

Record of the first session of tripartite talks on the Suez Crisis (London, 29 July 1956)

Caption: From 29 July to 2 August 1956, tripartite talks are held in London to establish a common position on the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company. At the first session on 29 July, the Americans, British and French agree on the need for a conference at which the countries with an interest in the canal can give their views on the matter. But on most of the major points for discussion there is disagreement between the United States and the European countries, particularly on questions regarding responsibility, the economic sanctions that should be imposed on Egypt and the preparation of potential military action.

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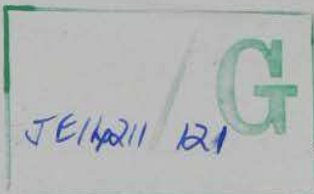
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Nationalisation of the Suez Canal

Tripartite Talks between the French, United Kingdom and
United States Delegations

Record of the 1st Meeting held at No. 1 Carlton Gardens,
London, S.W.1., on Sunday July 29, 1956, at 6.00 p.m.

Delegations were headed by

France

M. Pineau

United Kingdom

Secretary of State

United States

Mr. Robert Murphy

Foreign Office, S.W.1.

July 31, 1956.

RECORD OF MEETING HELD AT 1, CARLTON GARDENS AT
6 p.m. ON SUNDAY, JULY 29, 1956.

After welcoming the delegates, the Foreign Secretary stressed the gravity of the situation that had arisen from Colonel Nasser's action. If he were to get away with this, it would have the following certain consequences.

- (i) His prestige in the Middle East would be immensely strengthened;
- (ii) The pipeline transit countries would be likely to become more intransigent;
- (iii) There would be general Middle Eastern action against our oil supplies.

This would mean that NATO and Western Europe were at the mercy of one irresponsible and faithless individual. We had certain objectives which we wished to attain. These were:

- (a) to establish operating arrangements under international control guaranteeing free navigation, reasonable dues and continuity of efficient administration;
- (b) to establish the international control in a form which would secure the support of as many countries as possible and particularly of the "neutrals". Such support was most likely to be forthcoming if the international control were established under the auspices of the United Nations;
- (c) to ensure that the Suez Canal Company was fairly treated; and
- (d) to ensure full respect for the legitimate interests of Egypt, including a fair financial return from the operation of the Canal.

It was not our object to make it appear to the world that conflict arose out of mere expropriation of the Suez Canal Company. Our concern was with the fact that the Suez Canal was an international waterway and we wished to concentrate on that aspect of the case.

M. Pineau agreed in general with the United Kingdom objectives. He also stressed that the act of nationalisation itself was not of primary importance but the way in which it had been carried out. It would have a bad effect if our sole object appeared to be to defend the Suez Canal Company. He therefore agreed that an international convention should be set up and the method of doing this should be discussed. As to point (c), M. Pineau stressed that it was important that the Company shareholders should be properly compensated. He also stated that the French Government object strongly to the clause in the nationalisation law which compelled employees of the Suez Canal Company to continue working for the Egyptian Company under the threat of imprisonment. We had the right to demand Egypt to withdraw this article, as being contrary to international law. He suggested the insertion of the words "and its employees" after Suez Canal Company in (c) above. This was agreed.

M. Pineau said that his Government attached the greatest importance to the attitude of Egypt in connexion with the situation in French North Africa. If Nasser's success were to be accepted, it would be completely useless to continue the struggle in North Africa. This was a further argument for the French Government to consider counter-action.

Mr. Murphy said that Secretary of State Dulles and President Eisenhower fully appreciated the gravity of the situation. His Government deplored the violent and reckless language which had been used by Nasser in a unilateral action which affected all maritime

His Government did not wish to publicly defend the position of the Suez Canal Company's shareholders, although they realised this might be important. The important point to them was the free access to an international waterway. He hoped that the final decisions of the Conference would only be reached after a sober estimate of the facts and would take account of the effect such decisions would have on world opinion. He also felt that not only the interests of the three powers should be taken into consideration, but also those of other users of the Canal. Consideration might be given to the use of the NATO machinery and the support of friendly countries, including those East of Suez, might be enlisted. Action by the International Court of Justice and the United Nations might also be considered. The question of military intervention did not arise. It would in any case depend on developments, and should be relegated to the background. The Arab-Israel conflict should also be segregated from the present issue. The Egyptian Ambassador in Washington had already been informed of the United States' views. Mr. Murphy was fully aware of the consequences to Western prestige in the Middle East if this question were not handled correctly. Nevertheless, whatever attitude were taken it should be on the broadest possible base and try to carry world opinion with it. Any announcement made should make it clear that it was the intention of countries with maritime interests to try and bring this case to an impartial tribunal.

The Foreign Secretary asked Mr. Murphy for clarification of what he meant by an impartial tribunal. Mr. Murphy suggested this might be the United Nations or the International Court. He thought that the provisions of the 1888 Convention should be studied carefully and invoked in support of our interests. He was also fully aware of the necessity of protecting United States nationals. He would like to study the suggestions made by the Foreign Secretary carefully.

The Foreign Secretary said he would like to answer some of the points raised by Mr. Murphy:-

- (1) The question of military preparations. Political and economic pressure was unlikely to have any effect on Nasser unless he knew that there were military sanctions in the background. There was a possibility that British nationals might be arrested or British shipping interfered with. It was therefore necessary to proceed with military preparations as far as possible in case it were necessary to take action. These preparations would be precautionary.
- (2) He agreed that the Arab-Israel conflict was a separate problem and suggested a separate discussion of how this should be handled.
- (3) He was not entirely clear what Mr. Murphy meant by his impartial tribunal. But he agreed that it was necessary to mobilise international public opinion. We wished to assemble a conference of powers with considerable interest in the Canal. We should like to have such a conference in London and did not think it should be long delayed. We could either firstly send a note to Egypt indicating the importance we attached to the Canal being an international waterway and subsequently assemble a conference of powers interested in the free use of the Canal to endorse this note, or alternatively we could send a note after such a conference. It was also important to decide who should be invited to the proposed conference. Invitations might be issued on the basis of tonnage, trading interests or geographical

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areas. He would like to have the views of M. Pineau and Mr. Murphy on the desirability of such a conference and how it should be composed. He was not in favour of the Secretary-General of the United Nations convening this conference and would prefer it to be convened by one or more of the Tripartite powers.

M. Pineau did not agree with the United States approach to this whole question. It should not be regarded as a legal problem, but as a political one. It was a direct result of the decision made by the United States Government not to finance the Aswan Dam. If Nasser were to get away with this, it would have incalculable consequences for the whole Western position. Like Hitler, Nasser had made no secret of his intentions. If any legal decision were taken against Nasser, he would be no more likely to abide by it than by the Security Council decision that Egypt should not obstruct the passage of Israeli ships through the Canal. He considered that a Note in general terms should be sent to Egypt as a result of the present conference. He also agreed that a conference of maritime powers should be convened. He agreed with the Foreign Secretary on the military aspects of the problem.

In reply to a question from Mr. Murphy, the Secretary of State explained that we were only proposing military preparations in order to enable us to ensure by force, as a last resort, the free transit of vessels through the Canal. We had to ensure that the Canal remained an international waterway. It was not intended to make any military ultimatum to Nasser at the present stage. We must however be ready in case he were to occupy the base or take action against our ships.

M. Pineau agreed with the Foreign Secretary. Mr. Murphy pointed out that United States public opinion was not yet prepared for the idea of using force.

The Foreign Secretary said that a situation might arise where it would be impossible to go on paying dues to Egypt, if Nasser did not accept an international convention. He stressed the point that Nasser had already threatened employees of the Company with imprisonment. M. Pineau also emphasised that we were talking only about preparations at this stage.

The Foreign Secretary stated that Her Majesty's Government had decided to be ready to use force if necessary. Mr. Murphy said that the United States Government had not taken such a decision. M. Pineau said that the French Government had taken this decision. They were prepared to do whatever was necessary and considered that it was more important than anything else to check Nasser.

The general question of who should be invited to the conference of maritime powers was then discussed. No final decision was reached on this point. It was hoped that it would be possible to hold the conference in the course of the coming week. If it would not be possible to send the invitation from the three Powers, since Mr. Murphy had no instructions from his Government on this point, it might be better for the United Kingdom, as host Government, to issue the invitation. Mr. Murphy said he thought that the United States Government would be prepared to attend such a conference, but he could not say definitely yet.

M. Pineau gave his view of what might happen if no action were taken against Nasser. He envisaged three stages. Firstly the Canal

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would be run efficiently with the present staff. Nasser would demand the payment of dues in Egypt. Secondly, the dues would be raised moderately, but not so much that it would pay to send shipping round the Cape. Thirdly, Nasser would start to discriminate against shipping and, perhaps with the help of the U.S.S.R., would embark on a campaign against Western oil interests.

The meeting was then adjourned until 9.30.