

SECRET

Minutes of a Meeting with the Secretary of State
Mr. John Foster Dulles - Sept. 25, 1953
at the State Department.

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I called on Secretary Dulles on September 25 at 3.15 p.m. accompanied by Mr. Reuven Shiloah, whom I formally introduced in his new capacity.

In preparation for the meeting I had submitted a short aid-memoire indicating that I wished to survey the whole field of American-Israel relations having brought from Jerusalem a clear impression of governmental and public anxiety at the trend of recent actions and statements by the United States Government. I listed the main episodes which had contributed to this anxiety.

A few days before the September 25 meeting the Secretary had approached me at a reception given by the Australian Delegation in honour of Foreign Minister Casey. Mr. Dulles had said that he had noted that I was fundamentally worried about aspects of American-Israel relations. He would therefore like our meeting to take place soon, but would prefer it to be in Washington so that the State Department could record it and give the meeting its proper official status. I agreed to this course and the talk was arranged for the first day after the Secretary's return to Washington.

In the meantime the press had published General Benneke's request for a stoppage of work in the demilitarised zone and Israel's rejection of that request. I had also had a telephone conversation with Mr. Byroade, who had made it plain that the operation of the grant-in-aid programme was being delayed until our compliance with the General's request. It was obvious therefore that this issue would inevitably cut across the line of my general criticism of recent State Department policy. Accordingly I preferred to begin with this point, rather than respond to Mr. Dulles' anticipated initiative.

I said that I had planned to discuss the wider aspects of our relationship but would first like to say a few words on the Jordan project. I described this project in some detail and summarised the content of Mr. Sharett's reply to Gen. Benneke. The position was that a request had been made to interrupt

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I said that I had planned to discuss the wider aspects of our relationship but would first like to say a few words on the Jordan project. I described this project in some detail and summarised the content of Mr. Sharett's reply to Gen. Benneke. The position was that a request had been made to interrupt work on a project vital for Israel's economic future. This work had begun with the full knowledge of United Nations authorities, and its fulfilment was in complete accordance with policies and principles which the Security Council had laid down two and a half years ago. Gen. Benneke had based his request for an interruption on some four or five grounds, all of which could convincingly prove to be wrong in fact, and some of which conflicted with established

United Nations principles and commitments. We therefore had an unassailable right to ask Gen. Benneke to reconsider his decision in the light of Mr. Sharett's reply - a reply based upon our intimate knowledge of the scene, and containing assurances which should dispel his disquiet. If, to our surprise, he maintained his position in the light of our reasoned appeal, we then had a right to turn to the Security Council. I pointed out that in 1951 we had been told that the drainage of the Huleh swamps would have fearful consequences to the prejudice of other interests; that we had made ourselves somewhat unpopular for a brief period by tenaciously holding our ground against that assumption; but that in the course of time our position had been proved entirely justified, and ways were found of continuing the project to the full satisfaction of legitimate local interests. Similarly, for over two years we had persistently upheld our viewpoint of the Suez Canal issue, and here again we had been proved right, although Egypt was still ignoring the Security Council Resolution. Nobody, however, had attempted to dissuade Egypt from maintaining its position while utilising all avenues of appeal up to the Security Council itself. In the light of this experience we had learnt that we might sacrifice legitimate interests by yielding prematurely to unsound positions; and also that we had a way of proving the justice of our case if only we were able to argue it with perseverance and freedom. I therefore now had two requests from the Department of State.

The first request was not to impede us in our efforts to utilise all the available procedures of argument, reconsideration and appeal. We should not, and indeed, would not, be deterred from the use of peaceful remedies by giving any heed to Syrian sabre rattling. It was painful, however, to record that this was not the only external influence which was hampering our effort to seek reconsideration by every legitimate means. Quite irrelevantly, and I thought most unwisely, the execution of the Foreign Aid Programme in Israel was being held up by the United States with the avowed intention of influencing our action in a matter now under negotiation between Israel and the United

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The effect of the United States action was to deny us this capacity by imposing an urgent economic pressure to impede our deliberate pursuit of legal remedy. The Mutual Security Programme had been one of the most constructive expressions of American foreign policy in the world as a whole and in Israel in particular. It was a matter for grief to see any comfort being offered to ill-disposed critics who had asserted that this beneficent programme was an instrument of political influence. Had all the consequences of this irrelevant connection between the Jordan dispute and the Mutual Security Programme been considered from the viewpoint of American-Israel relations and of the larger international objectives which had given the programme its moral stature in the eyes of free countries which benefitted from it? We were in financial difficulties, but national pride would prevail against economic pressure. My first request, then, was that the United States should not impede us in our pursuit of reconsideration; and should, above all, re-establish the complete separation between the mutual security programme and political differences such as were bound to arise from time to time between free governments which cherished their liberty of conviction and judgment.

My second request was that if and when we pursued our appeal in the Security Council itself, the United States would then remain faithful to the policies which it had publicly enunciated in 1951, both in its own statement, and in statements by other Western representatives in the name of the group of countries sponsoring the Security Council's Resolution of May 18, 1951. The United States had been categorically committed to the view that normal economic work should proceed in the demilitarised zone unobstructed by the United Nations, so long as the progress of such work would not prejudice the private interests - or more specifically the land rights - of Arab inhabitants. If the Western Powers remained true to this commitment, any case for the stoppage of work in the Jordan could easily be refuted if proper time and consideration were given.

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Mr. Dulles reacted as follows: He was of course interested to hear my account of the project and of its many topographical and other aspects. He had not mastered these details. He presumed that I would not expect him to go into them. It was not a matter directly affecting the United States. There was a United Nations authority involved and this authority had given a ruling. He hoped that we would comply with that ruling. "In general, he said, "your

Government makes things difficult for its friends and for the United Nations by creating de facto situations and then asserting that these situations can never be changed except by war. They don't take enough care of the legalities of their position." Of course once a fact was created in the area it was difficult to disrupt it; but we seemed to make it a general policy to create these facts in advance and then to defy anybody to change them. This seemed to be a general feature of our position and policy, and it was bound to create difficulties. As he understood the position we had simply decided to ignore Gen. Benneke's recommendation and to go ahead as if nothing had happened.

I said that I would like to reply both to his general description of our policy and to his more specific allusion. If he meant that Israel's position was founded on nothing but a fait accompli which we refused to modify, then this was an unacceptable definition. Our territorial position and our relations with our neighbours rested upon valid international treaties. We had our rights under those treaties and had no obligation to change them to our disadvantage. We neither exercised nor claimed any rights beyond them so long as they remain in force; so long as Israel maintained its rights under the armistice treaties, its position was under no legitimate criticism at all. If our neighbours wanted any change let them enter into negotiations and put forward their proposals. We would then do the same.

Mr. Dulles replied that what I had said was unassailable but it seemed to contain a valuable new element. I had intimated that the Arab States could make proposals for a change in the peace negotiations. Mr. Sharett, on the other hand, had given him the impression that we were not prepared for any single concession in respect of the status quo. The Foreign Minister had said that nothing except war would enable the Arabs to get anything from us which they did not possess or enjoy under the armistice agreements. What I had now said about possibilities of revision of a peace negotiation sounded different and valuable, but was I quite sure that that was my Government's current position?

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I replied that if he studied Mr. Sharett's views as a whole he would see nothing new in what I had said. Our position had been and was that we legally and justly held certain positions under the existing armistice treaties. If the Arab States wanted to change anything, the very discussion could only arise in the course of a negotiation aimed at replacing the armistice treaties by

peace treaties. In such a discussion we were ready to consider mutual adjustments. It was just as legitimate for us to seek improvements of the existing situation to our advantage as it was for the Arabs to do so. While they could make any proposal for adjustment, we were quite free to agree or not to agree to accept it. We were also free to suggest adjustments in our favour. Thus, in the formal sense, all parties were on a sound basis in maintaining their full rights under the armistice, just as they would be on a sound basis in urging mutual adjustments in a new negotiation. As a matter of political fact, however, the present positions have crystallised into the national life of the State over a period of five years, and it was obvious that whatever changes occurred in a peace negotiation could not be such as to change the present balance of territorial or other rights in our disfavour. Everything I had just said was substantively a repetition of what Mr. Sharett had told him in Jerusalem. My only object now was to reject the suggestion that anything in Israel's present political or territorial position could fairly be described as a unilateral fait accompli. I distinctly remember that Mr. Dulles himself in 1948 had proposed the United Nations resolution out of which the present position arose. He had proposed that Israel and the Arab States should reach their own arrangements for boundaries and other matters by negotiating in two stages: first by negotiating armistice agreements, and then by extending their scope to peace negotiations of which the armistice agreement would be the starting point. That is exactly our policy. We had accomplished stage one, and were prepared for stage two when the other side declared its readiness.

Mr. Dulles said that he did not mean to question the legality of our position or rights under the armistice agreements, but would like to return to the matter at issue which is that we had taken a position contrary to the United Nations in the North. This had followed the disquiet caused by the move of our Foreign Office to Jerusalem, on which subject he had received representations from members of Congress, asking him why he did not do anything about it.

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(Here I would digress by saying that Mr. Dulles' statement about our creating accomplished facts and then refusing to change them may not have been intended to refer generally to the territorial position, but rather more specifically to the accumulation of incidents under the armistice, together with our Foreign Office move. On the other hand, once I ascribed his remark to our total position he entered the argument with forensic persistence, abandoning it only when allusion was made to his own part in establishing the present situation. This clearly gratified him, as does any reference ad personam. Whether I misunderstood his vague sweeping charge or not, I do not feel that anything was lost by giving him a detailed and accurate account of our position under the armistice treaties, as they affect the problem of territorial revision. I would only add that the State Department itself has recently reaffirmed and supported our boundaries position in a letter sent to Congresswoman Kelly. We shall, of course, remind the Secretary of this if, as I do not anticipate, he returns to the fray).

When he returned to the immediate matter at issue Mr. Dulles began by saying that the Syrian position could not be completely frivolous if Gen. Benneke had supported it. He did not even know the nationality of the General (Was it not Swedish?) but he was surely an impartial person. The Secretary went on to say that he would not for a moment suggest that we should be prevented from asking for reconsideration, either from the General himself or from the Security Council. This was our perfect right. However, we would win sympathy and good will in many quarters if we were to comply first, out of respect to the United Nations, and then go on to challenge and appeal as strongly as we liked.

I said that I would certainly convey his views fully to my Government. The fact was, however, that the status quo was the continuation of the work and not its suspension. It would thus be logical for the present situation to be maintained until the move for stoppage had been carried through every avenue of appeal. Otherwise the stoppage itself might well prejudice our

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Mr. Shiloah interposed to say that this was not the case. Until some of the Jordan waters were actually diverted - and this would not be for some years - no change of topography or the level of the Jordan was involved.

The Secretary appeared to be interested in this aspect and turning to Mr. Gardiner said "We might ask the General whether he would say that any irrevocable fact would be created if the work went on while the argument and appeal continued." We seized upon this and definitely encouraged him to pursue this line. (I doubt, however, whether he meant this to cancel the State Department's real desire, which is that irrespective of merits some act of tribute to United Nations authority should take place now that Gen. Benneke has suggested a stoppage).

Concluding this part of the interview Mr. Dulles said that financial aid under the mutual security programme was "discretionary" and the United States was entitled to a judgment as to when and in what circumstances it can be most appropriately applied. He concluded: "The aid programme should wait a few more days, by which time I hope you will have helped us clear up this other situation." He was careful to avoid the indelicate language of quid pro quo which Byroade used.

All this had occupied us for about 25 minutes. I now told the Secretary that I could have wished that the previous matter had not dominated this conversation which I had sought for a completely different reason. I thought it appropriate that we should now consider the basic problems of American-Israel relations. I had come back from Israel with a clear impression that a cloud had fallen over this relationship and that its traditional atmosphere no longer prevailed. I had discussed this problem at home in governmental and parliamentary circles, and also as far as possible in large public gatherings. The avid interest which the problem evoked proved - as the Secretary himself must have felt during his visit - that for the people of Israel the American relationship is the central problem of their international thinking. It is for this reason that every symptom of improvement or decline is followed with the closest scrutiny. A position had been reached in which it was impossible by explaining away a series of events, however rationally, to eradicate from Israel public opinion and from other public opinion concerned with Israel's

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I went on to cite the list of events which had built up this impression. First, there seemed to be a deliberate reluctance by leaders of the American Government to affirm and assert the American-Israel friendship. It was all very well to say that words were of no practical value and that their absence constituted no cause for concern. Both our countries are governed by their public opinion; it is important not only that friendly relations should exist but also that friendly relations should seem to exist. This American silence on the positive aspects of relations with Israel contrasted with a marked readiness to let the world know quickly and early about any differences of opinion. It coincided also with a tendency to emphasise the interests of the United States in maintaining its friendship with the Arab world. I believed I was right in saying that concern for the American-Israel friendship had never been expressed since the Administration came to power, except as a qualifying parenthesis to what was, in the main, an expression of desire for Arab friendship. Here I hinted obliquely at the absence of administrative appearances or utterances at occasions dedicated to American-Israel cooperation; and more specifically to the impression created in Israel by the President's avoidance, in a recent message, of a traditional opportunity at a ZOA Convention to express this element of American policy which had been handed down for the past three decades.

Second, wherever differences of judgment existed between us, as they must exist between free Governments, the United States appeared concerned to emphasise rather than understate them. There had seemed to be a special concern to let the Arab world know of America's unwillingness to help us in a certain sector of our financial problem. I said that I was not quarrelling with the decision itself, to which the United States was fully entitled, although we still hoped to change its mind. ^I He was concerned by what seemed a positive desire to demonstrate to the Arab world every dissociation of the United States from Israel's hopes or requests. A similar position existed in the Jerusalem question. I was referring not so much to the statements on which there had been much correspondence; but rather to the extraordinary practice of rigidity

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in this matter, and I myself was pessimistic about any parliamentary possibilities of achieving a reasonable settlement at this time for the establishment of a United Nations authority for the Holy Places in Jerusalem. The point is however that the United States and Israel were, in general, against the same proposal and for the same proposal. (He nodded in assent). We differed only on a marginal aspect of the problem, namely: whether we had chosen an appropriate time to move the Foreign Office to Jerusalem. That Jerusalem was politically a part of Israel was not doubted on either side. But whereas the aspect of the Jerusalem problem on which there were differences between the United States and Israel had been given wide public reverberation, the United States has shown no such concern to publicise its basic agreement with Israel on the problem as a whole. This, of course, made the conflict about the Foreign Office even sharper. Here then was a problem/ⁱⁿ which Israel and the United States were really allies and partners, opposed by the Arab world and by other interests; and yet precisely here the atmosphere of conflict was most acute and was being manifested with greatest frequency to the prejudice of our diplomatic relations. Other countries, including Catholic countries, had been far less sharp in their reaction and were now willing to be far less rigid in their diplomatic practice. Even if we assumed that the basic positions of Israel and the United States on the location of the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Missions had to remain as they were at present, it was still quite possible, within the framework of these positions, to work out more harmonious arrangements which would enable the diplomatic relations of the two countries to be as little affected as possible by the present anomaly. I pointed out that a recent letter by Catholic authority in America gave the clear impression that the writer believed Mr. Dulles to be in favour of territorial internationalisation. I understood this to be completely untrue. (The Secretary nodded his head in agreement).

My conclusion was that the present policy of the United States on Jerusalem, including its judgment on our Foreign Office move, did not did not compel the continuation of the irritation and anomaly inherent in the present practice of

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My conclusion was that the present policy of the United States on Jerusalem, including its judgment on our Foreign Office move, did not did not compel the continuation of the irritation and anomaly inherent in the present practice of the American Mission. If there was a will, then there were several ways, even within our present political positions, of excluding the Jerusalem question from the list of conflicts between Israel and the United States.

I then turned to the question of arms. In Washington, the issue, viewed at a distance, might be contemplated against a global strategic background. In Israel and the Arab States, however, this matter was always considered predominantly in its regional context - that is, in direct relationship to the Arab-Israel tension. The Secretary might have seen what kind of a country Israel was. There was not a single populated area more than a few miles from a hostile frontier. Nearly all of these frontiers were the scene of intermittent violence, of which the basic cause was the Arab refusal either to make peace with Israel or even to let Israel alone. In these circumstances when a citizen of Israel hears that the United States, Israel's best friend and zealous custodian for peace in the area, even contemplates the possibility of giving arms to bellicose dictators or other Arab Governments, without any substantial modification of their relations with Israel, he is struck by a complete and stunned incomprehension. The unwisdom of pouring oil on such troubled waters appears so simple that it was inconceivable that there should be any difficulty in bringing the United States to share our point of view. We were not consoled by assurances on the modest quantity of arms. The United States and Israel had a vastly different scale of thinking; they inevitably differed in their judgment of this matter. When Mr. Byroade told me that neither Syria nor Egypt would receive more than a certain quantity of military aid apiece, his sincere intention was to allay my concern; actually he merely reinforced it. Those quantities, small in American eyes, could substantially affect the balance of Israel's military security which rested on very slender margins. Moreover, there was a question of principle. These arms would be stamped with the American eagle; they would convey to the Arab mind a clear message that for the United States the refusal of the Arab States to live at peace with Israel was not a barrier to Arab military and moral reinforcement by the United States. We were at a loss to understand why the United States found it difficult to accept our view in this matter. The whole tradition of American history, in so far as I could understand it, was one of abstinence

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inforcement of direct military aid without this signifying a lack of regard for that which in the Israeli mind predominated over everything else, namely: the sharp fear for physical security. All that I had so far been able to tell my Government and public was that the issue was not yet settled. The United States Government had received an authorisation but not a definite mandate to give any arms to the Arab States. (Again Mr. Dulles expressed assent). Thus the issue was still open and we were still entitled to hope that our view would prevail. But the apprehension still existed. I had heard nothing which entitled my Government to believe that the danger had passed. Indeed, my last talk with Mr. Byroade showed that it still tangibly existed.

I said that all the misunderstandings and differences which I had enumerated had occurred within a brief space of time and seemed to constitute a trend of policy. The effect can only be understood if we thought of the cumulative influence of these events. Perhaps each one by itself could be explained in terms of a tactical posture which the United States thought suitable in order to increase its influence in the Arab world. All of them together, however, could not be thus explained; and our public opinion in the wide sense of in which I had described it, was so disturbed that the only way to allay it was by some tangible token that the American-Israel friendship was firm. I had felt in Israel that saturation point had been reached beyond which any further mishap would swing the balance towards a widespread and profound impression of injured relationships. Now we had the gravest matter of all. The United States by its action on the Jordan dispute and the Mutual Security grant had shown a definite lack of trust in Israel's ability and willingness to solve this matter by the legitimate exercise of its political rights as a member of the United Nations. Instead of standing by sympathetically while Israel made the effort to solve the question through appropriate channels, the United States was exerting the strongest possible pressure in favour of Israel's precipitate surrender of what it thought to be right and just.

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Towards the end of this latter point the Secretary had been handed a note to say that his next appointment awaited. Secretary Wilson, Secretary Humphrey, Mr. Stassen, Mr. MacArthur and a group of unidentified Generals awaited him outside. The Secretary said: "You have raised matters of fundamental importance. I did not quite realise that we were going to have such an important talk. I must now interrupt it but it is vital that we should resume soon. It is not a

matter that we can consider in haste. I will therefore give you only one quick reaction to illustrate my general thinking. When I was in New York at the United Nations meetings I met high ranking representatives of all the Arab States. They told me that they were disappointed in the new Administration. They had expected it to depart from the policy of its predecessors. They had especially hoped that the Eisenhower Administration would abandon the pro-Israel policy. They were now disillusioned. They said that we were following the same line and were still close to the Israel position on every point of substance. I wonder whether that does not reassure you, but we must talk about this some more."

As we rose to go I said to the Secretary that what he had just told me proved a completely different point. It proved that the steps which the United States had taken and which had had such a disquieting effect on Israeli and Jewish opinion had had no compensating advantage on the Arab side. The question therefore was whether there was any point in diluting or concealing the American-Israel friendship in the hope of making an impression on the Arabs.

Thus ended this important and revealing conversation. I should add that Mr. Dulles listened to the second half of my exposé with a tense and anxious interest far beyond that which he showed in dealing with the specific issues on which he had been briefed. It seems clear to me, especially when we compare this talk with that recently held between the Secretary and Mr. Javitz, that the Eisenhower Administration, despite its purposeful pursuit of Arab favour, does not view without deep alarm the prospect of being described as having initiated a major and adverse change in American-Israel relations. They had hoped, and perhaps still hope, that they can combine appeasement of the Arabs with an Israeli policy which, despite all vagaries, will still enable them to make a case for undiminished friendship for Israel. There is at least a possibility, which will presumably grow as 1954 comes round, of getting them to do something aimed at deliberately at redressing the balance in our favour. In my cables I

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fairly modest level are aware that we have raised the basic issue of the American attitude towards Israel and that the Secretary is taking this very seriously. They themselves are feverishly at work to prove that any worsening in the position is due to our own recent acts. Whether we see any substantive progress upon the resumption of the talk will depend very largely on whether the weakening and diversionary influence of the Jordan crisis has been relieved by at least the first step towards an agreed settlement. Otherwise - and not for the first time - we may have allowed an issue of local and marginal importance to cast a shadow larger than itself over the most important sectors of our international relations.

Ahba Eban