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Suez story-19

(as put together by D.H.)

14 May 56

Lloyd, Selwyn (Foreign Minister of U.K.)

- 1 letter from D.H.

14 May 1956

From the Delegation you will undoubtedly have received sidelights on my recent experiences in the Middle East which complete the picture you get from my report. All the same I feel that it might be helpful - perhaps more to me than to you - if I were to give you the inside story of the main political issues involved, once the cease-fire was in my hand. That story is built round the triangle: Israeli occupation of El Auja - mutual build-up of armed forces just back of (or in) the defensive areas - the blockade of Suez and Tiran.

The story begins with the Israeli Government's notes to me of 13 and 14 April 1956 where they threw the Suez question into the picture, in the first message putting it in relation to the question of general compliance, in the second message with a vague reference to the cease-fire clause (the letters have been circulated as Security Council document S/3587 of 16 April). My attitude at that stage was only to indicate that I found it doubtful whether the Suez question was within the terms of my mandate.

When I met the Israelis I managed first of all to isolate the cease-fire entirely from the Suez question. The Israelis, however, insisted on making it part of the negotiation. My stand was summed up in a personal memo to Mr. Ben Gurion, from which I quote the following:

"My own stand is that compliance with Article II (the cease-fire clause) must be based on reciprocity as concerns that article, but cannot be conditioned by compliance with the Armistice Agreement as a whole; that, further, the same applies to Articles VII and VIII (the El Auja clause) and that, finally, the Suez question as adjudicated by the Security Council cannot be made a condition for compliance with any specific clause in the general Armistice Agreement, in particular Articles VII and VIII."

His Excellency  
The Right Honourable Selwyn Lloyd, C.B.E., T.D., Q.C., M.P.  
Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs  
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I added that although under those circumstances I did not consider it possible to bring up Suez under my mandate, I would, if that was accepted by the Egyptians, as Secretary-General explore the possibility of, so to say, paving the way for the negotiations by a clarification of the Suez issue.

The Israeli formal stand (to which my quote refers) had been spelled out at great length in a written statement from Mr. Ben Gurion where the logical sequence was as follows: The Suez blockade (and Tiran) represents a hostile act; it is a threat in the sense of Article I of the Armistice Agreement; the maintenance of the blockade therefore means non-compliance with the basic clause of the Armistice Agreement; with non-compliance on Egypt's side with this basic clause, Israel must be considered entitled to hold back its own compliance with other clauses in the Armistice Agreement (always, however, with exception for the cease-fire clause); the El Auja clause is the one which in Israel's view is put in jeopardy by the Egyptian attitude.

I pointed out that although the legal construction was possible and necessarily carried some weight, Israel would expose itself to the criticism that they were trying to trade El Auja for Suez. Ben Gurion replied that he was aware of the fact that Israel might be put in a rather awkward position, but that he did not see any alternative to the line chosen.

In substance Mr. Ben Gurion's line was that behind the legal construction stood the simple fact that the El Auja position was essential for Israel's security. They could therefore not withdraw without any outward sign of a change in the direction of Egypt's policy. The most important of such possible "signs" would be to lift the blockade. My reply to this was that Egypt was likely to take very much the same stand and to say that, if they were asked for action demonstrating their peaceful intention, they could well, themselves, ask for signs from the Israeli side and that, among such signs, none would be more important than a withdrawal from El Auja - or, in a wider field, an acceptance in principle of the right of option of refugees. (It is to this last point that Ben Gurion referred in a remarkable statement to the Knesset, which you may have seen, where he said that he had told me on my departure that it was his view that "no avenues that might lead to peace should be left unexplored".)

In Cairo the situation created by the Israeli stand was studied in three days' discussions, both with Fawzi and with Nasser. Leaving Cairo I put on paper my conclusions and I informed Fawzi about what I had put down and that this was what I was going to say to the Israelis. The essential part in my note was an expression of the conviction that if we managed to maintain quiet along the borders, the Egyptian Government both in Suez and Tiran and on other points within the near future would take steps in the direction of the reestablishment of normal, peaceful conditions. Specifically, I put myself on record as being sure that if agreement were reached on the El Auja question, the Egyptian Government would liquidate the concentration of troops on the Sinai peninsula and in other neighbouring parts. The Egyptians made a difference between their formal stand, according to which they insisted on immediate implementation of the El Auja clause, and their political stand, according to which they regarded a solution to the El Auja problem as part of a reciprocal step by step move in the direction of a reduction of tension. Fawzi (and Nasser) certainly fully realized what it meant that I made myself a kind of hostage for them on two such essential points as Suez and the troop concentrations.

Ben Gurion's reaction to my conclusions from Cairo was naturally one of satisfaction, but his strong suspicions pushed him back one step from his previous position. In his first approach he had said that he would "take my word for it". On my return he said that he must have something in his hand, and although he agreed that no formal assurance should be given to him, he must insist on a formal assurance from the Egyptians to me, that they would de facto liquidate the blockade. (On the other hand, in the Jordan diversion discussion, he refused to give me even a clear-cut "statement of intention" as, after all, the Egyptians had done.)

I felt that with Ben Gurion's second stand I had no chance to reach an immediate result, and that, under such circumstances, I should instead try and lock the situation in order to get a reasonable basis for later negotiations. For that reason I drafted a letter for Ben Gurion which he signed (with very minor adjustments) and which he permitted me to use in Cairo as a background for my second round of talks on the Suez issue. (The letter is marked secret but has, thus, been shown to Fawzi.) The final paragraph in this letter reads:

Preludes

For follow-up on Israeli  
side - see correspondence with  
Ben Gurion.

"I wish to repeat that although we would appreciate an official declaration by the Egyptian Government of the change of policy, we will consider that as soon as you have a definite assurance from the Egyptian Government that it is ceasing to interfere with Israeli shipping and inform us of the fact, a situation will be established in which you have our unconditional assurance immediately to proceed to comply with Articles VII and VIII in the manner cited above."

Returning to Cairo with this "unconditional" assurance, I met, as expected, some drop in temperature. After all, the Egyptians had been far out with a rather significant ballon d'essai, and the result was more than nothing, but far short of the desirable. (I guess that also the development of the Jordan diversion plan had some influence on the Egyptian atmosphere.)

However, the letter from Ben Gurion to me was good enough for me to get Egyptian consent to my writing the whole El Auja story down - indeed, practically out of my report - in spite of the importance attached by the Egyptians to the El Auja development and in spite of their critical attitude to what they sometimes called a package deal, sometimes a dangerous attempt to widen the circles beyond what was practically possible to cover in the course of these negotiations.

I should add one word about the Egyptian stand on El Auja. I can quote the summing up given by Nasser. He said roughly this: When the Israelis, on somewhat flimsy grounds, occupied the El Auja demilitarized zone, that action lent itself to two interpretations. El Auja is the obvious springboard for an armed attack southwards and on Egypt. On the other hand it is the obvious defensive stand in protection of Negev and Beersheba. The Egyptian Commander in Chief must take steps on the basis of an interpretation along the first line. The politician has to pay attention to the possibility of an interpretation along the second line. In a conflict between the Commander in Chief and the politician, the Commander in Chief should have the last word in a situation where Israel openly talks about preventive war and does not show any indication of peaceful intention in other respects.

My conclusion from the story I have given you here in broad outlines, is that with wise manoeuvring we might realize what I practically held in my hand: the lifting of the blockade, evacuation of El Auja and liquidation of the troop concentrations. In my discussions I think I reached the uttermost point possible at the time, but all the balls are out in the field and they may still be put down into the holes.

You will, in the light of those observations, understand both my strong insistence in the report on "related, unilateral actions", my caution when I talk about the El Auja and the Suez questions, and my warning against open interference from outside just now, which, obviously, might create somewhat difficult prestige positions. It goes without saying that if the three things which seemed to be within reach, could be managed within the next two or three months, the situation would be very much improved. In my view we should then let everything settle down, and thereafter, from the inside, start playing first of all the refugee issue and secondly, probably, (without relation to the refugee issue) the water questions.

The main supporter for this approach would undoubtedly be Fawzi who may not have much power, but now seems to exert a considerable influence on the political thinking of Nasser. If we were to embarrass him or wreck his position, or even if we were not to do anything more than to scare him with indiscretions concerning his line of thinking, things may become very much more difficult. For that reason I believe that it is imperative, not only to abstain from any outside pressure just now, but also, in the inside operations, to give our potential helpers a feeling of safety and freedom of movement at the same time as we give them the arguments they need.

My own intention in the report was to introduce viewpoints and reactions which could serve if we were to try to make further approaches in the direction indicated by my experiences. For example if, with reference to the report, it can be brought home to Nasser (by Fawzi) in a discreet way that he has a unique chance by taking such unilateral steps as those concerning which I expressed hopes, then we may see him take some move that could be used as an argument in relation to Israel. And once, in such a situation, we get the Israelis to retreat from El Auja and, perhaps, to reduce their forces, for example in Beersheba, it should be possible to get Nasser to move on. I underlined strongly to Nasser that Egypt now was able to change the direction of developments in the Middle East and that it should be a challenge to him to have a chance to build the Arab World peacefully and constructively into a world community. The price he would have to pay would be slight indeed, the withdrawal of troops from Sinai (where it anyway must be a nuisance to have them, and where they did not serve any purpose if there was no risk for

an attack from Israel), and the lifting of the blockade in Suez (which again was just a nuisance, a major weakness in Egypt's policy in relation to the world at large and senseless as an attempt to keep down the Israeli war potential).

In this letter I have, as you see, dropped all diplomatic inhibitions. I have done so because I consider it essential that we can see eye to eye. How further action should be developed is something which I am very keen to study with you before HMG or any of the big powers come out in the field. Putting myself on record with this story, I know I can trust your care in the handling of the information.