The Suez Crisis of 1956 as a moment of transnational humanitarian engagement

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ABSTRACT

The Suez Crisis of 1956 is generally seen in historical research as a moment both of Great Britain's imperial decline and of Egyptian and Arab political self-determination in the Middle East. Yet the humanitarian aspect of this crisis is still neglected, even though it provoked important humanitarian engagements from different sides, Arab as well as Western. By focusing on the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement, this article investigates not only motives, forms and structures of humanitarian relief, but also analyses the successes and difficulties of transnational co-operation between Western and non-Western agencies with a special focus on the application of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Finally, the article addresses the political dimension beyond concrete forms of help by arguing that the Suez Crisis attested to both the persistence of post-colonial structures and the institutionalisation of new, transnational patterns of co-operation.

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aid, as the Egyptian Red Crescent saw its first humanitarian engagement on a transnational scale. Yet, the conflict also revealed the limits of transnational co-operation, especially between the ICRC and the Egyptian Red Crescent and concerning the role of the British Red Cross and the Egyptian Red Crescent in this conflict. These limits were mostly due to the colonial legacies inherent in the conflict and the political commitments of the different national societies to their respective states, but also to the lack of formalised procedures of co-operation between Western and non-Western organisations.

In order to develop these arguments, I will, after a short introduction into the historical context of the conflict and its humanitarian aspects, treat three aspects. First I will reveal how the Suez Crisis provoked a moment of transnational solidarity of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement’s branches with the Egyptian people in which the Arab Red Crescent Societies, in particular the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, played a central role. Second, I will show that these solidary relationships also strengthened transnational co-operation within the Movement on a formal level. Finally, the article will analyse how much political considerations impacted humanitarianism in the Suez Conflict. This was most visible in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies’ efforts to apply the Geneva Conventions of 1949 concerning prisoners of war.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 has constituted an important topic in historical research for a long time. In fact, this crisis is not only considered a turning point in British imperial history, indicating the end of colonial Great Britain as a regional and world power, but is also seen in the light of the Cold War, with Egypt serving as a platform for the diverging American and Soviet aspirations in the Middle East. Finally, the Suez Crisis is analysed as an important moment for Arab nationalism because Nasser’s image and standing in the Arab world increased strongly after these events.

Beyond these political dimensions, however, this crisis, which turned into a short but intensive war, also engendered humanitarian disasters and needs: civilians suffered from bombing and evacuation, and soldiers died in battle and were taken as prisoners of war. While this aspect, though not a central topic, is mentioned in the literature on the conflict, humanitarian assistance is quasi non-existent as a theme of research. A few studies allude to the Suez Crisis as the first site of engagement for the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) or as the first occasion for Egypt to appear as a ‘Third-Worldist’ power. Yet, when it comes to non-state humanitarian action, research literature is even more silent. While there are no studies on the Suez Crisis precisely, this lack of research has been addressed in a few pioneering works on non-state humanitarianism in other Middle Eastern countries and centuries, like Armenia in the 1920s and Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s, with a focus on Christian actors and organisations. The research gap is even more striking concerning non-Western non-state humanitarianism. Classical works on the Red Cross Movement generally ignore the non-European actors, and Jonathan Benthall, whose insightful studies take them into account, concentrates on present-day analysis. In order to detect in particular the motives, patterns and objectives of non-Western actors, studies on the wider topic of non-Western agency in post-colonial settings are helpful, like Paul Thomas Chamberlin’s work on the PLO from a transnational perspective or the volume on the Non-Aligned Movement by Nataša Mišković and others. These pioneering works help to contribute to clarify the relationship between the claims of humanity and colonialism or post-colonialism, addressed by Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin, in their important contribution to the new emerging field of global humanitarianism. Indeed, so-called ‘Southern’ activists have
played a central role in the history of non-state humanitarianism, and the following article seeks to contribute to revealing this history. The challenge is to bring together Western and non-Western agencies and activities in an attempt to write a history of ‘transnational humanitarianism’.\textsuperscript{16}

**The historical context of the Suez Crisis and its humanitarian aspects**

Although the Suez Crisis had been smouldering for many decades or even centuries – in fact since the canal’s opening in 1869 – its armed outbreak was triggered by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company by General Nasser, the Egyptian President, on 26 July 1956.\textsuperscript{17} This company, under British and French control, managed the canal since it had been opened. Nasser’s act was mainly due to the decision of the United States to not help finance the Aswan Dam in Egypt. The United States had promised this financial support in order to turn Nasser away from the Soviet Union, but when they realised that their plan did not materialise, they withdrew their offer. Of course there were many other reasons for this conflict, the main one being the British influence in Egypt which Nasser wanted to end. Since the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, there had been British troops along the Nile, and although the Anglo-British treaties of 1936 and 1954 foresaw their withdrawal, there were still British soldiers in the canal zone. In the case of Suez, Great Britain and France feared for the free passage of their ships through the canal. Together with Israel, afraid of the military strength of Egypt after Nasser had bought weapons from Czechoslovakia, they prepared an attack on Egypt, despite a UN resolution trying to solve the conflict. According to their plan, Israel attacked Sinai and Gaza on 29 October 1956. France and Great Britain then issued an ultimatum to both Egypt and Israel to end fighting and withdraw their troops from the canal zone. While Israel – still according to the plan – accepted the ultimatum, Egypt refused it and French and British troops thus landed in Port Said on 31 October 1956. Contrary to British expectations, the United States condemned this aggression and urged a UN resolution, which was put to a vote on 7 November 1956, and requested all parties to stop fighting. With American and Russian pressure the war ended, but it was not until 22 December 1956 that the last British and French troops left Egypt and Israel evacuated Sinai and Gaza in March 1957.

Although this only did not last for more than a week, it caused a lot of damage for soldiers and civilians. The Western Allies attacked Port Said in particular and destroyed many houses, leaving the civilian population homeless and without nutrition. As it was difficult to estimate the exact amount of damages, a literal war of images and numbers ensued. While the Egyptians claimed many losses and deaths, the French and the British denied these numbers.\textsuperscript{18} The British government accepted the proposition of the President of the Norwegian Red Cross, Steen, to fly to Egypt and evaluate the ‘truth’ of the damages, but Steen eventually abandoned this mission because he considered it too big of a task for him.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements quickly got involved in the conflict in other ways. First of all, the Geneva-based ICRC, the most powerful actor in the movement with the most financial means, sent delegates to Egypt in order to survey the application of the Geneva Conventions by the conflict partners and to help put them into practice, for example with the exchange of prisoners of war. As a huge number of national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies expressed their will to support the victims of the conflict by sending
money and goods or even personnel, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, also based in Geneva, co-ordinated their correspondence and activities.

The Egyptian Red Crescent at the heart of a movement of transnational solidarity

The movement of transnational solidarity with the Egyptian people within and beyond the Red Cross Movement was significant in two senses: first, because of the extent of solidarity the crisis provoked; and, second, because of the central role the Egyptian Red Crescent played in this process.

Indeed, the first call for help immediately after the Franco-British invasion in Egypt was launched by the Egyptian Red Crescent and transmitted to all national societies by the ICRC.20 Although this had already happened before – for example during the Israel-Palestine Conflict in 1948/9, when the Egyptian government had sent the Egyptian Red Crescent’s plea for help to Geneva21 – these former initiatives had not been so immediate after the breakout of the conflict and did not meet the success of the help campaign of 1956. For the first time, the archives reveal a great number of letters and goods that national societies worldwide sent directly to the Egyptian Red Crescent. The Indonesian Red Cross, for example, sent money directly to Cairo in late 1956 and early 1957 and informed the League thereafter22; the German Red Cross wrote to its Egyptian counterpart in February 1957 that it was putting together the requested material for a mobile hospital ward.23 Egyptian newspapers covered widely the activities both of the Egyptian Red Crescent and of the foreign Red Cross Societies in Port Said and thus also presented the extension of this aid campaign to the Egyptian public.24

All in all, the extent of the expression of global solidarity was very large. While it did not come as a surprise that the Jordanian Red Crescent displayed its solidarity with Egypt by underlining the ‘inhuman acts by two civilized countries’ which ‘violate and defeat the high ((50)) [sic!] principles and human ideals the Red Cross and the Red Crescent stand for throughout the civilized world’25, this is more astonishing for societies in countries far away from the Middle East, such as the Federation of Malaya. Some sums of money were sent directly to the Egyptian Red Crescent, like 40,000 Riyal from Saudi Arabia in November 195626, but a great deal of the donations passed through the ICRC and the League in Geneva before reaching Egypt. While most donors clearly identified the destination of their donation as being ‘in favor of the Egyptian people’27, a few remained more vague: the New Zealand Red Cross, for example, sent NZ$100 to the League in January 1957 for ‘relief among Arab people’, leaving the final choice to the Swiss partners: ‘If you feel it should go to the Egyptian Red Crescent, then we are in agreement.’28

It is interesting to note that quite a lot of donations were given for Egypt and Hungary at the same time: both countries had indeed witnessed a crisis in October 1956.29 Whether or not this simultaneous display of solidarity with the Hungarian people after the reprisal of the Hungarian revolution was due to the ICRC’s parallel call for help for Hungary and Egypt cannot be verified, but it might also have resulted from the global ‘anti-imperial’ wave30 during this ‘year of international crises’.31 Indeed, many Red Cross and other humanitarian societies worldwide donated so much, both in money and material, that on 23 November 1956, a member of the League had declared that ‘ICRC and Egyptian Red Crescent have received more than enough supplies and money to meet present situation (…)’32. Yet, the
transfer of funds, medicine and blankets continued. To some extent, the Egyptian Red Crescent was able to canalise this transfer and make clear which things were really needed: blankets for the unusually cold winter, and kitchen utensils and sewing machines for the people in Port Said who had lost their homes and were now accommodated in camps. By providing this aid, the Red Crescent Society was able to rely on its experience of assistance in the Suez Canal where the Ladies’ Committee had been especially active.

Although the Egyptian Red Crescent was able to play a central part in the humanitarian assistance of the victims of the Suez Crisis, its role seems not to have been very determined yet in the transnational structure of help. Right at the beginning of the crisis, the ICRC delegates in Egypt declared handing all the medicine over to the Egyptian Red Crescent in Cairo, for the latter would distribute it among the persons in need. One day later, delegates of the ICRC reported that one part of the charged material would be brought directly to Port Said, and they did not mention the participation of their Egyptian counterpart any more. The Egyptian Red Crescent, on the other hand, reported that the distribution of food was managed only by its own members. As it is be difficult to know for certain how exactly the procedure took place on the ground, it can only be concluded that the concrete organisation of transnational assistance was still in the process of being fixed.

An occasion for formalising transnational humanitarianism

The practical transnational co-operation of Red Cross and Red Crescent branches during the Suez Crisis also strengthened a uniformity of the movement on the level of formal procedures. Indeed, this conflict shaped the way transnational aid was given considerably, because for the Egyptian Red Crescent, this was the first time it had to organise the engagement of volunteers on such a scale and it thus became an important partner for the ICRC. For the Geneva Committee, the Suez Crisis constituted the first time it sent a delegate responsible for the whole region, David de Traz, who resided in Beirut.

While proving the value of Western Red Cross practices in non-Western contexts and by non-Western Red Crescent activists, this formalisation also had a normative and restrictive effect because it meant the implementation of only one procedure, which was given by the ICRC. While the question of professionalisation and rationalisation has been widely discussed for NGOs in general and humanitarian organisations and the ICRC in particular – although, as Volker Heins rightly puts it, the ICRC has been well-established since the beginning – its adaptation into non-Western contexts still lacks empirical research. In the following this shall be tried with regard to standard forms for messages and reports on camp visits. While both case studies are examples of the Egyptian Red Crescent’s willingness to adopt the uniformity of the formal procedures, this section will close with a reflection on the difficulties and limits the movement encountered concerning universal notions like neutrality.

The Suez Crisis is the first testimony, according to the archives, of an adaptation of Western formal humanitarian standards to the Arab context, illustrated by the forms for enquiries on missing persons and for messages between prisoners of war and their families. As the forms provided by the ICRC were the only ones that the Geneva Committee accepted, they had to be used by the Egyptians as well. In the following, the Egyptian Red Crescent organised the transfer of an enormous amount of letters. According to its report from February 1957, the Society managed to transfer about 60,000 letters until this date;
most of the letters were sent to and received from Port Said; other destinations were the Sinai Peninsula. These numbers thus prove the success of this formal procedure. Because of the huge demand, the International Section of the Egyptian Red Crescent had to extend its information and research service by an office with three counters for Port Said and one for Sinai. In order to fit the ICRC form, Egyptian volunteers had to read the letters arriving from the whole country, condense them and transliterate the Arabic into Latin letters. The only element they left in Arabic was put into the category ‘Message/al-tahrīr al-mursil’ (message by the addressor), which was meant to concern personal and family matters only. In this category people asked for news, tried to put the addressee’s mind at ease concerning the fate of other family members and urged the missing person to give news via the Red Cross: ‘waiting for your reply by the same way, that is by the International Red Cross’, wrote, for example, Georges Habib to his friend Mahmoud Younis on 29 November 1956.

These letters, after passing the Egyptian censorship, were then sent to Geneva, from which they went to Port Said or the other destinations where they were finally distributed by the ICRC delegates on the ground. This procedure took a long time, which is why letters were sometimes directly exchanged between Egyptian and Israeli officials – to the disapproval of the ICRC.

Yet, while the Suez Crisis introduced new patterns of formal humanitarian standards, it was also marked by continuity with practices from the Second World War. In fact, the British Red Cross tied in with the services for prisoners of war from ‘the last war’. The second example of an effort of transnational co-operation on the formal level concerns the common reports on camp visits. After the air raid, delegates of the ICRC and of the League visited Port Said together with members of the Egyptian Red Crescent Section of the city in February 1957 in order to evaluate the people’s situation on the ground. Once the visit was finished, all involved parties signed the report that accounted the results of the inspection. While the fact that all members signed the report testifies to its success as a moment of transnational co-operation, one is left wondering if and why this gathering of signatures was necessary: was it for demonstrating the common effort to any donor of money or goods or to the heads of the ICRC and the League? One might also argue that this procedure is an attestation of the process of institutionalising this kind of co-operation that was going on at that moment.

While the quoted examples make clear that there were activities and procedures that satisfied both Western and Arab branches of the Red Cross Movement, there were other more delicate procedures. One concerned the passage of ambulances and relief convey to Port Said and was linked to the question of neutrality.

When a unit of the Egyptian Red Crescent first tried to enter Port Said on 10 November 1956, it was refused access by the British military, which requested that for security reasons ‘all such parties should consist of neutral and not (repeat not) Egyptian personnel’. Ralph Murray, political advisor to the Allied Forces Headquarters, did not consider the Egyptian Red Crescent as neutral at all. In line with British reservations against Egyptian political activities from colonial times, he paralleled it with the Egyptian government, which is why he expressed his hope that the ‘Red Cross can be urged not to lend themselves to unsubstantiated Egyptian propaganda’. The same British resistance against the entrance of Egyptian humanitarian activists in Port Said was repeated on 26 November 1956. This time the British government referred to the Geneva Conventions – which it had not yet signed – declaring that the latter did not ‘impose any obligations to admit personnel of international relief
organizations. Thus, the British government used this argument to present itself as very generous and issued that it ‘should be glad to welcome bona fide non-Egyptian personnel of the Red Crescent on the same basis as we have admitted international personnel of the Red Cross’. While one consequence of this attitude was that on 9 December 1956, delegates of the ICRC were also refused access to Port Said, another one consisted of the protest of many institutions against the British attitude which had caused, according to the Lebanese delegate at the United Nations, the deaths and suffering of many people in the Egyptian city. Once the tension was released in Port Said on 12 December 1956, limited Egyptian Red Crescent convoys were admitted to the city.

While this incident makes clear that in times of war, and in particular in wars of transition from colonial to post-colonial regimes, the warring parties have been very anxious about the question of neutrality, it also hints at the notion of neutrality in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. For the ICRC, one of the central principles and means is that one does not take sides in a conflict. ‘Neutrality’ was thus achieved more easily by the ICRC than by the various national societies, although it failed as well, mainly in colonial conflicts. Yet, this term had a different meaning in the Arabic context, where it stood for the specific attitude of states in the context of foreign policy in the sense of non-intervention by the state. One can thus suggest that conceptual differences as well as the particular political circumstances of the process of decolonisation during the Suez Crisis complicated transnational humanitarian aid.

**Putting the Geneva Conventions of 1949 into practice: the Red Cross Movement’s engagement for prisoners of war**

As it was during this crisis that the Geneva Conventions of 1949 were applied for the first time, the most important aspect of putting the Geneva Conventions into practice concerned the exchange of prisoners of war. What were the non-state humanitarian actors’ achievements and which obstacles did they encounter? How did the Suez Crisis shape the evolution of the Geneva Conventions?

The aid societies’ scope of action in this field was strongly influenced by their respective states’ interests in this conflict. One major difficulty was that only Egypt, Israel and France had already signed the Conventions of 1949 in 1951 (Israel and France) and 1952 (Egypt). Great Britain was still reluctant in doing so, despite the efforts of the British Red Cross to push the government towards ratification. However, London established a Prisoners of War Information Bureau according to Article 122 of the Geneva Conventions in the first week of November 1956. The British government, conscious of the international attention to the conflict, felt obliged to stick to these rules, and might have considered the Conventions as an argument to legitimise its behaviour on an international scale.

Another difficulty for applying the Geneva Conventions resided in the fact that Egypt did not recognise the state of Israel. The government in Cairo refused, for example, to provide protection under the Geneva Conventions for Israeli prisoners of war in Egyptian hands. Although there were negotiations between Egypt and Israel and mutual interest in reaching a status quo, Egypt officially denied any diplomatic relations with its Western-oriented neighbour.

These insights into the states’ attitudes confirm the great weight of political considerations on humanitarian engagement in this conflict, both the colonial and anti-colonial reflexes
in the relationship between Egypt and Great Britain (and France) and the regional power balance between Israel and Egypt. In order to show how these political considerations determined the non-state humanitarianists’ opportunities to engage in the conflict, I will first deal with the question of prisoners of war between Egypt and Great Britain and then analyse the same for Egypt and Israel.

Yet, before analysing the different settings of engagement for prisoners of war, it is important to provide a quantitative overview, because the numbers were unequal for the warring parties. There were about 200 Egyptian prisoners of war in British captivity and approximately the same number in French hands. The Egyptians held nearly no European prisoners of war, except one Frenchman, who died. As for the Egyptian-Israeli side, the Egyptians had captured a few Israelis (the sources indicate at least four) while the Israelis held the biggest amount of Egyptian prisoners of war, around 5000.

**Egyptian prisoners of war in British hands: the colonial weight**

The question of prisoners of war between Egypt and Great Britain reveals the aid societies’ dependence on the persistence of colonial structures that the Suez Conflict also laid bare in humanitarian issues.

Indeed, their possibilities of action were deeply influenced by the British government’s will to control the situation and to avoid any bad reputation on a global scale.

Very soon after the invasion, the British Army took Egyptian soldiers as prisoners of war. Most of them had been captured in Egypt itself, but a group of about 70 Egyptian soldiers became prisoners because their frigate had been shot and sunk and the surviving staff was brought to Djibouti by the British Navy, where they were kept by the French military. On 21 December 1956, one day before the European troops left Egypt, all detained Egyptians (except three individuals) were handed over to the Egyptian authorities. Although their detention lasted less than three months, their capture provoked many debates in humanitarian and political circles.

The weight of the international dimension of transnational actors can be deduced from both Great Britain’s and Egypt’s behaviour in this regard. While the Egyptian government did not want to repatriate all of its prisoners of war from Israel, but keep some of them in Gaza as a reminder of the Egyptian presence for the Israelis and thus for the global community, members of the British Foreign Office also feared the reactions at the UN General Assembly in New York. They considered raising the issue of the Egyptian prisoners of war in Israel in the assembly, but quickly realised that this might engender questions about those Egyptian prisoners in British hands. The idea was thus to give the impression to the UN that it was the Israelis who were reluctant to return the Egyptian prisoners of war to Egypt. And concerning the danger of appearing as paternalistic towards Egypt, a member of the Foreign Office suggested to ‘justify this on humanitarian grounds.’

The relationship between the British government and the Red Cross concerning assistance for Egyptian prisoners of war was also dominated by questions of control and information, which revealed the difficult passage for the British from colonial to post-colonial logics. First, for the British Red Cross it was frustrating because its members felt that they received information only partly or too late. Moreover, the Red Cross members were ready to intervene in Suez even before the invasion had taken place (which proves the predictability of the invasion), but had to wait for a long time until London asked them for help.
The British government, on the other hand, was afraid that the British Red Cross, which received all information from the ICRC and was then asked to transmit it to the government, might be better informed than itself. In any case, the bureaucratic system already made the transmission of information a complicated task. All information had to be passed to the British government, to the protecting power (which was India), to the British Red Cross and to the ICRC. One result of this procedure was that decisions on humanitarian action often took much time, too much time.

The relationship between the British government and the ICRC was less marked by the claim of control than by the government's desire to 'use' the ICRC for its own political interests. For example, the Foreign Office was afraid that the committee members could 'lend themselves to unsubstantiated Egyptian propaganda' because they received letters from Egyptian prisoners of war which the British were not able to control. Yet, London did not have to fear the ICRC critics. The ICRC delegate in Port Said, according to the organisation's habit, visited the prisoners of war camp on 15 and 16 November and declared being satisfied with the conditions of the captured.

**Prisoners of war between Egypt and Israel: a regional political powder keg**

While assistance to Egyptian prisoners of war in British captivity was thoroughly observed and subordinated to political considerations, but not prevented by the British government, the Red Cross and Red Crescent members’ engagement was even more delicate concerning the mutual prisoners of war between Egypt and Israel. This was due to the political dimension the topic enclosed, which became obvious when ICRC delegate de Traz reported to Geneva in December 1956 that the Egyptian government did not seek the repatriation of all prisoners of war, but wished to keep some in the Gaza Strip as a sign of the Egyptian presence there. The fact that both had captured each other’s prisoners of war since the war of 1949 required many efforts and patience from the ICRC. In turn, the Egyptian Red Crescent was afraid to engage because of the still unresolved Egyptian–Israeli diplomatic relations.

As in the current situation, there had always been many more Egyptian prisoners in Israel than the other way around, which added another brisance to the situation. As mentioned before, the Egyptian prisoners of war in Israel made up the biggest group of prisoners in the Suez Conflict. Since Israel had difficulties in supplying these 5000 Egyptians with food, it sought to release them very quickly, cabling the British representative in Jerusalem to the Foreign Office in London. Nonetheless, it was only on 21 January 1957, nearly three months after the invasion, that Israel released the first 500 Egyptian prisoners of war, because both Israel and Egypt insisted on the principle of reciprocity and both waited until January 1957 to promise and realise the exchange of prisoners of war.

Concerning the non-state humanitarian actors, which were in this case mainly the ICRC and the Egyptian Red Crescent, both groups had been active for a long time with regard to the prisoners of war and both faced a lot of difficulties, though the difficulties were divergent. The ICRC had been involved in helping prisoners of war on both sides since the conflict in Palestine in 1949. Generations of ICRC delegates had been active in trying to negotiate between Egypt and Israel for the release of their prisoners, with some successes, but also with many obstacles. At the end of 1955 and the beginning of 1956, ICRC delegate de Traz expressed his frustration because the process was taking so long and he complained that the exchange of prisoners of war was not regarded by Egypt and Israel as an exchange of
human beings, but only of mere objects. De Traz also made clear that, while former ICRC delegates may have reached concessions by the authorities, for example the permission to move between both camps which had been obtained in 1949–50, this was not valid anymore because new humanitarian activists and institutions had arrived and he thus had to start at zero again. Yet, despite the ICRC's limited scope of action during the conflict, it was able to provide the first airliner to carry prisoners of war between Israel and Egypt since the beginning of the war in Palestine in 1948.

The Egyptian Red Crescent, whose members had also been concerned with the prisoners of war between Egypt and Israel for many years, encountered other difficulties even before the crisis of 1956. Although the humanitarian organisation made efforts to transfer letters and money to Israeli prisoners of war in Egypt, Gertrude Boutros-Ghali, the Red Crescent's delegate for international relations, expressed her doubts regarding its possible course of actions. She described the Egyptian Red Crescent as very ‘shy’, and this impression was shared by ICRC delegate de Traz. He reported that every time he spoke about Israel in front of the Egyptian Red Crescent, the latter's members blocked any discussion. They accompanied de Traz to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, but refused to speak themselves. This attitude resulted from the control the Egyptian government wanted to maintain both over the Egyptian Red Crescent and the political situation.

Since the military putsch in 1952, the Red Crescent Society had been brought closer to the government. This had the positive effect of re-evaluating its work. Yet, it also implied that the leading figures of the organisation were exchanged with other people close to the new regime. The Suez Conflict confirmed this limited scope of action attributed to the Egyptian Red Crescent. As the ICRC delegates had many difficulties in obtaining entrance to the Egyptian prisons which hosted the Israeli prisoners of war, ICRC delegate Muller made use of a contact with the Egyptian Red Crescent to obtain a meeting with Nasser in December 1956. This provoked the anger of Colonel Gohar, responsible for the Palestinian affairs, who told Muller he should have contacted him directly – which Muller had tried!

During the Suez Conflict itself, the ICRC encountered many difficulties as well. While the ICRC delegates were rather satisfied with the situation of Egyptian prisoners of war in Israeli camps, it also seems that the Geneva Committee had much more ease in dealing with the Israeli than with the Egyptian authorities. Whether this was due to the actual behaviour of Israel or to ‘cultural proximity’, which the Swiss ICRC members felt to be greater with their Israeli than with their Egyptian sister societies, still remains to be explored.

Yet, this did not prevent the ICRC from receiving harsh criticism from the Israeli side after the release of four Israeli soldiers from Egypt on 27 January 1957. Many state and non-state authorities attended the handing over. Members of the ICRC as well as the United Nations Emergency Force and Israeli political and military representatives were there when the four ex-prisoners declared having been ill-treated and even tortured by the Egyptian Army. In an interview given to the newspaper Jerusalem Post, the soldiers also criticised the ICRC of having visited them too late and that amelioration of the prison conditions were only made once the ICRC delegates announced their visit to the camp leaders. The Israeli press voluntarily spread their testimonies and the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, in its edition of 4 April 1957, even went so far as to give an account of the alleged complaint of the ICRC against the Egyptian military. The Geneva Committee very quickly replied that it had not proclaimed such an accusation, and finally the reproach against the Egyptian Army could not be verified.
How did the ICRC itself perceive the situation of Israeli prisoners of war in Egypt and their assistance to them? The ICRC delegates indeed also regretted being so late with their visits which took place only in December 1956 and January 1957, but which were due to their difficulties in obtaining access to the camps. In their reports to Geneva, the representatives expressed some concern for the soldiers, especially for one officer who was left in isolation and whom they found in apathy. They tried to reach ameliorations for the soldiers by referring explicitly to the Geneva Conventions, such as, for example, the right to regular letters from their families and break time in the sun. Although the Egyptian camp commanders promised and realised some improvement, the ICRC delegates did not receive any written guarantees from the Egyptian military. Their efforts were – ironically – curtailed by the soldiers’ release on 23 January 1957. In a letter to Colonel Fouttouh five days later, ICRC delegate Thudichum expressed his ‘surprise and disappointment’ that the Egyptian Army had not informed him about this event ‘of such a paramount importance’.

Yet, the Red Cross and Red Crescent’s engagement for the prisoners of war between Egypt and Israel did not stop at this point. In the years after the Suez Crisis, members of the ICRC and the Egyptian Red Crescent participated in the organisation of salaries to the Egyptian prisoners of war in Israel. However, this transnational co-operation also knew its limits. When in January 1958 ICRC delegate Muller sought to hand the assistance to Jewish prisoners in Cairo over to the Egyptian Red Crescent, he received a very direct message from Geneva rejecting this idea with the argument that the Red Crescent Society was too close to the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior to be able to help the detainees. This episode makes clear that despite some achievements during the Suez Crisis, transnational humanitarian co-operation remained limited.

**Conclusion**

The Suez Crisis engendered a moment of transnational humanitarian co-operation within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. As this study has shown, this was, among other things, due to the great movement of solidarity that the war provoked worldwide. A further key element was the new role of the Egyptian Red Crescent, whose activity and perception increased during this crisis. In this sense, the Red Crescent’s non-state humanitarian assistance can be seen as part of the Egyptian government’s involvement in humanitarian co-operation, for example with UN forces during and after the Suez Conflict. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in general was able to prove the worth of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which also led to the ratification of the Conventions by Great Britain in September 1957. Yet, the Suez incident also revealed the limits of transnational humanitarian co-operation given by political circumstances; in this case, the colonial and anti-colonial and other geostrategic motives of the conflict partners. With regard to the relationship between Great Britain and Egypt, non-state humanitarian engagement proved to be closely linked to the processes of decolonisation which indeed ‘changed the inner dynamics of international organizations’. After the Suez Conflict, British citizens were arrested in Egypt – a reversal of the power relations between both countries, and a new field of activity for the British Red Cross, which became responsible for the British who wanted to leave the country at the Nile. As a consequence of this, the role and rights of civilians in times of war, especially nuclear wars, became one of the topics of the 19th International Red Cross Conference in New Delhi from 24 October to 7 November 1957 – without
achieving the goals envisioned by the ICRC, due to political tensions of the Cold War. Concerning the ICRC more specifically, its relations with the Egyptian Red Crescent seem to have deteriorated in the late 1950s, because the latter proved to be more self-confident and even expansionist in the region – ironically, this was one of the consequences of the increasing activity the ICRC had wished for the national societies.

Unfortunately, these increasing non-state humanitarian activities were not able to prevent the outbreak of new hostilities in the region in the following decades.

Notes

1. “L’action du Comité international dans le Proche-Orient,” 731.
2. See, for example, the report by the Egyptian Red Crescent on its activities during the Suez Crisis, in: Archives of the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva (henceforth FCRCS), A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2, “Égypte 1956–1958” (Report by Gertrude Boutros-Ghali from 26 March 1957).
3. This interest is mainly concentrated in the 1980s and 1990s with very few studies on the Suez Crisis since that time.
4. Thomas, Fight or Flight, 168. Yet, Thomas also underlines that Suez was not the only decisive event in the process of British decolonisation.
5. Orlov, “Die Suezkrise.”
6. See for example Shemesh, Egypt. From Military Defeat to Political Victory,” 157–60.
7. See Shehada, Die Suezkrise von 1956 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der ägyptischen Darstellung, 290.
8. MacKenzie, A World Beyond Borders, 79; James, “Humanitarian Aid Operations and Peacekeeping,” 54.
9. Amar, “Egypt as a Globalist Power,”
10. See Watenpaugh, “The League of Nations’ Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927.”
11. See Naguib and Okkenhaug, Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East; Feldman, “The Quaker Way;” Gallagher, Quakers in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.
12. See for example Benthall, “The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Islamic Societies.”
13. Chamberlin, The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order.
14. Mišković, Fischer-Tiné, and Boškovska, The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War.
15. Feldman and Ticktin, “Government and Humanity.”
16. See Ticktin, “Transnational Humanitarianism.” Though a very helpful article on the history of dealing with humanitarianism in anthropology, the author unfortunately does not develop the concept of transnational humanitarianism for historians any further.
17. For a detailed account of the events and the importance of the Suez Canal for the different countries involved, see, among others, Louis and Owen, Suez 1956.
18. The National Archives in London/Kew (henceforth TNA), FO 371/118913, JE 1094/251: “Estimated damage”: While British sources spoke about approximately 100 dead and 450 injured persons, Egyptian estimates were much higher. The Egyptian position was underlined by journals such as The Scribe, edited by Dr Nabeeh Kamil, which, in its edition from November 1956, showed big photos of destroyed houses and streets. See TNA, FO 371/118913, JE 1094/245.
19. TNA, FO 371/118919, JE 1094/381: “Steen,” letter from Steen to the British Foreign Ministry, Oslo/7.12.1956. Steen justifies his cancellation with reasons “of partial (technical) kind”, but the correspondence reveals that he also became aware of the explosive power of his mission. In this letter, Steen suggests that the United Nations take over the mission and declares his readiness to fulfil it if Hammerskjöld would entrust him with this role.
20. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from the Swedish Red Cross to the League, Stockholm/15.12.1956.

21. See Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva (henceforth ACICR), B 00 79: “Croissant Rouge Égyptien,” Note of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry to the ICRC, Cairo/5.10.1948.

22. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from the Indonesian Red Cross to the League, Djakarta/13.6.1957.

23. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from the German Red Cross to the Egyptian Red Crescent, Bonn/12.2.1957.

24. See for example the articles in Al-Jumhūriyya, 1.11.1956, 13.11.1956, 15.11.1956, 19.11.1956, 21.11.1956, 26.11.1956, 5.12.1956.

25. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” telegraph from the Jordanian Red Crescent to the League, 19.11.1956. To some extent, this manifestation of solidarity is remarkable in the sense that during this period there were important political tensions between Jordan and Egypt, especially because Jordan was governed by a pro-Western king while Egypt under Nasser sharply rejected any British control. Yet, like at other occasions, King Husayn had to display his solidarity with his Arab neighbour in order to appease his critics both outside and inside Jordan. This quote is thus good proof for the highly ambivalent discourse of humanitarianism. For the relations between Jordan and Egypt see Kerr, The Arab Cold War, 16–17.

26. See the article in Al-Jumhūriyya, 21.11.1956, 4: “40 alf riyāl saʿūdī li-jamʿiyyat al-Hilāl al-Āhmār al-Miṣrī.”

27. See for example FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from the Romanian Red Cross to the League, Bucarest/26.2.1957.

28. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from the New Zealand Red Cross to Winsall, Wellington/23.1.1957.

29. See Rothermund, “The Era of Non-Alignment,” 23. Yet, despite the congruent date of the events, crises had very little influence on one another, as Campbell points out. See Campbell, “The Twin Crises of Hungary and Suez.”

30. This movement of criticising colonialism and imperialism throughout the world is generally associated with the Non-Aligned Movement. Its main protagonists at the time, Nehru, Tito and Nasser, supported each other during the events in Egypt despite diverging points of view on different aspects. See Mišković, “Between Idealism and Pragmatism,” 125–6. Yet, despite the parallels between donations to Egypt and Hungary and the Non-Aligned Movement, neither was congruent.

31. Heinemann and Wiggershaus, Das internationale Krisenjahr 1956. Polen, Ungarn, Suez.

32. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” telegraph from the League to the American Red Cross, 23.11.1956.

33. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2 “Egypte 1956–1958,” Communiqué No. 579, 29.2.1957: The need for materials had been stated by a common visit to the camp by members of the ICRC, the Egyptian Red Crescent and the League.

34. See Dār al-Wathāʿiq/National Archives in Cairo (henceforth DWQ), Ministry of Social Affairs, 4029-000464, letter from the Egyptian Red Crescent to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Cairo/3.7.1951: The Ladies’ Committee of Suez asked for permission to collect donations from the Mecca pilgrims.

35. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” Communiqué No. 533, Geneva/12.11.1956: “Secours de la Croix-Rouge pour l’Egypte.”

36. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” Communiqué No. 535, Geneva/13.11.1956: “Action du CICR en Egypte, Convois de secours pour Port-Said.”

37. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” “Rapport sur les activités du Croissant Rouge égyptien de novembre 1956 à mars 1957.”

38. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” “Gertrude Boutros-Ghali: Rapport du bureau de l’organisation des volontaires,” Cairo/26.3.1957.

39. See Bugnion and Perret, De Budapest à Saigon, 80.
40. For the ICRC see Forsythe, The Humanitarians, 230. For the question of the professionalisation of NGOs in general, see Heins, Nongovernmental Organizations in International Society.

41. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” “Rapport sur les activités du Croissant Rouge égyptien de novembre 1956 à mars 1957.”

42. It would be interesting but surely impossible to know if this column was really filled out by the sender(s) or by the Egyptian Red Crescent volunteers.

43. “(...) muntazirin al-radd bi-nafs al-ṣariq ayy bi-wasīyat al-Ṣālib al-ḥāmar al-Dawli (...).” TNA, WO 32/16345: “Prisoners of War 1956,” form filled in by Lieutenant Georges Habib.

44. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” letter from Curtis to Smelling (of the Commonwealth Relations Office), 6.11.1956; letter from Standish to Pritchard (of the British Red Cross), 12.11.1956.

45. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” report from Huber to the ICRC, Cairo/8.2.1957.

46. See Bugnion and Perret, De Budapest à Saigon, 95. They only mention this visit without giving any further interpretation.

47. TNA, FO 371/1118906, JE 1094/90: “That a request was made by two Red Crescent vehicles, containing Egyptians, to proceed to Port Said and inquires if General Burns could be approached on the Subject.”

48. TNA, FO 371/118911, JE 1094/192, telegraph from R. Murray to the Foreign Office, 22.11.1956.

49. TNA, FO 371/118914, JE 1094/264: “parliamentary question”, 26.11.1956.

50. This was according to a note in the papers of the British War Ministry. See TNA, WO 288/30: “Suez Medical Matters”, “Note”.

51. TNA, FO 371/118912, JE 1094/222: “That Lebanese delegate alleges that refusal of access to P. Said of Red Crescent teams has resulted in suffering and deaths”, letter from UK Delegate in New York (probably Sir P. Dixon) to the Foreign Office, 27.11.1956.

52. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958,” Communiqué No. 551, 12.12.1956.

53. Neutrality as one of the seven Red Cross Principles was adapted at the 20th Red Cross Conference in Vienna in 1965, but it had been a driving force of the movement since a long time before. See von Boven, “Some Reflections on Neutrality,” 135. Boven quotes Jean Pictet, who defined the Red Cross’s understanding of neutrality that it “may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature”.

54. See Forsythe, “On Contested Concepts.”

55. See Rey, “‘Fighting Colonialism’ Versus ‘Non-Alignment,’” 164; Sayegh, The Dynamics of Neutralism in the Arab World.

56. Petipierre, “Actualité du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge,” 76.

57. Archives of the British Red Cross in London (henceforth BRC), ACC 1983/9: “War Mobilization Emergency Plans 1956/Restricted Circulation. Chairman's office only,” “Note for files,” 1.11.1956.

58. TNA, WO 32/16345, letter from Standish to Mallett, 5.11.1956.

59. Bugnion and Perret, De Budapest à Saigon, 90.

60. TNA, FO 371/128203, VR 1551/3: “Israeli Prisoners of War in Egyptian Hands,” letter from Nicholls to the Foreign Office, Tel Aviv/29.11.1956.

61. See Oren, “Secret Egypt-Israel Peace Initiatives Prior to the Suez Campaign.”

62. For the (anti-) imperial dimension of the conflict between Great Britain (and France) and Egypt, see Thomas, Fight or Flight, 188.

63. See TNA, FO 371/118916, JE 1094/319 “Discusses Release of Egyptian POW held by British and French,” telegraph from Murray to the Foreign Office, 5.12.1956.

64. See TNA, FO 371/128203, VR 1551/8, letter from Chancery to the African Department, 4.12.1956. According to this letter there were about 30 Israeli prisoners of war in Egyptian hands; see also FO 371/128203, VR 1551/1, report from the UK delegate in Tel Aviv to the Foreign Office, 23.1.1957: The Israelis had captured 5850 Egyptian prisoners of war.

65. See TN, WO 32/16345, letter from Bisher/War Office to the ICRC, London/1.1.1957.

66. ACICR, B AG 210.102-005.01, letter from de Traz to the ICRC, Cairo/22.12.1956.
67. TNA, FO 371/118881, JE 1074/174: "Request guidance in the event of the subject of Egyptian POWs being raised in debate," letter from Sir P. Dixon to the Foreign Office, New York/2.12.1956.
68. See TNA, FP 371/121839, telegraph from Nicholls to the Foreign Office, Tel Aviv/26.11.1956.
69. TNA, FO 371/121839, VR 1551/7, "FO Minute" by E.M. Rose, 29.11.1956.
70. TNA, WO 32/16345, letter from Standish to Pritchard, 12.11.1956.
71. BRC, letter from Lord Woolton (of the British Red Cross) to Antony Head, the Secretary of State, London/21.9.1956.
72. See TNA, WO 32/16345, handwritten note from the Foreign Office.
73. See the letters kept in TNA, WO 32/16345.
74. TNA, FO 371/118911, JE 1094/192, letter from R. Murray to the Foreign Office, 22.11.1956.
75. See TNA, FO 371/118914, JE 1094/265, telegraph from the Foreign Office to the British Representative in Khartoum, London/4.12.1956.
76. See ACICR, B AG 210.102-005.01, letter from de Traz to the ICRC, Cairo/22.12.1956.
77. See ACICR, B AG 210.065-001, protocol from a conversation between P. Gaillard (ICRC) and Kahany, Delegate of Israel with the United Nations, Geneva/7.11.1956: according to Kahany there were altogether, since the beginning, 17,000 Egyptian prisoners in Israel and only 180 Israeli prisoners in Egypt. As these numbers are highly political, they have to be considered with precaution.
78. See TNA, FO 371/121839, VR 1551/1, telegraph from the British representative in Jerusalem to the Foreign Office, 21.11.1956.
79. See TNA, FO 371/128203, VR 1551/1, note from the British representative in Tel Aviv to the Foreign Office, 23.1.1957.
80. After the Israel-Palestine Conflict in 1949, the ICRC had managed to reach the exchange of prisoners of war between Egypt and Israel. See ACICR, G 59/ I / GC VII, 26: "Mission de Mr. Munier en Palestine. Copies pour information, juin 48-08.06.49," letter from Munier to the ICRC delegation for Palestine, Amman/31.8.1949.
81. See ACICR, B AG 210.065, letter from Boutros-Ghali to the ICRC, Cairo/21.10.1955.
82. ACICR, B AG 210.065, telegraph from de Traz to the ICRC, Cyprus/December 1955.
83. Detter, The Law of War, 373.
84. ACICR, B AG 210.065, letter from Boutros-Ghali to the ICRC, Cairo/21.10.1955.
85. ACICR, B AG 210.065, minutes of a meeting between Pierre Gaillard and Gertrude Boutrous-Ghali in Geneva, 30.9.1955.
86. ACICR, B AG 210.065-001: "Prisonniers de guerre israéliens en Egypte 1955–1957," letter from de Traz to Gaillard, Cyprus/15.12.1955.
87. See ACICR, BAG 121 065-002, letter from de Angeli to the ICRC, Cairo/20.10.1952. De Angeli reports on the “purifying committee” (comité d' épuration) that the Egyptian Red Crescent had to install like all the other governmental and paragovernmental organisations in Egypt.
88. ACICR, B AG 210-065, report by Muller on his visit to Israeli prisoners of war in the prison of Abbassiah near Cairo on 13 December 1956.
89. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: "Egypte 1956–1958," Communiqué No. 539, Geneva/19.11.1956: "Action du CICR en faveur des prisonniers de guerre dans le Moyen-Orient”; ACICR, B AG 210 065-001, report by ICRC delegate Louis Gailland, who visited Transit Camp 396 on 26 November 1956, and concluded positively: "L'impression générale recueillie par le délégué du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge a été bonne.”
90. See for example FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Egypte 1956–1958," Communiqué No. 566, Geneva/21.1.1957: "Ainsi commence la réalisation de l'offre faite par les autorités d'Israël au Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et concernant la libération de tous les prisonniers de guerre en leur pouvoir moyennant réciprocité de la part de l'Égypte.”
91. This helpful concept has been integrated into the debate on humanitarianism by Benthall. See Benthall, “Cultural Proximity.”
92. See TNA, FO 371/128203, VR 1551/6, letter from the British Consulate in Tel Aviv to the Foreign Office, 29.1.1957.
93. ACICR, B AG 210 065-001: “Prisonniers de guerre israéliens en Égypte 1955–1957,” “La Croix-Rouge parle des tortures infligées aux quatre prisonniers” (French translation of the article).
94. ACICR, B AG 210.065-001, letter from Gaillard to the newspaper Haaretz, Geneva/17.4.1957.
95. In a letter to the ICRC, Egyptian commander Colonel Gohar declared the Israeli soldiers had been injured because they had quarrelled with each other. See ACICR, B AG 210 065-001, letter from Gohar to the ICRC, Cairo/5.8.1957.
96. ACICR, B AG 210.065-001, report by ICRC delegate Muller on his visit to Israeli prisoners of war in Abbasiah near Cairo, 13.12.1956; report by ICCR Delegate Thudichum on his visit of the same camp, 6.1.1957.
97. See ACICR, B AG 210.065-001, report from Thudichum to the ICRC, 12.1.1957.
98. ACICR, B AG 210.065-001, letter from Thudichum to Colonel Fouttouh, Cairo/28.1.1957.
99. ACICR, B AG 102.003-02: “Sommes retirées aux prisonniers de guerre en Israël 22/01/1957–30/11/1959.”
100. ACICR, B AG 225.065-001, letter from Gaillard to Muller, Geneva/9.1.1958.
101. See Amar, “Egypt as a Globalist Power,” 182. The Egyptian military not only became partners and hosts of the UNEF, but also supported the UN Operation in Congo in 1960 to assure the African country’s independence.
102. See http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp (Accessed 29 August 2014).
103. Frey, Kunkel, and Unger, “Introduction: International Organizations, Global Development, and the Making of the Contemporary World,” 8.
104. See TNA, GP 22/219: “British Red Cross,” Minutes of the 494th Meeting, 13.2.1957.
105. FRCRCS, A 1023 Box 2: 22/1/2: “Égypte 1956–1958,” “Press Release No. 600b,” Geneva/16.04.1957.
106. See Bugnion and Perret, De Budapest à Saigon, 123.

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