PATRONS! The latest episode of the SUEZ CRISIS is out NOW! Check your feeds to see for yourself exactly how sneaky Anthony Eden’s government had become, and how the PM remained driven to act in Egypt regardless of the consequences!

Episode 2.9: Israeli Sneaky takes us first to a scene of division. The Commonwealth, seen as so vital to British interests, was beginning to fracture along the question of what the best course of action to take against President Nasser would be. The Canadian, Australian and NZ governments were all uneasy at the prospect of war, and some, like the Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson, advocated a diplomatic approach. While Eden forged ahead with an aggressive policy, torpedoing another conference on the Suez Canal in the process, he increasingly began to alienate the Americans. The PM didn’t seem to care what other nations thought, though he was eager to make even better friends with the French throughout September.

It was around this time in our story that things in France began to change – they were increasingly coming to provide weapons and support to a new ally – Israel. It is at this point in our story that, largely because of French prodding and intrigue, the Israeli element of the story became all important. While the British were not yet let in on the plan, Franco-Israeli military cooperation and supply deals were paving the way towards a more trusting, beneficial relationship which could soon be exploited. The Israeli government, led by David Ben-Gurion, was also desirous of a war with Egypt, that nation which had threatened his own with destruction time and time again. The dilemma was that Israel could not be seen as the aggressor, but how was such a war then to be crafted and set in motion? Scheming heads were set together, and before long, a solution more incredible than anyone could have imagined was brought into being…

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 2.10. Last time we looked at some nitty gritty details; above all, how people in the background in Britain were beginning to see the legal problems behind a potential military strike against Egypt. If Britain acted in this way, the consensus appeared to indicate, she would not be on firm legal ground, or on the moral high ground. Yet, despite this, and despite the objections and clear policy put down by President Eisenhower, Anthony Eden continued on with his French allies regardless. In this episode, after a somewhat winding tale, we are introduced to the other significant pillar of the Suez Crisis equation – that of Israel, and how it fit in first with the plans of the French and then, after some prodding, with the plans of the British. Without any further ado then, we’ve got a lot to cover today so I’ll just get right into it. I will now take you to an interesting scene, as the Australian PM returned home after a stormy meeting in Cairo…

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It had been an eventful fortnight for Robert Menzies, the PM of Australia since 1949. Menzies was a dominion leader of the old school, with a record of war service and British connections to boot. He was loyal to a fault to the line taken by Britain, and he was adamant that the nationalisation of the Suez Crisis represented a grave indication of Nasser’s insidious intentions. Anyone who ignored the line put forward by Eden, or who tried to rationalise Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company as purely academic ignored, in Menzies opinion, ‘two salient facts’, and these were, in Menzies’ own words:

First, for historical reasons, the concession had an international character recognised by international convention. It could not, therefore, be regarded as a merely domestic enterprise under the sole control of the Egyptian Government. Secondly, what Egypt did was to repudiate this contractual concession twelve years before its due date without consultation and without agreement. If such a repudiation is not a breach of international law then there is no international law.

Menzies may have had something of a point here, but the problem was, Eden wasn’t just looking to criticise Nasser’s moves for the sake of it, he was looking to use them as an excuse for military intervention. This, his lawmakers assured him, would not be possible. In Menzies case though, having attended the Canal User’s Conference on 16th August 1956, the Australian PM believed that his work here was done, and he got ready to return to Canberra when he received a strange telephone call. Menzies recalled:

At about 2AM, in the morning of 17th August, the telephone rang and woke me up. On the line was the…American ambassador…He said: ‘I want you to come to my house…’ ‘When?’ I asked. ‘Right away. Anthony, Selwyn and Foster are here, with some others. They want to discuss a matter with you.’ I protested, and asked whether it would not keep till the morning. He said that it would not, and that he would send a car down to [me] at once. I got up, dressed, and arrived at the residence at about 2.30AM.

Menzies was about to discover why he had been woken up. It was to be up to him to represent the conclusions of the Canal User’s Conference to President Nasser. He was to be the man tasked with explaining this case to the Egyptian President because, as Eden insisted, Menzies ‘knows how to put a case!’[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet, knowing what we know about Eden’s end-goal in all of this, it seems that Menzies was chosen less because he knew how to put a case, and more because he was a convenient fall guy now that John Foster Dulles was refusing to travel all the way to Cairo. It would be up to Menzies to explain the findings of the Canal User’s Conference, which Nasser had refused to attend. In short, an internationally constituted body of people would be created to advise the Egyptians on how to operate the Canal and its company. This, Nasser was unlikely to accept, since he would view it as more foreign interference in Egyptian affairs. At the same time, Menzies could be expected to do his duty, and as a committed Anglophile, Eden anticipated that he would stand firm for British interests when face to face with President Nasser.

We should remember that since Eden’s aim was to gain American approval for the use of force, he had wanted this Canal User’s Conference episode to blow up in Dulles’ face. When Dulles’ ideas were publically rejected in a face to face meeting with Nasser, then, Eden believed, the American Secretary of State would see his point of view and advocate sterner, forceful measures. But Dulles refused to go, and Menzies was to go in his place. This didn’t mean Eden’s plans were defeated – on the contrary, Eden believed that since the Cana User’s Conference had been Dulles’ idea either way, its rejection by Nasser would still force the Americans into sterner action. Menzies, loyal to a fault to London’s interests, could be expected to stand up to Nasser’s nationalism, which made it even more unlikely that the decisions reached by the Canal User’s Conference would be approved of in Cairo.

This, indeed, was what happened. Menzies was totally out of his depth in Cairo, and had attempted to approach Nasser in a spirit first of causal comradery, and then with some barely veiled threats. That Nasser later complained of having to deal with ‘this Australian mule’ tells its own story – Eden’s plan had worked. Menzies claimed that ‘we parted in a most amicable way’, but this amicability seems to have persuaded Nasser to break off the talks, accusing Menzies of trying to impose ‘collective colonialism in regulated form’, so the amicability can’t have gone particularly far.[[2]](#footnote-2) Menzies came to the conclusion that the situation was hopeless and like many great statesmen, he now looked for someone to blame for the embarrassing way things had gone down. Rather than blame Eden, who had a vested interest in seeing these talks fail, Menzies chose to lambast the Americans. When President Eisenhower gave his weekly press conference in late August, he had insisted that ‘we are committed to a peaceful settlement of this dispute, *nothing else*’. This line, in Menzies’ opinion, cut his legs out from under him – since Nasser knew that force would not be forthcoming, he had been less likely to bow to threats, and this ‘gave the final power into the hands of Nasser.’ If Menzies’ logic was flawed, then his idea that maintaining pro-British sentiments would unify his government at home in Australia were delusional.

Menzies’ trip to Cairo, taking place in the first few days of September 1956, is worth recounting because of the important change it indicated in the feeling of the Commonwealth members. For just as Menzies lambasted the Americans, at home in Australia, his FM – who had been the resident minister in Egypt during the SWW – had come out strongly against military action. This was bad, because it indicated that Menzies’ government was fracturing, but of interest to us is the fact that Menzies’ FM identified with the policy of Lester Pearson, the Canadian FM, who would soon assume a very important role. What this little episode demonstrated then, was that not only were his lawmakers and the Americans against what Eden’s government was trying to do, but the Commonwealth was also turning away from the policy of using force. Where Eden saw the reclamation of prestige and the need to gain satisfaction, his Canadian and Australian peers saw American and Asian condemnation, the absence of NATO support and censure by the UN.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Eden waited eagerly to see what John Foster Dulles would do, now that his Canal User’s Conference and its fallout had produced no result, and only made Nasser more suspicious and objectionable. If Eden was hoping to see Dulles abandon all conciliatory policies and fall in line with the PM’s forceful policy though, then he was especially deluded. Bear in mind that on 2nd September 1956, Eden had received that long letter from President Eisenhower that we read out at the end of the last episode. Despite Eisenhower’s clearly stated policy and his plain abhorrence of the use of force in Egypt, Eden still seemed to have expected that his Secretary of State would approve of a policy which would almost certainly result in a war in Egypt, or at least a humiliating climb-down and perhaps a regime change in Cairo. If Dulles and Eisenhower would have been horrified as these disruptive aims, then they would have been still more aghast to note that in Eden’s Cabinet, an Egyptian Committee – consisting of several hawkish members of Eden’s government – had been established, with one of its aims being the replacement of President Nasser with someone else.

As early as two days after Nasser had nationalised the Canal Company, on 28th July, this committee was reasoning that a new Egyptian government could be crafted from ‘a large number of formerly prominent and able figures’ who, it was hoped, would ‘come forward immediately’ once Nasser was toppled. Selwyn Lloyd, Britain’s FS, then even noted that ‘we might hope to stay in Cairo no more than a day or two.’ The Egypt Committee acknowledged, somewhat cryptically, that toppling Nasser ‘might perhaps be achieved by less elaborate operations than those required to secure physical possession of the canal itself’, but as Great Britain's ‘case before world opinion was based on the need to secure international control over the canal’, a diplomatic charade would be necessary for Eden’s government to cover their tracks.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Eden and his close circle of Cabinet ministers who were on for a strike against Nasser’s Egypt thus possessed wide-reaching goals, with nothing less than the ruin or removal of Nasser being enough for them. Only through the ruin or removal of Nasser could Britain’s interests be secured, and Eden be seen to gain sufficient satisfaction. Eden had intimated this idea before, when the crisis over the nationalisation first kicked off, by insisting that Britain had no quarrel with the Egyptian people, only with Nasser himself, during one of the earliest televised addresses.[[5]](#footnote-5) This claim was of course ludicrous, because Nasser was popular, and his policies had the enthusiastic approval of the Egyptian people – if Eden wanted to blunder into Cairo and remove Nasser, he would have to march over several dead Egyptian bodies to do it. Only once Nasser was removed, would a new regime in Cairo then be forced to agree to the new terms of the Suez Canal. This, it is important to bear in mind, was Eden’s end goal; everything he did, from setting up doomed diplomatic representations such as that conducted by Robert Menzies, to preparing a military strike in league with France, was aimed at fulfilling this goal. In spite of all the wealth of opposition sent against him, Eden never abandoned the notion that only by defeating Nasser in some fashion could the Canal be retaken, and British interests secured.

Remembering Eden’s end goal is important, because it helps to explain why he approved yet another Canal User’s solution put forward by Dulles. Once more, Eden believed that the failure of this plan would force the Americans into taking a sterner line with Nasser. In addition, seeing the world still in terms of Victorian Britain, Eden seems to have believed that if Dulles’ latest plan was rejected by Nasser, then Dulles would be humiliated and burning for some kind of revenge. In addition, this Canal User’s Association which Dulles’ was advocating in the second week of September represented to Eden a chance for Britain in another way. Nasser, Eden believed, was only a temper tantrum away from causing an international incident, and this latest plan – which would see foreign powers guide their own ships through the Suez Canal – was bound to anger him and perhaps provoke him to take retaliatory action. Again, these ideas were ridiculous – unlike Eden, President Nasser seems to have grasped that he held the moral high ground, and he was not about to jeopardise this position. Similarly, when Dulles’ latest idea was inevitably rejected in Cairo, the American Secretary of State simply shrugged his shoulders and suggested alternative options – he did not, as Eden expected, take policy defeats so personally.

But before Dulles could take his policy defeat like a professional statesman would, Eden took the opportunity on 11th September to make a speech before the House of Commons, in which he lumped a great deal more significance on this Canal User’s Association than Dulles’ had wanted. Among other zingers, Eden said:

I must make it clear that should the Egyptian government interfere with the operations of the Association or refuse to extent to it the minimum cooperation, then that Government will once more be in breach of the 1888 Convention. I must remind the House that what I am saying is the result of exchanges of views between three governments. In that event Her Majesty’s Government and others concerned will be free to take such steps as seem to be required, either through the UN or by other means for the assertion of their rights.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Eden has essentially taken a compromise proposal from Dulles and used it to beat the Egyptians over the head. Dulles hadn't wanted this at all – now there was no way Nasser would accept it. Eden had put words in Dulles’ mouth, and by doing so he had transformed the American policy into one of confrontation with Egypt, when this was the last thing Eisenhower wanted. Eden had done this, it seemed, all for the sake of a few cheers from his backbenchers in the Commons. Yet, he had also done this after several strongly worded and clearly stated memos from Washington affirming the President’s view that force would not be used. How many times did Washington need to say it before Eden decided to believe it? Dulles would come to realise that Eden wasn’t ignoring America’s stated policy because he ignorant, he was ignoring it because it wasn’t what he wanted to hear, and because he wanted to use American support for his own ends. At this stage of the game in mid-September though, Dulles was both confused and angry, believing that Eden had acted deliberately in bad faith.

Dulles was doubly irritated because even before Eden had come out with this speech in the Commons, he had been informed that Nasser was not going to accept the idea of a Canal User’s Association. Just as Dulles had been attempting to pick up the pieces then, Eden had taken this failing policy line, put a confrontational spin on it, and then declared America’s unwavering support of it. All of this rubbish Dulles had to deal with after repeatedly telling Eden his government’s views, and being mindful of the fact that a Presidential election was only two months away. Dulles simply didn’t have time for Eden’s nonsense, and when he met with the Washington press corps on 12th September, he stated publicly, largely for Eden’s benefit, that ‘If we cannot work out a programme for getting ships through the Canal on acceptable terms…the alternative…would be to send our vessels around the Cape’, before adding ‘We do not intend to shoot our way through.’ This public statement seemed to contradict what Eden had just said in the Commons the previous day – the British PM was thus embarrassed once more, as well as desperate for some new lead.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This lead came surprisingly enough from Selwyn Lloyd, Eden’s FS, who was rarely credited with an original idea during the period. It was Lloyd’s idea to put the matter to the UN, a scheme which was first opposed by Eden, and then approved in light of Dulles’ public disavowal of the use of force for the umpteenth time. This set off alarm bells both in the US and Canada – neither Dulles nor Lester Pearson wanted to see Eden use the UN as a cover for military intervention in Egypt. Dulles had the additional fear that the spectacle would divide the Western allies in the UN SC, but Eden by no means appeared strong in his acceptance of the UN idea. Tory backbenchers now accused him of wasting time once more, having praised him only the day before for committing to a strong policy.

Eden knew he needed to keep pressure on Nasser, so in cooperation with the French, a discussion was held whereupon it was decided that the best way to pile pressure on Cairo would be to remove the European experts in the Suez Canal Company. These drivers or pilots were required to train for nearly a decade before they could have the honour of guiding the vessels through the Canal, and it was the opinion of the former chief executive of the Suez Canal Company, a Frenchman by the name of Jacques George-Picot, that without European pilots, the Canal traffic would seize up, and chaos would ensue. The idea that the Egyptians would be helpless without their European experts on hand to guide them was proven false within 48 hours of the very provocative decision to repatriate the Europeans on 14th September. Eden imagined a terrible scene, perhaps even retaliation on Nasser’s part, with the exodus of the European experts back home. To his immense chagrin, and to the immense embarrassment of Jacques George-Picot though, the Canal didn’t seize up, and the Egyptians proved just as able to guiding the ships through as the European counterparts. It was back to the drawing board once more.

Problems existed in the realm of military strategy as well. Operation Musketeer had been the agreed to military plan for the Anglo-French leadership to follow. This entailed a strike on Alexandria above all, which would be followed by a march southwards towards Cairo, where President Nasser would then be unseated as President, a regime change would follow and the Canal would be retaken. This plan contained several variables, and necessitated close Anglo-French cooperation of the Egyptian airforce was to be destroyed, and the element of coordinated surprise maintained. On 7th September though, discussions about Operation Musketeer had reached something of an impasse. After due consideration and after having received some important information from their sources in Alexandria, the Anglo-French command were getting cold feet over the plan to attack that city.

The casualties would be grave, and success may not be guaranteed if the Egyptians put up sufficient resistance. Deliveries of anti-air and anti-tank guns from their Soviet suppliers seems to have tipped this argument towards considering a new primary objective, and Port Said, the city at the opening of the Canal on the Mediterranean side, became the new focus. Operation Musketeer Revise was thus born, but not everyone was happy. The diplomatic searching seemed to be accompanied by a military uncertainty – could the operation really be tackled professionally and safely? Imagine the disaster if the Anglo-French forces were repelled or were unsuccessful? The whole point was to present a military fait accompli, and this could hardly be done if the allies were suffering in the desert, or if Egyptian resistance proved far more fanatical than expected. Even while Eden didn’t rate the Egyptians very highly, he did accept that casualties either of an allied or local civilian nature would be unacceptable, and he approved the idea of abandoning the old plan to bombard Alexandria from the sea first.

In the second week of September, Anglo-French political and military authorities met, still in the strictest secrecy. The French PM and his FM were in London on 10th September, and they agreed with Eden and Selwyn Lloyd that Alexandria was bound to cause casualties in the civilian population, which would have been immensely bad form. The objections of the French military were duly noted – Port Said would accrue not advantages to the allies, and it would not remove Nasser either. Eden doesn’t seem to have grasped this important point, but the French did. Guy Mollet and his FM Christian Pineau were a great deal more calm and collected in their conversations with Eden and Lloyd than they had been on previous occasions. If Eden didn’t know any better, he could even have discerned that his French counterparts didn’t expect this military operation to be necessary. Yet, Eden refrained from asking the French what it was that had changed, perhaps because he suspected that he knew the answer and that he would not like it. The French had acquired a new ally, one which, at this stage, Eden wanted absolutely nothing to do with.

Daniel Ben-Gurion had a long and detailed shopping list. On his list was sixty Mystere mark IV, the latest in French fighter jet technology; 36 Vautour, a jet bomber which had yet to roll off the production line, 2k tanks and an enormous stockpile of anti-tank missiles, along with piles of other equipment, small arms and ammunition. The bill came to around $100 million, but the President of Israel was more than willing to pay. Thanks to a mutual understanding Ben-Gurion had with the French minister of defence, Maurice Bourges-Maunoury, a Franco-Israeli relationship seemed destined to blossom. It was all about mutual interests – neither Israel nor France was particularly fond of Britain’s Baghdad Pact, forged in previous years; both were in search of allies in one another’s home region, and both were occupied by conflicts – Algeria in the French case, the looming war with Egypt in Israel’s – which required arms deals and cash to fight.

The Franco-Israeli relationship developed out of arms deals into a more important diplomatic and strategic partnership, so that by summer 1956, Paris and Tel Aviv were sharing intelligence and nuclear assets, not to mention another arms deal worth $80 million, which aimed at solving the siege mentality present in Israel’s government. Yet, as ever, the relationship was not so simple as a conspiracy launched against Egypt. While Israel’s ambassador in France had voiced her approval of a war with Egypt, and indicated that Israel would support the French during any confrontation with President Nasser, President Ben-Gurion knew that, like Eden in London, he couldn’t afford to be seen as the aggressor. It would be necessary for Egypt to give some kind of provocation for Israel to justify this action first. At the same time, Ben-Gurion knew that Israel desperately needed allies in the region, and he couldn’t afford to look a French gift horse in the mouse if the opportunity for a swift strike against Nasser presented itself. In meetings held in late August, the French suggested that Israel conquer the Sinai Peninsula, and thereafter turn the Suez Canal into an Israeli-owned waterway.

This indicated just how far the French were willing to go to take Nasser down, after he had caused them so many problems in Algeria. The nationalisation of the Canal had sharpened all attitudes, and Nasser was evidently becoming more active in his quest to stand for pan-Arabism against the surrounded Israel. On 19th September then, the culmination of that Canal User’s Conference which Eden had earlier attempted to make political credit out of before the Commons, opened in London. Throughout this conference, Anglo-French solidary was the order of the day, and Dulles gave the impression that he was willing to support this bloc – diplomatically at least – in their quarrel with Egypt. As was the general trend during the period, Dulles was caught between not wanting to urge the Anglo-French to make war by encouraging them too much, and not wanting to push the Anglo-French away by refusing to cooperate in the Egyptian scheme. It required a careful policy of balance, and Selwyn Lloyd, who represented the British at this iteration of an effort to find a solution to the Suez spat, recorded that Dulles was on flying form. In public, Dulles seemed adept at encouraging the Anglo-French, without pushing them into making war. In private though, Dulles was deeply vexed by the unfolding situation. He cabled Eisenhower that day, on 19th September to the effect that:

My general impression is that the British and French have quite isolated themselves even from what are naturally their closest friends. The Norwegians, whom the British habitually count upon, are worried, and also Italy, which since the war has worked closely with France, is worried. The fact is that the US is the only bridge between the British and the French and the rest of the countries here. I do not yet know whether that bridge is going to hold. The Egyptians are making an enormous effort to make it appear that the [Canal] User’s Association is a device to lead the member down the path to war for which the British and French are preparing, and Egyptian propaganda in this sense is having a definite impact. Dout that we shall make as much or as rapid progress this week as the British and French have wanted, but we will know better by tomorrow.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Dulles’ optimism that more would be known, and that issues would be solved in the future, were not to pan out. American intelligence at this stage centred on the notion that while Britain and France were ‘…convinced that the elimination of Nasser is essential to the preservation of vital Western interests in the Middle East and North Africa…military action is likely only in the event of some new and violent provocation.’ This was incorrect; there was a big difference between carrying on until a provocation emerged, then scrambling to react to it, and what the Anglo-French were actually doing, in preparing for a military operation against Egypt, and trying desperately to find some justification for launching this operation thereafter. The Anglo-French did not yet have the justification, but they had been preparing for over a month by the time Dulles sent this cable home to Washington, and in light of these extensive preparations, it was next to impossible that they would not eventually find some way to bring these preparations to bear.

Dulles had been somewhat mislead by what he interpreted as a softening French attitude. This, Dulles interpreted in the French support of the UN approach, which he believed demonstrated that Paris wasn’t finished talking about things rationally. If Dulles believed that the French hadn't abandoned the diplomatic solution though, then this was because the French were putting up a front. In public approving of the British representations to the UN, in private the French government was engaged in significant talks with the Israelis, to the extent that Eden began to worry that his French ally was drifting away from him. Perhaps the French were getting cold feet, the PM worried. He and Selwyn Lloyd travelled to Paris on 26th September, with the intention of making clear to the French their strong commitment to the new entente, and to getting rid of Nasser. The French premier reciprocated by sharing some extent of the Franco-Israeli plans, but not their full extent. The French cooperated with Eden, but refrained from sharing all they had been up to.

It was now apparent to those French generals who had objected to Port Said being made the new target, rather than Alexandria – if the Israelis attacked over Sinai, then the French would be able to capture the Egyptians in a pincer, and perhaps would not even have to deploy troops at all if their airforce could do most of the work from above, and the Israelis attacked on the ground. The day after the British delegation returned to London, on 28th September the Israelis arrived in France, and out of these discussions came one unavoidable conclusion – France did not have the air power to utterly destroy the Egyptian airforce in the manner that Israeli plans required. The British would have to be brought on side. The question of how to achieve this delicate task, especially since the high level Anglo-French talks were on-going to modify Operation Musketeer, was a conundrum we will investigate in the next episode. Until then my lovely history friends and patrons, my name is Zack and this has been 1956 episode 25. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. All cited in Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Ibid*, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Ibid*, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Howard J. Dooley, ‘Great Britain's 'Last Battle' in the Middle East: Notes on Cabinet Planning during the Suez Crisis of 1956’, pp. 494-495. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in *Ibid*, pp. 249-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Ibid*, p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)