

Letter from Jean Chauvel to Christian Pineau on the nationalisation of the Suez Canal (London, 27 July 1956)

Caption: On 27 July 1956, Jean Chauvel, French Ambassador to London, informs Christian Pineau, French Foreign Minister, of the British reaction to the unilateral nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company.

Source: Ministère des Affaires étrangères ; Commission de publication des DDF (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques français. Volume II: 1956, 1er juillet-23 octobre. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1990. 697 p. p. 165-167.

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T. Nos 3006 to 3015. Top priority.

London, 27 July 1956, 4.45 a.m.

Top secret. Reserved.

(Received 5 a.m.)

At 11 o'clock this evening, I was called to the home of the Prime Minister, where, in addition to Sir Anthony Eden, I met the Lord Chancellor, Lord Salisbury, Mr Selwyn Lloyd, Lord Home, the Minister for War, Lord Mountbatten and a representative of the United States Embassy.

Sir Anthony Eden informed me about the news just arriving of Nasser's decision to seize the Suez Canal and of the relevant Egyptian law.

We reviewed the legal position of the Suez Canal Company, an entity set up under Egyptian law that, according to its contract, had neither jurisdictional guarantees nor an arbitration clause. I sent for Mr Georges Picot, who at the time was in London, to fill me in on the details. We then looked at the Preamble to the 1888 Convention (1) and the clause of the Montreux Convention concerning undertakings given by Egypt regarding foreign economic interests. (2)

I pointed out that the issue was a legal one for the Company but that, for our governments, it was essentially political. Sir Anthony Eden sided with me, adding that the affair was a test of strength that Nasser must not be allowed to win. On the subject of what action to take, the Prime Minister asked Lord Mountbatten to take all necessary steps to ensure that Royal Navy crews were on alert.

We then considered the possibility of bringing in others to take part in any action, in particular the US Administration. It seemed to us that an appeal to the signatories of the 1888 Convention would not be very useful. I suggested, on the other hand, that we should get in touch with the interested members of the Commonwealth, such as India, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand.

For the moment, the members of the British Government in attendance approved the terms of a communiqué announcing the holding of consultations. I proposed that the communiqué be released simultaneously in London, Paris and Washington. The British agreed, and the US representative telegraphed an appropriate message to Washington. The time chosen was 11 o'clock in order to allow the broadcasts to be made at the same time.

As for the rest, Sir Anthony Eden unequivocally asserted that a three-way ministerial meeting would be imperative. The difficulty is that Mr Dulles, now that the Panama Conference (3) was over, was committed to a tour of Latin American capitals and would not return to Washington before next week.

In order to determine the points for discussion, it was decided that Lord Home would meet the four Commonwealth representatives and, in addition, that Mr Selwyn Lloyd, the US representative and myself would meet at 5 p.m. at the Foreign Office. The agenda would cover the following items:

1. Instructions for the employees of the Company. Should they obey the takeover or refuse? This evening, the Prime Minister was favouring refusal.
2. Diplomatic efforts to be undertaken in Cairo and with governments interested in passage through the Canal, such as the Netherlands, Norwegian and Italian Governments. (4)
3. Possible military action.

All the members of the British Government present this evening are taking this matter extremely seriously. They want to take decisive action, but they have no clear idea how to do it. Mr Selwyn Lloyd told me that, if it were up to him, he would place the Canal under international control, backed by the appropriate legal and material guarantees.

The meeting broke up at 2.30 a.m.

The full Cabinet will be discussing the matter tomorrow morning. It was agreed that the US Ambassador and myself would contact Mr Selwyn Lloyd at around 12 noon.

I should be grateful for any guidance that Your Excellency might wish me to follow during the morning. Obviously, it would be useful for me to know what military, i.e. naval, (5) means we would have available for common action.

(1) The Convention signed in Constantinople on 29 October 1888 was designed to guarantee free passage through the Suez Canal. Its Preamble set forth the desire of the signatories — Germany, Austria–Hungary, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia and Turkey — to ‘establish, by a Conventional Act, a definite system destined to guarantee at all times, and for all the Powers, the free use of the Suez Maritime Canal, and thus to complete the system under which the navigation of this Canal has been placed by the firman of His Imperial Majesty the Sultan, dated 22 February 1866 and sanctioning the concessions of His Highness the Khedive.’

The Convention was published in ‘La Documentation française’, *Notes et études documentaires, Documents relatif au canal de Suez*, No 2205, 16 August 1956, p. 35. This publication contains essential documents on the Canal, in addition to the 1888 Convention.

(2) Reference to a Convention of 8 May 1937 abolishing capitulations in Egypt.

(3) A formal conference of American Presidents was held in Panama. President Eisenhower, accompanied by his Secretary of State, arrived in Panama on the morning of 21 July. The Conference ended during the night of 22 July.

(4) A later telegram replaced ‘Italian’ by ‘Israeli’.

(5) Should read: ‘... it would be useful for me to know what military, I imagine naval ...’, instead of ‘... it would be useful for me to know what military, i.e. naval ...’