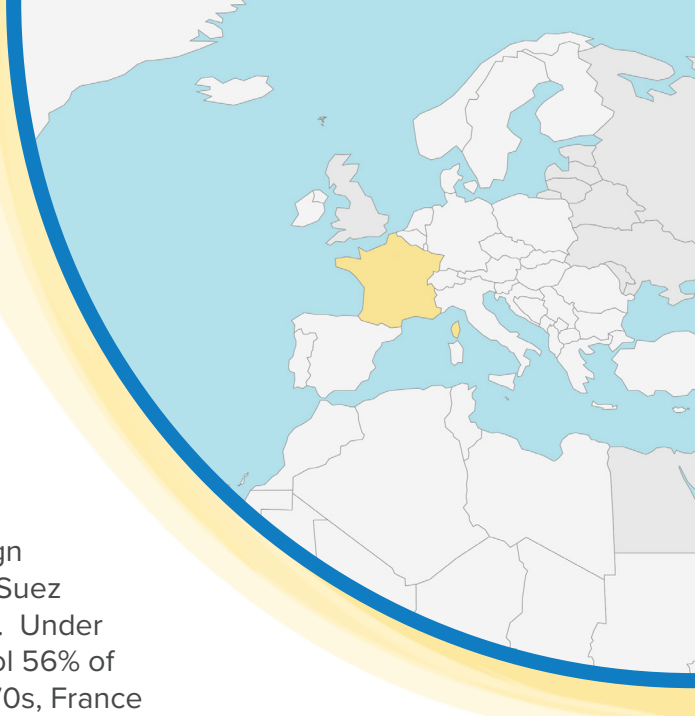
France



France began its colonial empire in the 1600s. At various points the French controlled territory in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. France also had deep-rooted connections to the Suez Canal, beginning with Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt and Syria (1798-1801). During this time the idea of a canal linking the Mediterranean with the Red Sea became popular. A half-century later, a workable design was drawn up by French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps. The Suez Canal Company was formed to pay for the canal's construction. Under an agreement between France and Egypt, France would control 56% of shares in the company and Egypt would control 44%. In the 1870s, France tried to purchase full control of the canal, but Egypt sold these shares to Great Britain instead.

After World War II, many of France's colonies pushed for independence. France responded by trying to retain control over its colonies. One French colony, Vietnam in Southeast Asia, won its independence in 1954. That same year Algeria in North Africa began its war for independence. Egypt's leader, President Nasser, supported the Algerian fight for independence.

By 1956, France had lost one colony (Vietnam) and was fighting a war to try to retain control of another (Algeria). France's power and status seemed to be declining along with their influence in the Middle East. When the Suez Canal was nationalized by Egypt and placed under control of the Egyptian government, it completely undercut France's position. Not only was the action a threat to economic and political interests, it was a further assault on France's prestige and influence in the region. By entering into an alliance with Britain and Israel, France hoped to regain its status as a major player in the region. France believed that removing President Gamal Abdel Nasser from power would resolve the Suez Crisis and make victory in Algeria more likely.

Questions to Consider:

- How important was the Suez Canal to France?
- Did France truly feel their security was threatened, or was this more of an issue of national pride?
- Was President Nasser really behind France's problems in Algeria?
- Why did France get Israel involved?

France's Position:

- Nationalizing the canal is a threat to your long standing prestige and influence in the region.
- Ensure continued access to the canal for French ships.
- Support the idea of a military intervention.

- Encourage an alliance with Britain and Israel to regain status as a major player in the region and oust President Nasser.
- Maintain alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union.

What can France negotiate with?

Remember that you don't have to offer these right away in a negotiation.

- Promise no military action will be taken against Egypt.
- Help Egypt pay for the Aswan Dam.
- Allow Egypt to nationalize the canal as long as French ships still have access.