The Suez Crisis and British Policy
towards the Middle East in the Mid-1950s

IKEDA, Ryo

The Suez Crisis, which was caused by the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal in July 1956, has been considered a major exception of British decolonisation policy. Previous research tends to argue that Britain's going to war was the lion's last roar, i.e., Britain tried to resist Third-World nationalism by using force, only to suffer a miserable failure and further intensification of nationalist movements in its colonial territories. This article rather argues that Britain aimed to prevent France and Israel alone from attacking Egypt because, without British involvement, this would have been a heavy blow to British prestige in the Middle East. The Baghdad Pact had been established in February 1955 to gather pro-Western countries in the region but the conclusion of the Egyptian-Czechoslovakian arms deal in September 1955 was undermining the Western monopoly of arms supply to Arab countries. When Israel attacked the Arabs, Britain had to show pro-British Arab countries that it was capable of acting as a police power, whilst maintaining punitive attitudes against Egypt. Otherwise Britain would have lost face in the eyes of Arab peoples. Thus it had every reason to choose to attack Egypt in order to retain political control over Arab oil-producing countries.