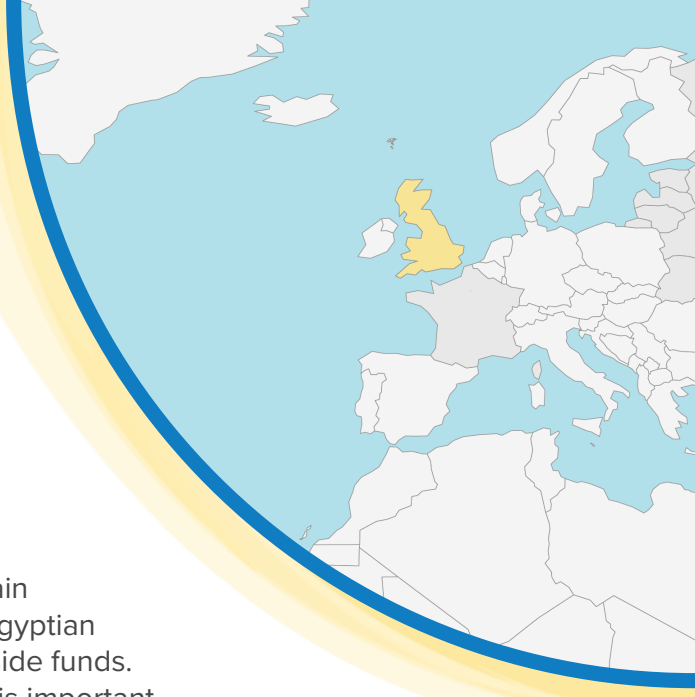

Great Britain

In the late 1500s and early 1600s Great Britain established numerous colonies throughout the world. This empire grew to span the globe and included land in North America, South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Middle East. The empire provided Great Britain with raw materials, trade opportunities, and international power.

In the 1870s under Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Great Britain purchased a 44% share in the Suez Canal Company from the Egyptian government. At the time, Egypt agreed because it needed outside funds. The purchase gave Great Britain a great deal of control over this important water link between East and West. In 1882, Great Britain began its occupation of Egypt and used the canal as a central connection for its commercial ships and navy. During World War I, Great Britain used its control of the canal to deny access to enemy ships. After the war, the Ottoman Empire was dissolved and British power grew in the Middle East. The League of Nations gave permission for Great Britain to administer two Middle East territories: Palestine (present-day Israel and Jordan) and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq).

In 1922, Egypt became independent, however, Great Britain maintained a great deal of influence in the country. During World War II the British used Egypt as a base for Allied operations. Britain closed the canal to enemy ships. However, the war also weakened Great Britain's ability to control its empire. In the postwar years, many colonies pushed for independence. This accelerated the breakup of the empire, and Great Britain slowly granted independence to its colonies. Iraq and Jordan became independent in 1932 and 1946 respectively, and Israel was declared a state in 1948.

Even though by 1956 Great Britain no longer had a vast empire to defend, the Suez Canal was still important. The canal was the main route to ship oil from the Middle East to Europe. Because of the tense global atmosphere felt during the Cold War, the canal maintained its military value. Great Britain was a member of multiple regional defense alliances including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). All these alliances opposed the spread of the Soviet Union. Great Britain viewed controlling access to the canal as vital to its own and its allies' interests.

When President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and placed it under the control of the Egyptian government, Great Britain truly felt their national interests and security were at stake and reacted accordingly. The possibility of Europe's access to Middle Eastern oil being cut off was a nightmare scenario. Great Britain's leadership believed they needed to restore their control of the canal so as not to lose any more status and power in the region.

Questions to Consider:

- How important was the Suez Canal to Great Britain?
- How was Great Britain's security threatened?

- How could Great Britain maintain its control of the canal? Could it use its military to reverse President Nasser's actions?
- What are some alternatives to a military conflict with President Nasser?
- Why was Middle Eastern oil important to the British?

Great Britain's Position:

- Ensure national interests and securities are not at stake with the nationalization of the canal.
- Maintain access to oil in the Middle East.
- Restore control of the canal and preserve influence in the region.
- Support entering into an alliance with France and Israel.
- Explore the option of military intervention (Note: no military action can be part of this simulation).
- Maintain alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union.

What can Great Britain 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 British ships still have access.