published a biography about Hammarskjöld, writes, 'In Cairo, he [Hammarskjöld] hit it off very well with Dr. Mahmoud Fawzi' and notes the Secretary-General's positive impression of Nasser meant he 'would go out of his way to explain Nasser's views to Western leaders'.³⁷ The recount by Muhammad Hasaneen Heikal, the editor of the 'al-Ahram' newspaper and a confidant of Nasser, is no less cordial. He claims, 'Egypt had not enjoyed a happy relationship with Hammarskjöld's predecessor... But Hammarskjöld was different. He and Mahmoud Fawzi became friends immediately they met'. As for Hammarskjöld's relations with Nasser, Heikal wrote, 'The two men, the intellectual Swede and the Arab man of action had little in common. But they liked and trusted one another... They both put their faith in the United Nations'.³⁸

Meanwhile, with the Israelis, Hammarskjöld was off to a worse start. During his January visit, he insulted his hosts several times and acted in ways that they may have interpreted as anti-Israeli prejudice. He initially refused to meet government officials in Jerusalem, due to its contested status, even though it was Israel's capital; he was reluctant to have his passport stamped by Israeli authorities – although Lash claims his aides and not Hammarskjöld raised this objection; and he personally offended Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett by signaling that he was unwilling to travel with him by car from Lydda to Jerusalem, as the itinerary had originally prescribed.³⁹ The April visit was no better. According to Heikal, the Secretary-General let his Egyptian hosts pick up on the fact that 'he was really upset about the treatment he had received in Israel', and outright told Nasser, 'After visiting Israel I understand your problem better'.⁴⁰

It is noteworthy that the Israelis also played a part in this rocky introduction. First, Israel maintained tense relations with the UN and was highly skeptical of its performance since before Hammarskjöld's appointment.⁴¹ Moreover, Ben-Gurion's diary reveals that around early 1956, he was displeased with Hammarskjöld's conduct, claiming the Secretary-General was washing his hands of any meaningful initiative to placate the troubled area.⁴² These Israeli resentments plausibly affected Hammarskjöld's reception in Israel and amplified his antagonism toward his colleagues there.

All in all, Hammarskjöld appears to have entered the Suez Crisis boasting a better rapport with the Egyptians than with the Israelis. His tendency to disassociate himself from Israel's capital, passport stamp or Foreign Minister may suggest some degree of initial anti-Israeli bias. Nevertheless, his proclivity was not necessarily the result of clear pro-Arab or anti-Israeli ideologies or prior associations, but perhaps the product of good, 'on the spot' personal chemistry with Egyptian officials, chiefly Fawzi, alongside an equally mutually unpleasant reception in Israel. One could well argue any human mediator is prone to create better working relations with one party over the other due to personal preferences. Regardless, these seeds of rapport with the Egyptians are important because they would evolve into practical collaboration during the Suez Crisis.

Hamarskjöld's partial conduct: cooperation with the Egyptians during the Suez Crisis

Beyond entering the crisis prejudice-free, scholars also expect the impartial mediator to manage the crisis itself in a balanced way. This neutrality is accomplished by treating the parties equally and avoiding partisanship.⁴³ The assumption here is that such unbiased conduct could encourage all parties involved to accept the mediator, thus increasing their degree of cooperation with the mediator's actions and proposals.⁴⁴ Hamarskjöld clearly abandoned this standard of impartiality during the Suez Crisis for the sake of open cooperation with Cairo.

In brief and as noted in the literature review, the Suez Crisis began after the Egyptians nationalized the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956. The Company was formerly held by international shareholders, most notably the British and French governments. Cairo hoped that, through nationalization, it could take another step toward decolonization, deal a powerful blow to British and French imperialism in the Middle East, and assume national control of the significant revenues generated by the Company. London and Paris meanwhile considered this nationalization an act of thievery and demanded the Company's re-internationalization.⁴⁵

As the Security Council was attempting to remedy the situation,⁴⁶ Hamarskjöld also took initiative, and between 9 to 12 October, organized private consultations between Fawzi, Lloyd, and French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau. The Secretary-General hoped that discussions in a more private and casual atmosphere could yield better agreements than in the Security Council. Although this effort proved fruitless,⁴⁷ it heralded a new degree of cooperation between Fawzi and Hamarskjöld.

During the consultations, Hamarskjöld maintained his outspoken neutrality. And, indeed, Pineau and Fawzi could both agree in their memoirs that Hamarskjöld behaved even-handedly.⁴⁸ However, outside the formal discussions, Hamarskjöld would frequently meet Fawzi, and the two exchanged candid observations. Just as he shared his thoughts about the Israelis with Nasser in April, Hamarskjöld now shared his thoughts about Lloyd and Pineau with Fawzi. The two agreed Pineau was complicating the negotiations, whereas Lloyd seemed more constructive and forthcoming.⁴⁹ Even after the consultations were formally concluded, Hamarskjöld and Fawzi independently continued their diligent work on guidelines for the next stage of negotiations on the fate of Suez until the two were pleased with the outcome.⁵⁰ The French and British ministers on the other hand left with the feeling that the process was unsatisfactory and unproductive, also partly due to their own difficulties in presenting a coherent Anglo-French case.⁵¹

Unbeknownst to Hamarskjöld and Fawzi, Pineau had already begun bringing the Israelis into the fold.⁵² During that time, Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors were escalating, and a war with Egypt seemed to them increasingly appealing.⁵³ In late October, the infamous Sèvres Protocol was concluded between the leaderships of Britain, France, and Israel. It stipulated that Israel would launch an attack against Egypt on 29 October 1956. Then, France and Britain would issue an ultimatum to both sides and demand their withdrawal from the Suez Canal Zone. Egypt's non-compliance would justify their own onslaught on Suez, simultaneously to Israel's offensive in Sinai.⁵⁴

After the planned attack commenced, a rare consensus emerged among most of the UN members that the aggression was unjustified.⁵⁵ The Security Council convened twice to discuss it on 30 October 1956. Two American drafts were submitted, proposing to cease the hostilities and urging Israeli withdrawal from Egypt. Both drafts gained the support of seven out of the 11 Security Council members but were vetoed by Britain and France.⁵⁶

Hamarskjöld's collaboration with Cairo would now reach its climax. He would no longer only cooperate with Fawzi due to good personal chemistry, but also because he categorically opposed the aggressive means used by the invaders. The Secretary-General pronounced this resistance in his 31 October statement. He dramatically announced that the Anglo-French ultimatum to Egypt necessitated an immediate Security Council session, and that if the American Delegation had not

called for one, he would have done so himself. He added that the UN Charter was violated, and although the Secretary-General must be impartial, 'he must also be a servant of the principles of the Charter'⁵⁷ – hinting he could legitimately act decisively in the face of the aggression.

The Secretary-General went beyond simple rhetoric and suggested to Egyptian UN Representative Omar Loutfi a practical method to circumvent the Anglo-French veto: to request the referral of the Suez question from the Security Council to the General Assembly, where no veto power existed. Their plan was executed with the help of the Yugoslav Delegation because Yugoslavia held a seat on the Security Council at that time. On 31 October, the Yugoslav Delegation motioned for referral, and it was adopted as Resolution 119. Hammarskjöld also lobbied side-by-side with the Egyptians and Yugoslavs to secure the necessary seven Security Council votes for the adoption of the Resolution.⁵⁸ Because the referral proposal was procedural rather than substantive, Britain and France were powerless to veto it.⁵⁹

Despite their victory, the infuriated Hammarskjöld told Loutfi he intended to resign in protest against the Anglo-French intransigence.⁶⁰ Loutfi reported to Cairo that he had discouraged Hammarskjöld from doing so, because the Secretary-General had been instrumental in the promotion of Resolution 119, which Loutfi considered the greatest victory scored yet against Britain and France.⁶¹ After rescinding his resignation, Hammarskjöld and his Secretariat worked tirelessly that night to rapidly put together the procedures for the General Assembly session, enabling its launch only 24h after the adoption of Resolution 119.⁶²

The efforts by Hammarskjöld, Cairo, and their partners bore fruit. With the issue referred to the General Assembly, the threat of an Anglo-French veto was lifted, and they could dedicate themselves to securing a prompt ceasefire. During its deliberations on 1–4 November the General Assembly adopted several resolutions, demanding the stoppage of warlike actions and Israel's withdrawal behind the Armistice Line. Hammarskjöld was also asked to prepare a plan for a United Nations Force 'to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities' – the first sign of the imminent creation of the UNEF.⁶³ These resolutions, as well as the subsequent creation of the Force, cannot be attributed solely to the Secretary-General; a pivotal role was also played Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson.⁶⁴ Egypt communicated its acceptance of the ceasefire to Hammarskjöld on 2 November;⁶⁵ the Israelis acquiesced on the following day,⁶⁶ having already achieved their military goals.⁶⁷

Despite the Egyptian-Israeli ceasefire and mounting international pressure, London and Paris decided to move forward with their invasion plans in a desperate final bid. Anglo-French forces landed in Suez on 5 November to conquer the Canal Zone. But the resulting backlash took its toll: after denouncements by both Washington and Moscow, Britain and France finally suspended operations on 6 November at midnight and announced their acceptance of the ceasefire to the UN.⁶⁸ The offensive was successfully halted.

The last and longest stage of the Suez Crisis was the aftermath of the war. Between 6 November 1956 (the ceasefire), to mid-March 1957 (the completion of Israel's withdrawal from Sinai), Hammarskjöld and his UN Secretariat became more dominant in setting the international agenda, and their efforts focused on fulfilling the following objectives: the evacuation of foreign troops from Egypt; the establishment of UNEF; and the clearance and reopening of the Suez Canal, which had been obstructed during the Anglo-French attack.⁶⁹

Hammarskjöld's increased practical involvement with the Suez Crisis serves to illuminate the extent to which the Egyptians influenced his viewpoint. Having received administrative powers to resolve the aftermath of the crisis, he adopted policies that *de facto* favored Cairo's preferences. Three major points of contention between Cairo and its adversaries demonstrate this favoritism: the foreign military evacuation, the clearance of the Suez Canal, and the Canal's mode of administration.

On evacuation, the invaders insisted on withdrawing their forces from Egyptian territory only after certain preconditions were met. Britain and France demanded to remain in the Suez Canal Zone until UNEF was set up and able to take over this territory from their forces;⁷⁰ the Israelis

were determined to remain in Sinai until Egypt provided guarantees to allow for free Israeli naval passage through the Gulf of Aqaba, and to prevent Sinai and Gaza from becoming once more hubs for Arab infiltrator incursions into Israel.⁷¹

The Egyptians, on the other hand, insisted withdrawal must take place quickly and unconditionally. Fawzi explained to an Indian colleague that from a principled point of view, Cairo felt the UN rewarding an aggressor for their aggression was inappropriate. And practically speaking, the Egyptians felt making concessions at this point vis-à-vis UNEF would create a detrimental precedent in the future working relations between them and the Force.⁷²

Hammarskjöld adopted almost fully the Egyptian standpoint. He partially acquiesced to the Anglo-French demand by setting up UNEF and deploying it rapidly, but the Force's function was left intentionally obscure, and Hammarskjöld guaranteed to Cairo it would have no dealings in the Suez Canal once the Anglo-French withdrawal was complete.⁷³ Against the Israeli demands, Hammarskjöld proved even firmer: he stressed repeatedly both publicly and privately that Israel's withdrawal must be unconditional.⁷⁴ The Israeli government was forced to compromise on minimal security and naval guarantees from uninvolved individual countries, rather than from Egypt or the UN.⁷⁵

Hammarskjöld also saw eye to eye with the Egyptians on the issue of the Suez Canal clearance. The British and French governments were anxious to restore their trade route through Suez, and therefore pressed for the prompt reopening of the Canal.⁷⁶ The Anglo-French urgency did not escape the eyes of the Egyptians, who refused to allow for clearance to begin before the completion of the Anglo-French withdrawal. Hammarskjöld adopted the Egyptian argument; he updated Fawzi on 24 November that he had notified Lloyd that commencing clearance before finalizing the Anglo-French withdrawal would have disrupted the logical order of events and could only serve to throw everyone into arguments.⁷⁷

Third and most importantly, Hammarskjöld adopted the Egyptian view regarding the broader and more cardinal question of the future administration of the Suez Canal. During the above-mentioned October private consultations between the foreign ministers, Lloyd and Pineau proposed schemes that would internationalize the Suez Canal *de facto*, such as having their independent Canal Users' Club collect transit dues separately from the Egyptian Canal Company, or merging the Club with the Company, or including a certain percentage of foreign technical experts in the operation of the Canal. Fawzi rejected these schemes, stating that the Canal would have to be administered by the Egyptian Company alone. However, he did express readiness to facilitate some form of cooperation between the Canal Users and the Egyptian Company.⁷⁸

When Hammarskjöld sent Fawzi his 'conclusions' from the consultations, he casually incorporated Fawzi's ideas into the seemingly neutral text. For example, he wrote, 'Nor, in my understanding, should the principle of organized cooperation between an Egyptian authority and the Users, give rise to any difficulty of views,'⁷⁹ even though, as stated, Lloyd and Pineau rejected this form of obscure User-Company 'organized cooperation'. Later, Hammarskjöld did not press Cairo to re-enter negotiations with London and Paris on this matter.⁸⁰ In April 1957, the Security Council members were eventually content with leaving the Canal Company in Egyptian hands, with minor guarantees ensuring the passage of foreign ships.⁸¹

Hammarskjöld's impartial goal: ending the crisis above all

Scholars who specifically investigated mediation within the context of international crises judge the impartiality of a mediator by their end goal. A mediator is perceived as impartial if they have no personal preference concerning the outcome of the mediation, apart from its success.⁸² When an impartial mediator attempts, for example, to de-escalate a deteriorating international crisis, they will have no policy aim but to minimize the probability of war and to convince both parties to exercise restraint.⁸³ Similarly, when facilitating peace negotiations, the

unbiased mediator is concerned only with reaching a peace agreement; the biased mediator on the other hand would invest more efforts into securing an agreement formula benefitting some party involved.⁸⁴ According to this logic, the American mediations in the Middle East in the years 1973–1975 or in the Falkland Islands for instance can be deemed partial; these American mediations sought to further American interests and not merely to facilitate productive processes.⁸⁵

Hammar skjöld's overarching goal meets this criterion. Despite the general agreements and good rapport that he had with the Egyptians, he was by no means an Egyptian puppet and employed diplomatic maneuvers to curb Egyptian policies that he found detrimental. Hammar skjöld used three techniques to frustrate unwanted Egyptian policies: UNEF's composition was defended by Hammar skjöld through direct confrontation; the clearance of the Canal involved forcing the Egyptians into a compromise; and an Egyptian demand for war reparations was terminated through indefinite stalling.

Starting with UNEF, on 4 November, still before the ceasefire, General E.L.M. Burns, who was to be the first UNEF Commander, was contacted by Hammar skjöld, who outlined his vision. The Secretary-General said that at least initially, UNEF's function would be to secure the Suez Canal and police the withdrawal of the foreign troops. He added that getting UNEF to Egypt as soon as possible was vital, because its presence there was a precondition for the Anglo-French and Israeli withdrawals.⁸⁶

Burns arrived in Cairo on 8 November and led preliminary negotiations with the Egyptians on the placement of UNEF in their territory.⁸⁷ Hammar skjöld took over the dialogue when he came to Egypt on 15 November, accompanying the first wave of UNEF soldiers.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, telegrams were constantly exchanged between New York and Cairo.

These negotiations illuminated the points of agreement and contention between the UN agents and Nasser's government on UNEF. In essence, the Egyptians shared Hammar skjöld's view that the Force should be deployed as fast as possible to facilitate the invaders' evacuation from Egypt.⁸⁹ Although finding an Egyptian testimony directly accounting for this policy was impossible, two plausible explanations come to mind. First, the Egyptians understood UNEF was supported by a vast majority of the General Assembly members, and therefore, cooperating with the trend was wise. Second, they knew – like Hammar skjöld – the deployment of UNEF would apply additional international pressure on the aggressors to withdraw for the sake of the Force's takeover.

The main disagreements between the UN Secretariat and the Egyptians stemmed from the 'how'. Whereas Hammar skjöld wanted UNEF deployed as fast as possible, Cairo wanted first to ensure it was going to remain strictly within the confines of its mission and would not pose any threat to Egyptian sovereignty.⁹⁰ The main Egyptian demands were as follows: first, that UNEF's entry and continued presence in Egypt would depend on Egyptian consent; second, that Cairo would receive guarantees that UNEF should have no function in Port Said and the Suez Canal once the Anglo-French forces there withdrew; and third, that Cairo would reserve a right to influence the national composition of UNEF.⁹¹

Hammar skjöld was willing to entertain the first two conditions. His report stated that the stationing and operation of UNEF inside a country's territory required consent from that country's government,⁹² and as mentioned above, he reassured the Egyptians that UNEF would have no function in the Anglo-French occupied areas after their departure.⁹³ But regarding UNEF's composition, Hammar skjöld and Burns resisted the Egyptian demand and eventually prevailed.

At first and on 4 November, Hammar skjöld promised Cairo the invaders would not participate in UNEF.⁹⁴ However, the Egyptian demands gradually multiplied. Cairo declined Canadian participation, given Canada's allegiance to the British Queen and the Canadian uniforms that resembled those of British soldiers.⁹⁵ They also opposed the participation of Denmark and Norway, because the two countries were allied with Britain and France through NATO.⁹⁶

Concerning Canada, Burns – himself a Canadian – reminded his Cairo colleagues of Ottawa's major role in the creation of UNEF and its political independence from Britain. Meanwhile, in New York, Hammarskjöld warned Loufi that Canada's exclusion might land a fatal blow to the Force. Later, he updated Loutfi that he had raised the Egyptian worries with the Canadians, who were so offended that they considered withdrawing Burns from UNEF's command.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Burns proposed arrangements to sweeten the Canadian pill: the Canadians could be furnished with field uniforms like those worn by the Egyptian soldiers, instead of their regular British-like outfits. Additionally, their contact with the Egyptian population could be minimized by deploying them in a distant and separate location, and then have them be the first UNEF contingent to cross the Suez Canal over to the Sinai Peninsula to monitor the Israeli withdrawal.⁹⁸ Eventually, Pearson proposed the winning formula: Canada would contribute air forces and administrative troops instead of a combat contingent. The Egyptians accepted this plan on 15 November.⁹⁹

Hammarskjöld also scored a victory regarding Denmark and Norway. On 11 November he appealed directly to Nasser, explaining that the latter's attitude toward the composition of UNEF distorted the character of the Force and created difficulties that could lead to its failure. He asked Nasser to forego his rejection of the two Scandinavian countries, stating that he was 'deeply troubled... by a stand which envelops such risks for international cooperation'.¹⁰⁰ On the following day, Nasser conceded, and communicated to Hammarskjöld through Loutfi that, considering the Egyptian government's willingness to assist in speedily ending the present crisis, it was willing to accept Danish and Norwegian participation. However, in return, Nasser requested that the Secretary-General should accept the participation of India, Yugoslavia, and Indonesia.¹⁰¹

UNEF eventually consisted of contingents from Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, India, Indonesia, Norway, Sweden, and Yugoslavia.¹⁰² This composition reflected a significant victory for Hammarskjöld; he was able to ensure the participation of all three countries that he considered important.

A second major issue was the clearance of the Suez Canal. Hammarskjöld decided to have the UN conduct the clearance itself, with the help of private firms uninvolved in the conflict.¹⁰³ The American General R. A. Wheeler was appointed as commander of the salvage fleet, and arrangements were made to send him from Athens to Egypt on 6 December.¹⁰⁴

The Secretary-General was generally very attentive to Egyptian sensitivities concerning the clearance. He reprimanded Wheeler when the latter made political statements that aggravated Cairo,¹⁰⁵ and he entertained a list of Egyptian demands to monitor and influence the clearance – demands that Wheeler adamantly opposed. These stipulations included, among other things, providing Cairo with timetables that demonstrated the clearance was progressing simultaneously with the Anglo-French withdrawal, letting the Egyptians review and approve the list of advisors whom Wheeler intended to employ, and ensuring the salvage fleet made executive decisions in consultation with the Egyptian Canal Company.¹⁰⁶

However, on one point, Hammarskjöld proved unrelenting. He was going to force the Egyptians into a compromise, to allow the use of a small number of British ships in the clearance operation, despite the former refrainment from including Anglo-French vessels in this effort.

On 10 December, the Secretary-General still agreed with Fawzi that the aggressors should not make any contributions to the salvage fleet.¹⁰⁷ But by 16 December he changed his mind: he wanted to use six British ships for the clearance, emphasizing that they each have a crew of no more than 15 men. He proposed that they could wear civilian clothes and fly UN colors. Although he could understand why the Egyptian Government objected to Anglo-French participation, he felt the benefits here outweighed the drawbacks. He urged Fawzi to accept, given that this opportunity was the last chance for the British to save face, considering the Anglo-French withdrawal.¹⁰⁸

On 18 December, after another conversation on the topic with Hammarskjöld, Fawzi was convinced; he telegraphed Cairo that turning a blind eye to the fleeting little verdict of the six

ships might be prudent. He was hoping this small concession could prevent Egypt's enemies from claiming Cairo was disruptively intransigent.¹⁰⁹

Another potential headache for Hammarskjöld was that the British government demanded to protect its sailors through excessive security means, which the Egyptian government perceived as problematic. These means included armed UN sentries onboard the ships who were authorized to open fire to defend themselves and the crews, UN land guards to protect the ships from the Canal banks, and UN patrols to secure road convoys belonging to the vessels.¹¹⁰ But Hammarskjöld turned lemons into lemonade, and by fighting off these British demands, he bought himself more credit with which he persuaded the Egyptians to compromise. His argument was that because he was holding back so many requests made by London, Cairo could at least help him by accepting limited British participation in the clearance.¹¹¹

Hammarskjöld's bid paid off: on 20 December Nasser wrote to Fawzi that the British ships could be used as long as they were not exploited to detract from Egypt's sovereignty. Fawzi also reminded the satisfied Secretary-General that this approval had to be matched by London's relinquishment of its inflated security requirements. Hammarskjöld made the appropriate arrangements with the British government, and London acquiesced to relax its demands.¹¹²

Egyptian telegrams reveal a third, unrealized Egyptian campaign that Hammarskjöld thwarted: suing for reparations for the damages the aggressor countries caused Egypt. Even though this effort did not mature into formal UN resolutions the Egyptians and their partners considered it important. And while Hammarskjöld did not directly contest this Egyptian demarche, he successfully led Cairo to postpone its implementation indefinitely.

The first Egyptian telegram dealing with this topic reported a 21 November meeting between Fawzi and the Soviet Foreign Minister Dmitri Shepilov. In that meeting, as well as in another on 6 December, Shepilov encouraged Fawzi to sue for a UN investigation of the damages Egypt sustained during the crisis, to be followed by a payment of corresponding compensations on behalf of the aggressors. This idea seemed as if it could benefit from the support of powerful countries: the Indian Delegate Krishna Menon also appealed to Fawzi on this issue, proposing to formally raise it in the General Assembly. Even the American Representative Henry Cabot Lodge 'did not hesitate' to agree with the Egyptian view that compensations were in order.¹¹³

Hammarskjöld's response to the plan, however, was lukewarm. When Fawzi asked him on 6 December to formulate a report on the investigation and compensation of the damages, the Secretary-General agreed with the idea in principle but had difficulty deciding on the appropriate method and avenue through which to pursue this matter.¹¹⁴

Fawzi nonetheless continued developing this concept. On 12–13 December he outlined his plans to Nasser: the matter of reparations was to be referred to the General Assembly. A draft was to be proposed, requesting Hammarskjöld to evaluate the damages and accordingly determine the sum of compensations to be paid by the aggressors. To ensure the success of this demarche, Fawzi was going to secure the support of the Afro-Asian Bloc countries and the Indian, Soviet, and American delegations.¹¹⁵

But on 13 December, Hammarskjöld intimated to Fawzi that the British and French representatives had contacted him together and said they preferred to settle the matter of reparations outside the General Assembly. The Secretary-General argued that direct negotiations would be a more prudent and constructive course of action, whereas Fawzi insisted the talks needed to be backed by General Assembly action; otherwise, they would be destined to remain empty words.¹¹⁶

On 21 December the Egyptians switched to high gear. Fawzi postponed his return to Cairo to deal with the matter of reparations himself. A draft on the topic was officially submitted to the General Assembly, and Fawzi gave a speech that conveyed in general lines the reasons Egypt was entitled to compensations. However, Hammarskjöld successfully convinced Fawzi to wait a little longer before presenting any specific draft and to allow for a chance to conclude some deal directly with Britain and France. In practice, the Egyptian draft was never formally discussed in the General Assembly.¹¹⁷

On 7 January 1957, Fawzi made another attempt. He told Hammarskjöld Egypt could not remain silent for much longer, given the continued absence of reparations, and that if the matter was not resolved soon, it would be raised again in the General Assembly. Unperturbed, the Secretary-General reiterated that although he sympathized with the Egyptian viewpoint, seeking an agreement outside of the General Assembly was still preferable. The two decided to review this matter again later. On the following day, Hammarskjöld returned to Fawzi with a warning: he had learned from Pineau that if Egypt was going to raise the issue of reparations in the General Assembly, France and other countries would submit counter-demands for compensations and a deadlock would ensue.¹¹⁸

And thus, the matter was frozen indefinitely. Although reparations were still mentioned in Fawzi's discussions with colleagues in New York,¹¹⁹ the matter was no longer promoted in practice. On 24 February, Fawzi advised Cairo that the dominant position among Egypt's friends at that time was that reparations should be temporarily abandoned. He reassured his colleagues that dealing with this issue later would be possible, even after the adjournment of that General Assembly session.¹²⁰ But, *de facto*, this initiative was permanently forsaken.

Conclusion

Various writings on conflict mediation raise various properties of the impartial mediator. These properties could be largely translated into three main criteria: prejudice, conduct, and goal. The impartial mediator enters the conflict unbiased by former predisposition or association, manages the crisis in a balanced manner, and has no preference over the outcome of the mediation apart from its success.

A historical analysis of Hammarskjöld's performance in the Suez Crisis suggests he was 'partially partial'. On the one hand, he entered the crisis boasting better rapport with the Egyptians than the Israelis and Britons, and during the crisis, the good personal chemistry developed into diplomatic assistance to Cairo. Even if British sources are correct in that he disliked Nasser personally, this did not seem to reflect on his working relations with his Egyptian colleagues. On the other hand, Hammarskjöld was impartial in that he considered the prompt resolution of the crisis more important than Cairo's diplomatic success, sometimes thwarting Egyptian policies that he felt were potentially inflammatory.

It is noteworthy that not all scholars agree that impartiality is even a desirable trait for a mediator. Some argue the impartial mediator is better equipped to remedy disputes,¹²¹ whereas others argue the opposite.¹²² A third body of literature presents a more balanced picture, claiming both partiality and impartiality have their advantages and drawbacks, and/or demonstrating both approaches are favorable in different contexts.¹²³

In the case of Hammarskjöld and the Suez Crisis, his mediation appears to have benefitted from his 'partial partiality'. The reason lies in the international context: statements and votes in the UN forums reflected the fact that an overwhelming majority of member states opposed the attack on Egypt. Therefore, whenever the Secretary-General wanted to squeeze concessions out of Israel, Britain, or France, he could turn to international pressure, and when he wanted to secure Egyptian acquiescence, he could rely on his personal rapport with Cairo. His partiality therefore was paradoxically key in ensuring he could effectively influence both parties.

Notes

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