

56

3055

NOTES OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MR. RICHARD CROSSMAN AND COLONEL NASSER
IN THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE IN CAIRO
on 27 December 1955

Nasser started by telling me that he himself was alarmed by certain of the developments that had taken place in the last six months. They were having incalculable consequences and none of us could predict them. "I would remind you that you British started the ball rolling. On each occasion it was a British initiative taken without consultation with me to which I had to react. For instance, the Baghdad Pact." (NOTE: I happened to see Nasser exactly on the day in January when the advance news of Iraq's intention leaked out and he told me at great length of his anger at the British for letting him down. He had understood that the British agreed with him that formal military pacts between the West and the Arab world do more harm than good).

Nasser then told me that he had put all this to Eden and Foreign Minister MacMillan when they visited him on the way to the Baghdad Conference. He had explained to them that he had no objection to the northern tier strategy but it must be in depth. "Even in nuclear war one must have ground troops and as they are not going to come from British^{ain} and America they must be provided by us Arabs." ~~He then explained~~ I then expressed some surprise that he accepted the northern tier strategy. "Ah yes, I disagreed with Nehru at Bandung on this issue. There were two extremes. The Turks on the one side ^{argued} organised for adherence to NATO. Nehru argued for complete neutrality. I pointed out a way between isolationist neutrality and NATO type pacts. That way is collective security freely organised by the people of the region themselves."

He then made a passing reference to the problem of Turkey. "They are going bankrupt, they said, but under the NATO pressure and the Baghdad Pact they are

2453/13

to increase their divisions from 15 to 30. That is a poor outlook. And as for Iraq, what will happen when Nuri Said dies? However, he again emphasised that he did not deny the military validity of the northern tier strategy. The thermo-nuclear blocking of the Zagras (?) mountain passes should ~~not~~ give ^{time for} ~~them~~ to the build up of a land front, ^{he} and went on: "But there are two fronts in the battle against communism - the external military front and the internal front. The real immediate danger is on the internal front and that is increased by the Baghdad Pact. Each piece of military defence the Western Powers insert into the Arab world automatically produces ten positions which the Russians can exploit on the internal front. For instance, suppose there were set up a Middle Eastern joint command and I was made the head of it and there was one British Lieutenant serving on it. Everybody would believe that the British Lieutenant was in control, not ^I me. That is a fact. It is not a fact which may last forever. It is a fact today. The time may come, when we have ^{had} our independence long enough, ~~when we have~~..... ~~that~~ that we can afford joint military planning of this kind. At present it merely gives opportunities for the Russians to exploit on the internal political front."

Referring to this internal front I then congratulated Nehru on his skill in handling the ^{Khrushchev} ~~Khrushchev~~...-Bulganin mission. This, I said, had been used to demonstrate Russian support for the Nehru regime and so to strengthen Nehru against his internal communist danger. Nasser agreed delightedly. "The Russians used to call me a Fascist beast", he said. "Now, ~~the~~ since the arms deal, I am the leader of a liberation movement and that silences my local communists."

^{He} I then mentioned an article I had written in which I had said that the Western Powers did not take Arab rearmament seriously but merely regarded the jet planes and the tanks as "toys" to keep the Arab rulers quiet and to please them sufficiently to make them let us do what we want in their area. "You", he said, ^{who} "are one of the people and not an expert and know very little about our area, seem to have some understanding of our feelings. Some people regarded your

article as hostile and offensive. I did not. I enjoyed it. It was true."

I then asked him whether he would ~~xxxxx~~ favour a complete withdrawal of western troops and bases and a Great Power guarantee of the whole area. He said, ^{yes} ~~xxxx~~, but I am not quite sure ~~wh~~ from what Fawzi told me in the afternoon whether he really understood what I said. (In answer to the same question Fawzi had replied that he would regard a Great Power guarantee of ^{their} our independence as an *insult*).

Referring to this question of Western military bases I then asked him about Jordan, and he said something which I suspect must have been polished by repetition. Sitting up in his chair and putting two fingers into his left vest/pocket, he said. "Jordan was completely safe in your vest pocket, and you felt so sure about it that you took it out of your left vest pocket and you held it in the air ~~xxxx~~ before popping it into your right ^{vest} ~~vest~~ pocket. Well, you must not be surprised if it nearly got lost on the way. Now why should you take that sort of initiative? Just to put a feather in Nuri Said's cap? Well, you must not expect me, then, to remain inactive, especially when you misjudged the situation."

At this point I raised the question of Israel, and he immediately said: You remember last January, when we talked, I told you Israel was not on the agenda, since I never do two unpopular things at the same time and I was then in the middle of smashing the Moslem Brotherhood. At that time I had no real interest in the subject. I did not read about it in any detail. Then came Feb 28. (NOTE: Throughout he referred to the Eaza raid as Feb. 28 as though it ^{was} ~~was~~ a historic date). After that I could not sleep. I had nightmares. I had been caught with my pants down. As you know, the refugees, three hours after the raid, in the middle of the night, started a demonstration against my troops in the Strip and they could not have done that without the organisation from Israel. Also, the Officers' Movement here came to me and said: We told you so. You refused to allocate enough

see what has happened. We were caught defenseless, ~~and~~ unprepared to do something about it.

"So then I started ^{had} reading all about Israel. I ^{read} had the newspapers every day. I read B.G.'s speeches in the election campaign. I began to study the danger and the aggressive nationalism, and, by the way, I notice that the Herut is making overtures to the General Zionists. And then I discovered, when I approached the British for arms, that the Tri-Partite Declaration counted for more in London than the defence of Egypt. They would not let me have the arms I wanted. And one day, at a party, I went up to the Soviet Ambassador and said: Will you sell me arms? And he looked amazed and said he would see me the next day. I then said I wanted an answer in four days and I ^{had} have no foreign exchange to spare. I got the answer in four days."

I ~~then~~ asked him what the effect of the arms deal had been. "Now the position is less perilous," he said. "Now I think B.G. will ~~now~~ think twice before launching another attack. But please, Mr. Crossman, will you tell him something for me? Tell him this, tell him ~~xxxxxxx~~ he cannot force me to make peace. He cannot force peace. That is what you must tell him."

~~"By the way, you are interested in peace?"~~

"But are you interested in peace?" I ~~he~~ said. "On the last three times I had seen you, you were not prepared to consider negotiations."

"Now the balance of power is shifting," he said. "I was not prepared to negotiate from weakness, and I consider Sir Anthony's speech a courageous speech and that is why I alone among the Arab leaders responded positively to it."

"But can you trust Britain as mediator?" I said. "Would you not rather have a great Asian from Bandung, like Nehru?"

Without saying anything, he pushed the idea aside. So ~~ix~~ I said:

"What about ~~Mr. Tito~~ Marshal Tito, who is arriving tomorrow?"

"If we ^{are} were serious, we all know that you alone can do it. Britain alone. And it must be secret. Eden is right. It is

I did not bother to discuss the ~~s~~hort of terms he had in mind because he had told me this quite precisely on previous occasions, when we had discussed the land bridge across the southern Negev always as a strictly military requirement/ of Middle Eastern defence and Egyptian security. He then turned to me and said: "So I see you are in favour of a British mutual assistance pact with Israel. Why?"

"For two reasons," I said. ~~"First, because"~~ "First, we must restrain Israel from preventive war, by giving her security and steadying ~~(d)~~ her. And secondly, because I want a fair balance in the negotiations.

"I don't deny your arguments from your point of view," he said.

"But I think I should tell you that on the day after you sign such a pact every Arab State will sign a corresponding pact with Russia."

I then said abruptly; "So what?" And he looked a bit surprised, but said nothing, and we returned to the subject of secret negotiations.

"Do you conceive of a settlement?" ^I he asked, "entirely completed by such negotiations, or do you envisage that when a certain stage of agreement had been reached, there will be a public peace conference within the framework of the United Nations?"

"Why do you want the United Nations?" he said.

"Because it is only within that framework and with Russian participation that the problem can be publicly settled."

"I entirely agree about the Russians," he said. "There can be no final settlement unless at some stage they are brought in."

But

/He added (referring again to an article I had recently written):

"I don't much like your proposal for a Four Power arms embargo on the Middle East because the Jews would get the better of it. They always do."

That afternoon I discussed this talk with Trevellyan, the British Ambassador. He emphasised that I must keep this completely to myself. I then said I would discuss it, naturally, with Sharett and Ben-Gurion. At first he demurred, even- but prompted by Trevor Evans, the Oriental Secretary,

Arab concession there would have to be , apart from frontier rectification,
~~one~~
~~(I)~~ important Israeli concession of territory, probably at Eilat. There was
also some talk of the internationalisation of Jerusalem which, ~~as you can~~
~~imagine~~, was not enthusiastically received by the British, or the Arabs in
Amman or Old Jerusalem, when I talked to them a few days later.

Tel Aviv, 6 January 1955