

"The Apple of Discord":
The Impact of the Levant on Anglo-French
Relations during 1943.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BATTLE JOINED

i) Tension Spreads

Grave concern existed within the Foreign Office about the tension in the Lebanon spreading elsewhere in the Middle East. Neighbouring Arab states seemed all too willing to muscle in on behalf of the Lebanese to force the French to restore the situation. From Ibn Saud came a flood of protests¹, and from Iraq too, where Nuri Said sought to make political capital out of Lebanese misfortunes. The latter had calmly announced to Sir Kinahan Cornwallis² that "after what had happened, it would be impossible for the French and Lebanese to live in harmony ... [and] that this was [a] grand opportunity for His Majesty's Government to oust them [i.e. the French] from the Levant".³ Formal Iraqi protests were made against the French action and British and American diplomatic intervention was requested; two deputies in the Iraqi Chamber even called for armed Iraqi intervention to expel the French.⁴

In Egypt, King Farouk warned that the Germans would lose no time in exploiting the situation for propaganda purposes and that even the Russians would not hesitate to fish in

¹ Jordan (Jedda) to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6934/27/89, FO 371/35184.

² Sir Kinahan Cornwallis: British Ambassador to Iraq, from February, 1941.

³ Cornwallis to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6860/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁴ Cornwallis to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, Nos 1077 and 1078, E6932/27/89, FO 371/35184.

such troubled waters.⁵ Nahas Pasha had also been watching the unfolding of events in the Lebanon with some concern. Shone⁶ reported that before the arrests, Nahas had expressed the hope to de Benoist, both in conversation and by letter, that "an honest and courageous solution" to the constitutional crisis would be found as quickly as possible.⁷ When news of Helleu's heavy-handed tactics broke, Nahas immediately launched into action; the Egyptian afternoon press on 11 November printed his letter to de Benoist and the nascent Arab unity movement accused the French Committee of conducting an imperialist policy. Nahas also protested to the Committee itself and to Britain and America, expressing the conviction that Britain should intervene to restore order.⁸ On 12 November, he penned a stronger protest to the French, threatening to reconsider the attitude of Egypt towards the Committee and to take measures against the local French.⁹ There was little doubt, Shone reported, that Nahas, propelled by his desire to lead the Arab world, was seeking to make the very most of the crisis; he had unleashed the full force of the Egyptian press against the French and was

⁵ Shone to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6874/27/89, FO 371/35184. See also record of interview with Farouk, Kirk to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1020-21.

⁶ Terence Shone: British Minister, Cairo, 1940-44; in December 1944, on the departure of Spears from the Levant, he was appointed British Minister to Syria and Lebanon.

⁷ Shone to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6863/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁸ Shone to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6864/27/89, FO 371/35184; Kirk to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1012-13 and pp 1020-21; Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312 contains copies of many of Nahas' various letters of protest.

⁹ Shone to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6883/27/89, FO 371/35184; Conversation Filliol-Dumani Bey, 12 Novembre 1943, No 107, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312.

"stimulating editors to support the Lebanese and attack the French strongly".¹⁰

The strength of the Egyptian reaction as perceived by the British was not exaggerated and certainly gave the French cause for concern. Baron de Benoist confirmed to Algiers that Syrian and Lebanese circles in Egypt were extremely agitated; he also reported that Nahas was furious and had launched the Egyptian press on a violent anti-French campaign, such that even normally moderate and pro-French journalists "sont obligés de suivre le courant".¹¹ In fact it was in Egypt that some of the most serious reactions to events in the Lebanon occurred: on 14 November there were hostile demonstrations outside the premises of the French Délégation both in Cairo and at Alexandria; several windows were broken and when Egyptian police failed to intervene, the demonstration was eventually broken up by American police.¹² Shone was obliged to appeal urgently to Nahas to call a halt to such potentially violent incidents; though Nahas did attempt to enforce some restraining measures, Cairo was the scene of further anti-French demonstrations on

¹⁰ Shone to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6873/27/89, FO 371/35184. For examples of articles appearing in the Egyptian press both before and after the arrests, see Shone to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E6862/27/89, FO 371/35184 and Shone to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7061/27/89, FO 371/35187. See also Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312, for de Benoist's reports on the Egyptian press.

¹¹ De Benoist à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999; de Benoist à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312. The Baron pointed out that as usual, "Le Misri" had set the tone with headlines such as: "La France Libre et le Liban Enchaînée" and "Les Français Libres imitent les Allemands: Le Gouvernement des Sénégalais au Liban".

¹² De Benoist à Alger, 14 et 15 Novembre, Nos 112 and 113, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312.

15 November, in which one person died and fifteen were injured.¹³

Britain was concerned to prevent the spread of tension throughout the Middle East, not only from the security aspect but to protect her own image and position. Casey pointed out to the Foreign Office the increasingly widely held opinion that Britain was ultimately responsible for order in the Lebanon and by extension, for the lives and liberties of the Lebanese people.¹⁴ The prevalence of such thinking was illustrated only days later by a debate in the Iraqi Parliament, during which an Iraqi deputy described the French as "British mercenaries", for without British money and armed support, the Fighting French would never have established themselves in the Levant.¹⁵ The naturally drawn conclusion was that it was Britain's responsibility to keep the French under control and her failure to do so might gravely jeopardise her own position in the Middle East.¹⁶ The Commander-in-Chief articulated similar concern about a possible waning in the initial wave of pro-British enthusiasm: it had generally been anticipated in the Middle East that Britain would intervene quickly in the Lebanon to put the situation to rights. He was worried that her failure to do so might cause a swing in public opinion away from Britain with possible serious consequences.¹⁷

¹³ Shone to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6975/27/89; Shone to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7015/27/89 and E7016/27/89; all in FO 371/35186; Shone to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7133/27/89, FO 371/35188.

¹⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6861/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁵ Cornwallis to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6932/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁶ Shone to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6974/27/89, FO 371/35186.

¹⁷ Commander-in-Chief, Middle East to War Office, 13 November 1943, E7004/27/89, FO 371/35186.

Reports received in London from Spears early on 12 November indicated that after the imposition of a curfew and a relatively calm night, the situation was deteriorating. To the Foreign Office it seemed that French behaviour was becoming "more and more outrageous": radio broadcasts were being jammed and low-flying aircraft were being used to intimidate the population. From his house, Spears had heard heavy machine-gun fire, rifle shots and grenade explosions, all emanating from a nearby Moslem quarter. Furthermore, he had received reports that Senegalese soldiers had lobbed grenades into unarmed crowds and fired on children who had tried to rip down the newly-affixed posters of de Gaulle.¹⁸

Under such circumstances, it was almost inevitable that Spears was chafing at the bit and calling for immediate British action. He had become more and more convinced that the moment for British military intervention was "fast approaching, since the employment of black troops and of tanks and armoured cars, far from calming public opinion, is exciting it".¹⁹ He been absolutely horrified to learn that if Britain did intervene, the Foreign Office inclined towards the declaration of an *état de siège*. He argued that this would cause "quite unnecessary complications", as an *état de siège* had been designed to meet an external threat in conjunction with the French, not internal disturbances in opposition to them. Spears continued to insist that Britain should intervene with a declaration of martial law and the sooner the better. Martial law could be declared when he, Spears, and the Army Commander agreed that the French were using excessive force: the Army Commander would simply inform his French counterpart that Britain was assuming

¹⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6905/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6903/27/89, FO 371/35184.

control for security and order him to confine his troops to barracks. Spears remained convinced that as soon as French troops disappeared from the streets and the British replaced them, order would be restored.²⁰

The Foreign Office however, refused to sanction Spears's plea. According to War Office information, there had been "considerable exaggeration" in early reports.²¹ Despite Friday prayers, the 12 November had passed without serious disorder anywhere either in Lebanon or Syria. Though of necessity, the situation was still regarded as grave, the Commander-in-Chief emphasised that the BBC, Reuters and the local press all seemed to have exaggerated matters grossly.²² The fact that War Office information was "slightly calmer than Sir E. Spears's" was not lost on Foreign Office officials.²³

At a joint meeting between Foreign and War Office representatives, the relative merits of declaring an *état de siège* or British martial law were discussed. It was decided that a declaration of martial law was contrary to the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements and would be tantamount to tearing up those agreements; it could only be justified therefore, "in the greatest emergency". Spears's proposal of simply assuming control over the French would not work, a Foreign Office official minuted, as the French would refuse point blank to obey British orders, with the result that "we should just have to take the whole [of the] Levant States over, (which is precisely what Sir E. Spears has wanted us

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Commander-in-Chief, Middle East to War Office, 12 November 1943, E6903/27/89, FO 371/35184.

²² Commander-in-Chief, Middle East to War Office, 13 November 1943, E7004/27/89, FO 371/35186.

²³ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 13 November 1943, E6913/27/89, FO 371/35185.

to do all along)".²⁴ Telegrams were accordingly sent both to Spears and to the Commander-in-Chief, informing them that a declaration of martial law was out of the question at the present stage.²⁵ Additionally, Makins was instructed to reinforce his representations to the French and to leave them in absolutely no doubt that their attitude and action were regarded as "wholly indefensible". The situation in the Levant was deteriorating rapidly and the entire Middle East was now "in a state of growing excitement". The Committee was expected to comply immediately with the British request for Helleu's recall and for the release of the Lebanese ministers; otherwise, Britain would completely dissociate herself from the French, with possible unpleasing consequences for them.²⁶

ii) The Prime Minister Intervenes

From the point of view of the Prime Minister's general relations with the French, events in the Lebanon could not have come at a worse time. Since the formation of the French Committee, Churchill had advocated the playing down of de Gaulle's rôle and the nurturing of the Committee as a collective body with which the Allies could do business. To his extreme annoyance, de Gaulle continued to consolidate his own position at Giraud's expense. Giraud had dug his own grave: his handling of the liberation of Corsica, and especially his failure to keep the Committee informed, had

²⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 13 November 1943, E6903/27/89, FO 371/35184.

²⁵ Foreign Office to Spears, 13 November 1943; War Office to Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, 13 November 1943; both in E6903/27/89, FO 371/35184.

²⁶ Foreign Office to Algiers, 12 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184.

aroused considerable misgivings and suspicion.²⁷ An internal dispute which subsequently developed was initially written off by Macmillan "as nothing but a storm in a Corsican tea-cup".²⁸ However, by 25 September, "ugly rumours" were reaching him "of fresh and perhaps this time irreconcilable dissensions among the French".²⁹ At a Committee meeting that day, de Gaulle had proposed three decrees to allow the Committee to appoint a civilian Commissioner of War, to whom Giraud would be responsible, thereby distinguishing the military command from the governmental authority and subordinating the former to the latter. De Gaulle's own powers were to remain unaffected. Giraud refused to accept the proposals and stated that he preferred to resign.

Churchill had also got wind of rumours of these ominous developments and immediately telegraphed Algiers, instructing Macmillan to inform de Gaulle that "any alteration in the system of co-Presidents would overthrow the basis on which the French Committee had been recognised and would have the most serious results". Macmillan realised that if he obeyed his instructions, he would immediately jeopardise any chances of a settlement, as de Gaulle would fly into a rage about supposed "Allied intervention in French affairs" and use this as an excuse for a patriotic rallying. Throughout 26 September, Macmillan met a procession of French, all of whom confirmed that any form of intervention would be disastrous. He saw Giraud who remained

²⁷ Giraud, with British assistance, had for several months been arming the Corsican patriots who rose up against the Germans early in September 1943. He had failed to inform either de Gaulle or the Committee of his actions and was subsequently accused of trespassing beyond his military sphere into the political. See Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 298-99; Crawley, *op cit*, pp 209-10; Ledwidge, *op cit*, pp 161-62.

²⁸ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 21 September 1943, p 226.

²⁹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 25 September 1943, p 228.

adamant that he would resign and de Gaulle who insisted that the co-Presidency would in fact still exist juridically, though not in practice.³⁰

Macmillan wrote to Churchill and attempted to assuage his fears. Whilst he acknowledged that de Gaulle's manoeuvrings would to some extent destroy the equilibrium between the two generals, there was no intent to abolish the co-Presidency. He reassured Churchill that he had seen Generals Giraud, Georges, de Gaulle and Massigli, and made absolutely clear to them the grave view the British government would take if Giraud were forced into a position of inferiority or resignation.³¹

Churchill's doubts remained however; in a meeting with Viénot and Roché³² on 27 September, he mentioned reports that de Gaulle had been trying to obtain personal control of the Committee. When Viénot tried to assure Churchill that there was no truth in these rumours, the Prime Minister responded tersely that if that was the case, the Committee should act forcefully to prevent such rumours from being spread. Churchill also warned the two Frenchmen that "if the General should achieve supreme power in France, he would very soon quarrel with England and the USA".³³

Churchill despatched another telegram to Macmillan, emphasising that if de Gaulle were to achieve anything like sole mastery of the Committee, he would be on a collision course with the United States, and ultimately, Churchill

³⁰ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 26 September 1943, pp 229-32.

³¹ Macmillan to Churchill, 26 September 1943, FO 954/8.

³² Louis Roché: Counsellor at London Délégation of CFLN.

³³ Record of conversation between the Prime Minister, M. Viénot, Major Morton and M. Roché, 27 September 1943, Z10285/2043/G17, FO 371/36075.

would range both himself and Britain with Roosevelt.³⁴ By 29 September however, Macmillan had learned that the crisis had run its usual course: "Everyone had quarrelled, everyone had resigned and everyone had become reconciled..." At a Committee meeting on 27 September, a Commissioner for National Defence had been appointed and French forces had been divided into two categories, one to remain at the disposal of Giraud as Commander-in-Chief for operational purposes, and the other under the direct authority of the new Commissioner, Legentilhomme.³⁵ Macmillan wrote to Churchill to inform him that for the moment the danger had been averted.³⁶ In his diary however, he observed wryly: "Giraud claims victory; de Gaulle has won it".³⁷

Just over a month later, further changes were afoot. It had been decreed on 17 September that there should be formed at Algiers a provisional Consultative Assembly to assist the Committee in its work and, given the circumstances, to provide as representative an expression as was possible of French national opinion. The Assembly was to consist of over one hundred members, almost half of whom were to be representatives of the various groups of the French Resistance. Its inaugural session took place on 3 November and was attended by representatives from Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union.³⁸ Within days of the Assembly beginning to function however, a bitter attack was launched

³⁴ Churchill to Macmillan, 29 September 1943, FO 954/8.

³⁵ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 29 September 1943, p 244.

³⁶ Macmillan to Churchill, 1 October 1943, FO 954/8.

³⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 29 September 1943, p 244.

³⁸ On the formation of the Assemblée Consultative provisoire, see J. Lacouture, De Gaulle, Le Rebelle, 1890-1944, Vol I, (Paris, 1984), p 734; Macmillan, Blast of War, p 417-418.

against Giraud and there were calls for a restructuring of the Committee to include fewer generals and more politicians. It was decided that all Committee members should resign and a small sub-Committee of four (de Gaulle, Pleven, Tixier and Mayer) was appointed with the task of reorganisation. It was also further stipulated that there should be a definite separation of the "pouvoir militaire" from the "pouvoir civil". As Giraud was shortly due to resume his military command, when the reorganised Committee was announced on 10 November he retained his post as Commander-in-Chief but was no longer co-President; Général Georges and Couve de Murville (both Giraudists), were also eliminated.

A strong reaction from Churchill was inevitable. He telegraphed to Roosevelt on 10 November that he was

not at all content with the changes in the French National Committee which leave de Gaulle sole President. The body we recognised was of a totally different character, the essence being the co-Presidency of Giraud and de Gaulle. I suggest we maintain an attitude of reserve until we can discuss the situation together.³⁹

When, only a day later, events in the Lebanon took the course they did, the Prime Minister's fury can only have increased.

General Foreign Office handling of the Lebanese affair and, in particular, the determination to avoid an escalation of the crisis by a declaration of British martial law, was certainly rendered a good deal easier by the Prime Minister's departure at noon on 12 November for Plymouth, where he boarded the battleship Renown, for a lengthy voyage to Cairo. As soon as the crisis had erupted, Churchill had received a personal telegram from Casey, urging him to

³⁹ Churchill to Roosevelt, 10 November 1943, FO 954/8.

discount the allegations that the French would inevitably make about Spears's rôle in the affair. Casey had additionally urged Churchill to realise that all possible pressure would be required "to make [the French] untangle the knot that they have tied".⁴⁰ Acting upon this advice, Churchill telegraphed the War Cabinet that he hoped "a very strong telegram" would be sent to Macmillan, demanding that the French immediately release the Lebanese President and ministers and dismiss "the drug-trafficker Eddé".⁴¹

Casey had furthermore suggested to Churchill that he might find it necessary to join American pressure to that of Britain in order to achieve a satisfactory solution to the situation.⁴² Churchill was immediately receptive to the suggestion. He drafted a telegram to Roosevelt, the tenor of which well illustrates the extent of his irritation with the French and especially de Gaulle. In it, he spoke of "the lamentable outrages" which the French had committed, completely stultifying all their undertakings both to the Levant States and to Britain. He continued:

There is no doubt in my mind that this is a foretaste of what de Gaulle's leadership of France means ... People will say: "What kind of France is this which, while itself subjugated by the enemy, seeks to subjugate others?".⁴³

Churchill stressed that Britain and America should take the matter up together in the strongest manner:

⁴⁰ Casey to Churchill, 11 November 1943, T1947/3, MOS/102, PREM 3/421.

⁴¹ Churchill to War Cabinet, 12 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁴² Casey to Churchill, 11 November 1943, T1947/3, MOS/102, PREM 3/421.

⁴³ Churchill to Roosevelt, 13 November 1943, T1952/3, E7116/27/89, FO 371/35188.

Already we have seen the character of the body we recognised at Quadrant totally altered by de Gaulle's complete assumption of power. The outrages in the Levant are of a different character and afford full justification, with the support of world public opinion, of bringing the issue with de Gaulle to a head.⁴⁴

As far as Churchill was concerned, the Lebanese ministers should be released and "permitted to resume their full function"; the Assembly should also be allowed to meet again as soon as conditions allowed. If this did not happen, recognition should be withdrawn from the Committee and the process of arming French troops in North Africa should be halted. Churchill declared that he was presently enquiring into the state of British forces in the Levant, but warned Roosevelt that should action be taken there, precautionary measures would also be required in North Africa, "for ... there is nothing this man will not do if he has armed forces at his disposal".⁴⁵

The Foreign Office must have been extremely disturbed by the contents of this telegram and even more worried by a telegram Churchill had despatched to Wilson and Casey. This informed them that he expected the Cabinet would take "a very strong line against General de Gaulle and the outrages in Syria", and requested urgent information as to what forces there were available,

to overawe and, if necessary, to overpower the French, on the basis that the inhabitants are sympathetic to us.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Churchill to Casey and Wilson, 12 November 1943, T1950/3, PREM 3/421. See also Wilson to Holmes, 13 November 1943, ADC/434, WO 201/982.

Thus, whilst the Foreign Office was insisting to British officials in the Middle East that British troops were not to be used in the Levant, the Prime Minister was creating the opposite impression, with a telegram which must have breathed renewed hope into Casey and Spears if no-one else.

Fortunately for the Foreign Office however, when the Cabinet reviewed the Lebanese situation on the afternoon of 12 November, a much less belligerent attitude prevailed. There was some pressure for Britain to increase her demands on the French Committee and to insist not only on the release of the ministers, but also on their reinstallation as a government in order to restore the position which had obtained prior to the French arrests.⁴⁷ The point was made however, and met with general support, that to make another demand on the French when her original demands had not yet been met, would weaken Britain's own position. It was thought that if the original demands were refused by the French, then they could be restated and raised to include reinstatement. It was agreed that it should be made perfectly clear to the French that if her demands were not complied with, Britain would withdraw recognition of the Committee. It was felt that every endeavour should be made to avoid a situation where British troops might have to intervene, though it was recognised that "in the last

⁴⁷ See Wiley (American Consul, Algiers) to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1025. Wiley mentions in this report that Makins had received strong instructions from his government which he had proceeded to deliver. He (Wiley) describes those demands as the immediate release of the President and members of the Lebanese government, and that they should be "restored to their positions". Evidently the American had gained the impression from Makins that the British request for the release of the Lebanese implied their release and their reinstatement, rather than just their release. This impression would have been fortified by Churchill's letter to Roosevelt, in which Churchill had expressed his view that the Lebanese ministers should be released and "permitted to resume their full function". Churchill to Roosevelt, 13 November 1943, T1952/3, E7116/27/89, FO 371/35188.

resort, if all else failed", intervention might be the only option.⁴⁸ As a result of these resolutions, Casey and Spears were informed that the War Cabinet sincerely hoped that it would not be necessary to employ British troops in the Levant at the present stage.⁴⁹ In the Middle East, General Wilson informed Holmes that Casey had received a telegram from Eden, informing him that the Cabinet had taken a more moderate line than had been expected by the Prime Minister.⁵⁰

During its deliberations on 12 November, the War Cabinet had also recommended that two further telegrams be despatched to Algiers; one endorsed the Foreign Office demands about the release of the ministers and the removal of Helleu and went on to stress that the Committee should be made to understand that its future relationship with Britain depended on whether or not they acquiesced in these demands.⁵¹ The second advocated an attempt to discover the extent to which individual members of the CFLN had been party to Helleu's action. It was felt that perhaps those who had not been aware of it might be encouraged to pressure their colleagues into meeting the British demands and perhaps "to exercise restraint on de Gaulle or whoever is responsible for the present deplorable situation".⁵²

⁴⁸ Conclusions of Meeting of War Cabinet, 3.30pm, Friday, 12 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

⁴⁹ Foreign Office to Casey, 12 November 1943, FO 226/245.

⁵⁰ Wilson to Holmes, 13 November 1943, ADC/434, WO 201/982.

⁵¹ Foreign Office to Algiers, 12 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184. Churchill had actually sent a telegram to the Cabinet expressing the hope that "a very strong telegram" would be sent to Algiers. Churchill to War Cabinet, 12 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁵² Foreign Office to Algiers, 12 November 1943, FO 226/245.

iii) Casey Visits Beirut And Calls For British Intervention

By 13 November, the situation in the Lebanon had further deteriorated: many towns were closed and reports Spears had received entirely confirmed "the extraordinary brutality of the French".⁵³ In Beirut itself, Moslem quarters were being surrounded by French troops. In a separate incident, when a deputation of some fifty students from the American University had tried to approach the Spears Mission, French marines had opened fire on them, causing ten casualties.⁵⁴ There had been incidents at Rayak, Tripoli, and Sidon, in which the French had opened fire on unarmed crowds, resulting in almost one hundred casualties and several deaths.⁵⁵ The French, Spears subsequently claimed, were doing their best to play down the events. They flatly denied the Sidon incident and referred to the "foolish imprudence" of youths for "getting in the way of Bren carriers"; Spears also roundly denounced the BBC for quoting so extensively from communiqués issued by the French, thereby creating the impression that the British government was at one with the French.⁵⁶ Reports received in the War Office however, from

⁵³ Spears to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6931/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁵⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6947/27/89, FO 371/35185. See also Spears, *op cit*, p 240; Eyewitness account of incident in front of Spears Mission, 9.30am, 13 November 1943, by Lt. Col. K. C. Gresham, WO 201/984.

⁵⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6930/27/89 and E6931/27/89; both in FO 371/35185. First reports estimated that there were eleven casualties at Tripoli, seven of which were children under eight. A later report from the Political Officer there claimed that there had been eight deaths and twenty-four casualties. (See Spears to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7049/27/89, FO 371/35186). At Sidon sixty to seventy casualties were reported, though the number of fatalities was unknown.

⁵⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6964/27/89, FO 371/35185.

representatives of the Ninth Army, continued to be less sensational. Whilst the deterioration in the situation was confirmed, it was also stressed that there were "many dangerous and unfounded rumours current", and that in particular, most Reuters reports were "grossly exaggerated and irresponsible".⁵⁷

The Foreign Office agreed that it was clear that the stories of rioting had been "very exaggerated", but nonetheless admitted that there had certainly also been "some very nasty incidents".⁵⁸ Much exasperation was directed towards the French as it was considered that their behaviour had been "the height of unwisdom". They were "obviously most unpopular" in the Levant, and were felt to be "a millstone round our necks in dealing with the Arabs".⁵⁹ A telegram was despatched to Macmillan, instructing him to register an immediate protest with the French in the strongest possible terms against the incident outside the Spears Mission.⁶⁰

As far as Beirut was concerned, the Foreign Office could only issue stop-gap instructions pending Catroux's arrival. Spears was requested to do his utmost to prevent the local French authorities from "behaving provocatively" and likewise to induce the Lebanese "to behave as calmly as possible", as it was not in their interests that disorders should occur. Casey was warned to expect Catroux's arrival in Cairo, and to make it plain to the Frenchman that Britain considered that the Committee had so far been "evasive" over the Lebanese affair. Only by stretching forbearance to the

⁵⁷ Wilson to War Office, 14 November 1943, E6976/27/89, FO 371/35186.

⁵⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 15 November 1943, E6976/27/89, FO 371/35186.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Foreign Office to Algiers, 14 November 1943, E6967/27/89, FO 371/35185.

absolute limit had Britain been prepared to wait until Monday, 15 November for Catroux's arrival in Beirut, and with luck, a quick solution to the crisis. Casey should remind Catroux that Britain confidently expected that his "appropriate instructions" included authorisation to release the Lebanese ministers immediately and moreover, that his arrival would signal Helleu's effective subordination to him.⁶¹

The discrepancy in reports about the general situation in the Lebanon emanating from Spears on the one hand, and from the military on the other, continued to be noted in London. Casey too had become confused by the conflicting reports and decided to visit Beirut to assess the situation for himself.⁶² He was equally confused by his instructions from the Foreign Office about possible British intervention. His directions thus far had been that British troops would have to be employed if military security required, but that at the present juncture it was preferable that they should not be not used.⁶³ These instructions had received Cabinet endorsement, but Casey had also received Churchill's enquiry about the state of British forces in the Levant and this must have added to his confusion. Additionally, conditions now seemed to have deteriorated to such an extent that Casey wondered whether Britain might anyway intervene to pacify the situation, even though her military interests were not considered jeopardised. He summarised his thoughts thus:

What it boils down to is, can we fulfil our undertakings regarding the independence of the

⁶¹ Foreign Office to Casey, 13 November 1943, E6915/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁶² Casey to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6926/27/89, FO 371/35185; Kirk (Cairo) to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1023.

⁶³ Foreign Office to Casey, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184; Foreign Office to Beirut, 12 November 1943, FO 226/245.

Levant States by purely political action or should we use force?⁶⁴

As far as Casey was concerned, his mind was already made up and the issue was quite clear. Even before his visit to Beirut, he had declared that if the French continued to use force, then he was inclined to use British troops to restore order.⁶⁵ To the Foreign Office he explained himself thus:

Common humanity and our reputation with the Arab world prompts us to take charge of the situation and restore order and the liberties of the Lebanese. This would certainly bring us into conflict with the French. This decision must rest with you, as issues beyond the Middle East are involved.⁶⁶

Casey reached Beirut at 4.00pm on 13 November. After discussions with Spears and General Holmes, he embarked on a tour of Beirut and on a series of interviews with a variety of individuals, including Dr. Dodge,⁶⁷ the Maronite Archbishop and the Grand Mufti. Dodge had spoken of the "incredible folly" of the French in throwing away their prestige in the Levant; he observed that even the Christians, their closest allies, had turned against them, and forecast that unless Catroux released the Government and dismissed Helleu, the Lebanese would rise against the French and destroy them "with great bloodshed". The two religious leaders had only confirmed what Dodge had said: there was complete accord between Christians and Moslems alike and

⁶⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6924/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁶⁵ Kirk to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1023.

⁶⁶ Casey to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6924/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁶⁷ Dr. Dodge was President of the American University in Beirut.

unless Britain protected the Lebanese from French savagery, they would take the matter into their own hands.⁶⁸

Although in conversation with Holmes on the evening of 13 November, Casey had stated that the likelihood of a declaration of martial law was now receding, his visit to Beirut did not alter his conviction that if the French used excessive force, British troops ought to intervene. He had made out such a strong case for British intervention however, that Holmes began to doubt his own instructions and telegraphed Wilson for guidance. The Commander-in-Chief confirmed that for the present, British troops were not to be used and that interference with the French territorial command could be justified only in the greatest emergency.⁶⁹ Similarly, after a conversation on the morning of 14 November, Wadsworth reported that the Minister of State answered a question "in a manner which suggested that he had already made up his mind on [the] need for British military intervention".⁷⁰

Indeed, Casey had arrived in Beirut convinced of the need for British military intervention and the impressions he had received during his visit had evidently done nothing to lessen those convictions. He distilled the conclusions he had drawn into a telegram which was sent to London from Beirut before his return to Cairo. He estimated that the tension was increasing and that the situation would soon be "potentially very dangerous". Thus far the Lebanese had refrained from insurrection, hoping for British intervention. He believed that the Lebanese would maintain

⁶⁸ Casey to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6967/27/89, FO 371/35185. For printed version, see Spears, *op cit*, p 248-251.

⁶⁹ Holmes to Wilson, 13 November 1943, ADC 433; Wilson to Holmes, 14 November 1943, CIC/173; both in WO 201/984.

⁷⁰ Wadsworth to Hull, 14 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1030-1031.

their restraint only if the British assumed control in the principal towns. He recommended that Britain should take over patrolling duties only, which would be "less unpalatable" to the French than a total transfer of control. Like Spears, he was certain that the French would accept this if the Commander-in-Chief made the demand with the maximum firmness "as an essential military measure in aid of internal security".⁷¹

Casey realised only too well the objections that his proposal would encounter: the British government would be unwilling to complicate matters further with the French before they had had the opportunity to respond to the two major demands already made upon them. But Casey regarded it as extremely unlikely that the French would comply with British demands. This had been brought home to him by a press conference the previous evening, at which Helleu had stated that total independence for the Levant States was out of the question, that de Gaulle had been in full agreement with the measures he had taken and that Catroux was coming to Beirut purely to discuss military matters with Wilson and Holmes. Spears had observed, and Casey was inclined to agree, that stupid as Helleu was, he would never have made such a statement unless authorised to do so by Algiers, for it rendered a French climb-down virtually impossible.⁷²

Moreover, given the bitterness of the pill which Britain was asking the French to swallow, Casey fully expected that the French would attempt to play for time, in the hope that something would happen to save their skin. He predicted that Catroux's mission was just such a device invented by de Gaulle "to spin things out ... till British indignation has

⁷¹ Casey to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6963/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁷² Spears to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6966/27/89, FO 371/35185.

cooled and some new factor emerges to help him out of his dilemma". In these circumstances, timing was therefore crucial. Judging from what he had seen, he believed there was a "grave risk of the situation getting irrevocably out of hand, unless the suggested remedy [i.e. British assumption of patrolling duties in the major towns] is applied by 09.00 hours, Wednesday, November 17th at latest". This he considered "a not unreasonable time-limit in the urgent circumstances that exist".⁷³

Unfortunately for Casey, his suggestion found little favour with the military. At a Middle East Defence Committee meeting on 15 November, Wilson had "a considerable argument" with Casey about it, and pressed his view that it must be all or nothing.⁷⁴ Nor did Casey's recommendations fare any better in London where it was felt that the French deserved at least a little time to carry out the British demands, especially as, contrary to Casey's belief, it was expected that they would comply with the demands. A War Cabinet meeting on 15 November discussed Casey's telegram and the proposed Foreign Office reply. Sir A. Cadogan said that present policy was tentatively to allow the French another twenty-four hours and if no answer was received, to request compliance within another twenty-four or forty-eight hours. The reply to Casey, endorsed by the Cabinet, pointed out that if the French failed to comply with Britain's demands, British intervention would hardly be very effective if confined to mere patrolling duties in the larger towns. A more sensible course would be for Britain to dissociate herself from French actions and, subject to prior Cabinet approval, impose British martial law. Under those circumstances, it was thought that public feeling would be

⁷³ Casey to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6963/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁷⁴ Wilson to Holmes, 15 November 1943, ADC/437, WO 201/982.

"much more profoundly stirred than it is at present, if it is known that the French have rejected our first efforts to secure a settlement".⁷⁵ The telegram was copied to Beirut and to Algiers, and on the Cabinet's recommendation, a supplementary telegram was sent to Beirut, to make it absolutely clear that at the present stage, no threat of the imposition of British martial law should be used or even referred to, in any dealings with the French.⁷⁶

iv) *A Posteriori* Reasoning

"Les circonstances exigeaient des mesures rapides et radicales". This was how Helleu, at 10.00am on 11 November, routinely announced his actions to the Committee in Algiers. His telegram went on to explain that he had dissolved the Chamber and suspended the constitution, and had ordered the arrests "pour éviter la subsistance d'un organisme constitutionnel qui aurait pu, avec des appuis extérieurs, s'opposer à mes décisions". He reassured the Committee that he had done everything necessary to ensure that order was maintained. He expected other Arab states to register their displeasure and also anticipated a strong protest from Spears, who was "d'ailleurs, le véritable responsable des menées anti-françaises contre lesquelles j'ai dû réagir". Despite the fact that two requests for reinforcements had now been turned down, Helleu evidently felt that in the circumstances which now prevailed, he might effect a change of mind, and reminded the Committee of the request he had previously made for reinforcements: "Je vous rappelle

⁷⁵ Foreign Office to Casey, 15 November 1943, E6963/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁷⁶ Conclusions of meeting of War Cabinet, 5.30pm, Monday, 15 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

instamment ma demande concernant l'envoi du "Richelieu" ".⁷⁷
 In conclusion, he promised to keep the Committee informed about the way events were developing.

How had the French come to take such drastic action? In attempting to determine exactly what drove Helleu to act as he did, it is interesting to ponder a point made by George Kirk in The Middle East in the War, that in Algeria on 23 September 1943, Catroux had himself dismissed all the Moslem members of the Délégations Financières, and had interned two of their leaders, when in an act of defiance towards France, they had absented themselves from the formal opening of the Délégations Financières. Whilst there is no evidence directly linking Helleu's high-handed behaviour with that of Catroux's a month and a half previously, it is quite possible that Helleu thought he could draw a lesson from Algerian events. After all, Catroux had emerged untarnished from the episode and indeed, his action had resulted in an apology from the Moslem members so that Catroux had subsequently withdrawn their dismissal.⁷⁸

It is also incontestable that since the outcome of the elections, Helleu had been subjected to considerable pressure from his closest and most influential advisers, to act firmly to stem the nationalist tide before it swamped what ground France was still managing to cling to. In mid-October, for example, Jean Chabret, the Délégation's Conseiller Législatif, provided Helleu with a ten page article entitled "Pouvoir du Délégué Général". The concern from Helleu or from members of his staff for a definition of the Délégué Général's rôle and powers is telling. The article went to great lengths to justify the French position in the Levant, asserting that despite the declarations of

⁷⁷ Helleu à Alger, 11 Novembre 1943, No 327-330, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁷⁸ George Kirk, *op cit*, pp 279, 420-421.

independence, France still retained responsibilities for the Levant, of which she could not be divested without the approval of the League of Nations. More especially, it stated that nothing could be done to alter the *status quo* without the Délégué Général's assent:

En ce qui concerne plus particulièrement les Constitutions libanais et syrien, leur révision doit, pour être valable, non seulement avoir été faite suivant la procédure constitutionnelle, mais avoir, en outre, recueilli l'accord du Délégué Général ... ils ne peuvent être modifiés qu'avec l'assentiment de la Puissance Mandataire.⁷⁹

The paper went on to maintain that Catroux's declarations of independence had been inspired by Robert de Caix's theory that "Le mandat cessat d'exister en fait avant de cesser d'exister en droit". However, should this ideal prove unattainable or unrealistic

par suite de la négligence, de la faute ou de l'incapacité de représentations des Etats, la France aurait incontestablement le droit et le devoir, en vertu des obligations et des responsabilités qui lui incombent, de prendre toutes mesures politiques, législatives, financières ou administratives, qu'elle jugerait nécessaires pour l'accomplissement de sa mission.⁸⁰

Additionally, the considerable influence which Baelen and Boegner wielded over Helleu should not be forgotten. The entire blame for the Lebanese crisis cannot simply be assigned to these man, but their rôle is discernible throughout, and especially Boegner's as at the time of the crisis, Baelen was indisposed. It was Boegner who had originally persuaded Helleu to press Algiers for reinforcements to strengthen French negotiating power.

⁷⁹ Note: "Pouvoir du Délégué Général", par Jean Chabret, Beyrouth, 13 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

Furthermore, he had submitted a paper to Helleu prior to his departure for Algiers, strongly advocating that the alliance between France and the Levant States be cemented before it was too late.⁸¹ He suggested that the Levant governments somehow be brought to agree to a formal exchange of letters stating that the 1936 treaties would come into force as soon as a properly constituted French Parliament existed to ratify them. In fact, the allegedly liberal proposals with which Helleu returned from Algiers were based on the 1936 treaties, as Boegner had proposed, despite the fact that it must have been realised that these were no longer acceptable to the Levant States.

Given such pointers, it is relatively easy to see why events in the Lebanon took the course they did. The hard core element on Helleu's staff knew that Khoury and Solh would never accept that France should hold a position in the Levant which the 1936 treaties had outlined. What was needed therefore, was a government which would accept those treaties. When the Lebanese government acted as it did by unilaterally reforming the constitution and abolishing all reference to the mandate, it played directly into French hands. As Chabret had outlined a month previously, and as had been made abundantly clear to the Lebanese in the communiqué issued on 5 November, the French considered that no alteration to the constitution was permissible unless approved by the Délégué Général. In responding to the Lebanese challenge therefore, the French considered themselves free to employ whatever measures they saw fit. They felt fully justified in removing the government in order to install another which would be more amenable to the idea of a treaty with France.

⁸¹ Boegner à Helleu, 20 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

It is indisputable that, since the elections, most French in the Levant had wanted to crack down on the Lebanese and were exploring all means of doing so. It is probable however, that the extreme action of arresting the government was something which was decided upon purely as a response to the Lebanese defiance on 8 November, firstly in refusing to await Helleu's return, and secondly, in proceeding to amend the constitution. It is difficult to assess exactly what rôle Helleu played in formulating the scheme. He was sufficiently perturbed by the turn of events to return from Cairo a day earlier than he had originally intended. It is most probable however, that he returned to find the plot already being hatched by certain ring-leaders amongst his staff and all that remained for him to do was to give the go ahead.⁸²

The French arrests have been described as a "brutally efficient round-up of the Lebanese ringleaders".⁸³ Brutal they may have been, but efficient they most certainly were not. Three ministers escaped arrest initially and although one was apprehended later in the day, the other two remained at large, able to form precisely the constitutional rump which Helleu claimed he had been trying to avoid.⁸⁴ By 12

⁸² Though too much emphasis cannot be placed on this, Wadsworth's account of his interview with Helleu on 11 November is interesting. When speaking of his failure to inform Spears of what had been planned, Helleu asked: "Could I tell him *what had been prepared* [my italics] in greatest secrecy for me to do that night [?]" . Wadsworth to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1019.

⁸³ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 126.

⁸⁴ Casey, prompted by Spears, had suggested that the two Lebanese ministers still at large, should be sent to Egypt or Palestine for asylum from the French, possibly accompanied by three or four members of the Chamber of Deputies. After discussion with Colonel Calthorpe of the War Office, the Foreign Office vetoed the idea, having decided that such a move might well create a dangerous Anglo-French incident. Casey to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6901/27/89, FO 371/35184; Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 13 November 1943, and Foreign Office to Casey, 13 November

November, the two ministers still at liberty had galvanised themselves into action, paying Spears a surreptitious visit with the text of a resolution unanimously passed by thirty three deputies from the Chamber. The resolution condemned the French action as unconstitutional, accused Eddé of high treason and affirmed continued loyalty to Riad Solh's government. They proposed to act in the name of the President and his Cabinet, and called upon the population to withhold their taxes, on government officials to refuse to obey orders, and on other Arab nations to come to their assistance.⁸⁵

However bungled Helleu's actions may have been, he made no apologies to Algiers. Instead, he helpfully provided Massigli with a list of arguments which might be used to fend off the inevitable British and American protests and criticisms. Firstly he argued, the Lebanese had undoubtedly been engaged in "un véritable complot politique destiné à nous chasser du Liban", and consequently radical measures had been required in the interests of military security. He suggested that even before their protests began to pour in, the British might be reminded that the French measures were not so different from the forceful tactics that Britain had herself employed in Iraq against Rashid Ali and in Egypt to install Nahas Pasha in power. Lastly, as the mendacious and tendentious reports which were already being circulated about events in the Lebanon were of British origin, Britain had no room to condemn the French action as likely to disturb public order and security.⁸⁶

1943, E6913/27/89, FO 371/35185.

⁸⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6907/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 12 November, 1943, E6908/27/89; both in FO 371/35184.

⁸⁶ Beyrouth à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 1534, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

In complete contrast to Spears, who had been tempted to exaggerate the disturbances in the Levant to add weight to his own advice to impose British martial law, Helleu was above all concerned to play down the effects of his action to Algiers and to emphasise that complete calm reigned in the Lebanon.⁸⁷ In numerous telegrams to the Committee, he denied that internal order had been disturbed and complained bitterly about the inaccurate reports Reuters was emitting. It was not true, he argued, that the forty eight deputies who had voted to amend the constitution had all been arrested, nor that wholesale arrests were being carried out among the population.⁸⁸ Reports that serious trouble was expected in major towns and from the Druzes were false, as were stories of confrontations between French tanks and the Lebanese populace. Helleu categorically denied that Senegalese troops had attempted to occupy Bechara el Khoury's house. He claimed that it was untrue "que les tués se chiffrent par dizaines; il y a eu, en tout et pour tout, trois tués".⁸⁹ Stories that he no longer had the situation in hand "sont entièrement fausses".⁹⁰ Helleu claimed that the incident outside the Spears Mission had arisen when a sous-officier was set upon by the crowd⁹¹; the Sidon affair was simply written off, as owing its origins "aux excitations de la radio étrangère et peut-être à une visite à Saida du

⁸⁷ Beyrouth à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 340, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁸⁸ Beyrouth à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 338-9, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁸⁹ Beyrouth à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 351, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁹⁰ Beyrouth à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 358-9, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

Capitaine Thomas de la B.S.M.".[British Security Mission]⁹² He told eagerly of visits from various Lebanese notables, all of whom had expressed satisfaction with his action which "avait arrêté sur une pente fatale le Liban et par suite toute la chrétienté d'Orient".⁹³ When Général Humblot and Monclar walked about in Beirut on 14 November, even in the Moslem quarters, "ils ont été l'objet de nombreuses manifestations de sympathie".⁹⁴

Worst of all, Helleu alleged, British propaganda was using such reports to hinder Eddé's attempts to form a Cabinet.⁹⁵ He believed that the British were trying, without success, to form a Moslem bloc hostile to France and to insinuate that events in the Lebanon had aroused the anger of the whole of the Moslem world. This was manifestly untrue, he claimed, and Syria was the perfect example with which to refute this. Syria was completely calm and the government had done nothing to demonstrate solidarity with Riad Solh, despite attempts by certain Lebanese deputies to get it to do so.⁹⁶ In fact, Helleu claimed that he had received a letter from the Syrians "conçue en termes très courtois et très modérés"; Shukri Quwatli, when he delivered it, had apparently commented to the Délégué at Damascus: "Le document que nous avons remis n'est pas une protestation, ce n'est pas une note, c'est une lettre, une simple lettre.

⁹² Note par le Conseiller Administratif de la France Combattante au Liban Sud, Saïda, 14 Novembre 1943, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308.

⁹³ Beyrouth à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 348, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁹⁴ Beyrouth à Alger, 14 Novembre 1943, No 365, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁹⁵ Beyrouth à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 340, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁹⁶ Beyrouth à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 344 et 13 Novembre 1943, No 349-50, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

Nous ne pouvions faire moins". Helleu observed: "Nous devons certainement en savoir gré au Gouvernement Syrien; je pense ... qu'il a fait le minimum".⁹⁷

There is evidence to suggest that if the French were delighted by the attitude of reserve maintained by the Syrians, the British were not so pleased and were actively encouraging the Syrians to adopt a firmer line and to demonstrate their solidarity with the Lebanese. On 16 November, Brenan, the Political Officer at Damascus informed Lascelles: "Our various démarches to the Syrian President have borne fruit and to the point where, I submit, it might be unwise to go further, unless you wish clashes with the French to break out".⁹⁸ Only a day earlier, Lascelles himself had seen fit to reprimand Colonel Summerhayes, the Political Officer at Aleppo, for attending the French Armistice Day Ball, and in so doing made a scathing comment about the fact that the Syrians were being "so wobbly about supporting their neighbours". Lascelles went on to allege that Summerhayes must have realised that French actions "would inevitably strain our relations to breaking point" and informed him that it was the Minister's wish, until further notice, that he maintain an attitude of "extreme coldness" towards the French.⁹⁹

v) Makins And Macmillan Tackle The French

Swamped by such reports from Helleu, the French in Algiers were steadfastly refusing to accept that they had

⁹⁷ Beyrouth à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, s.n., Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. A version of this telegram is also to be found in Vol 1575.

⁹⁸ T. V. Brenan to D. W. Lascelles, DO 383, 16 November 1943, FO 226/241.

⁹⁹ D. W. Lascelles to C. H. Summerhayes, 15 November 1943, FO 226/241.

done anything wrong and denying that anything was amiss in the Levant. To add to Makins' difficulties, the telegrams containing his instructions arrived late, corrupt, in inverse order and without reference to each other. It was, he observed, "lucky that there was no slip-up".¹⁰⁰ Though he had already seen Massigli earlier in the day, on the evening of 12 November he saw Massigli and de Gaulle together.¹⁰¹ He noted that both seemed "rather subdued". De Gaulle had insisted that the Committee's position in the Lebanon was unassailable because French actions were based on mandatory rights; the Committee had honoured its promise of independence to the States, elections had been held and a government had been formed, which had proceeded to provoke the French Committee just when it had decided to negotiate a treaty. In the face of such provocation the Committee had merely exercised France's mandatory rights. If Britain forced the issue, de Gaulle defiantly threatened to retaliate by withdrawing all French officials and troops alike from the Levant. On a more conciliatory note however, he had informed Makins that Catroux, equipped with "appropriate instructions", would be departing for the Lebanon on either 13 or 14 November and would call on Casey in Cairo en route. Makins ended his report with the information that from what he had been given to understand, Helleu had acted "within his instructions from Algiers".¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

¹⁰¹ See also Wiley to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1024-25, as Makins gave an account of his meeting to Wiley who relayed the main details to the State Department. In his letter to William Strang, Makins informed him that he had had "a strained interview with de Gaulle and Massigli, but fortunately, just as it looked like becoming stormy, the lights fused. Oddly enough this rather threw de Gaulle out of his stride". Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

¹⁰² Makins to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6195/27/89, FO 371/35185.

In view of further telegrams received from the Foreign Office, Makins was obliged to see Massigli again early on 13 November. He delivered a note which expressed Britain's inability to acquiesce in any further deterioration of the Lebanese situation, and stated that unless Britain received authoritative assurances that everything possible was being done to reach a *modus vivendi*, she proposed to settle matters herself by inviting French, Syrian, Lebanese and American representatives to a conference. The note further requested the immediate withdrawal of Helleu and the release of the imprisoned Lebanese; for the moment Britain complied with the suspension of the Chamber, though its reassembly was expected at the earliest possible date.¹⁰³

Massigli survived the meeting by launching a counter-attack. He drew attention to the various false and exaggerated Reuters reports¹⁰⁴ emanating from the Levant, the dissemination of which, he protested, "only added fuel to the flames", and served nobody's interests; he requested that every effort be made not to exaggerate events in the Lebanon.¹⁰⁵ Later that same day, the Committee met and subsequently announced that it had entrusted Catroux, who would be leaving forthwith for Beirut, with the task of restoring normal constitutional life to the Lebanon, within

¹⁰³ See Foreign Office to Casey, 11 November 1943, Nos 3521 and 3522, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184; Makins to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6925/27/89, FO 371/35185. For a printed copy of the British note, see De Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, pp 597-598.

¹⁰⁴ One of these reports claimed that forty-eight Lebanese deputies had been arrested and another that there were serious disorders through the Levant.

¹⁰⁵ Makins to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, No 2338, E6925/27/89; Makins to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, No 2332, E6950/27/89; both in FO 371/35185.

the framework of the mandate, such as had been defined in previous declarations by the Committee.¹⁰⁶

The extent to which the French were denying any responsibility for the Lebanese situation is further evident from instructions which Massigli eventually sent to the French representatives in London, Washington and Moscow. These reaffirmed categorically that accountability rested squarely with Riad Solh and his colleagues in the first instance; however, it was alleged that an equally large part of the blame

incombe aux agents britanniques, du fait de leur ingérence dans les affaires libanaises et syriennes, dans la politique intérieure et administrative des Etats et même dans les rapports des gouvernements de ces Etats et les représentants de la France.

It was claimed that the endless encouragement British agents had offered to Syrian and Lebanese ministers had enticed them away from France and had started them off

vers une politique qui, appuyée sur le soutien britannique, entend faire table rase de nos intérêts historiques au Liban et en Syrie.

Countless protests to the British had produced absolutely no effect and since the reintroduction of constitutional life, Spears and his associates had only redoubled their efforts. This behaviour on the part of the British agents constituted a contradiction of formal undertakings by the British government and was hardly compatible either with respect for France's privileged position or with the continued and legal

¹⁰⁶ Algiers to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6995/27/89, FO 371/35186. Spears found this assertion on the part of the Committee "particularly disquieting", as it suggested to him the intention "to bargain or to attempt to bargain for the release of the Government against promises to revert to the former "Mandatory Constitution"." Spears to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7009/27/89, FO 371/35186.

existence of the mandate. Massigli assured the representatives at great length that France intended to keep her promises to the Levant States; he warned them especially against the tendentious reports in the British press and insisted that Helleu was painting a very different picture.¹⁰⁷

Prior to its despatch, de Gaulle saw a draft of this telegram and instructed Massigli that it would be as well to add "que dans l'extrémité, nous nous retirerions du Levant". He professed his belief that the threat of a French withdrawal might be

la seule considération dont les conséquences peuvent faire changer l'attitude des Anglais comme cela s'est produit dans d'autres occasions. En outre, il est préférable de ne pas le leur cacher maintenant tandis qu'il est temps pour eux de fixer leur position.¹⁰⁸

De Gaulle evidently hoped that by the adoption of this defiant attitude, he might succeed in forcing the British to back off.

When Macmillan returned to Algiers from Italy on the afternoon of 13 November, he found the crisis "in full swing". He and Murphy¹⁰⁹ went into conference almost immediately, and shortly thereafter descended successively upon Massigli.¹¹⁰ Murphy in fact presented Massigli with a

¹⁰⁷ Massigli à Londres, Washington et Moscou, 13 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁰⁸ De Gaulle à Massigli, 13 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Also in Papiers Massigli, Vol 1479.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Murphy: Roosevelt's personal representative in Algiers and Chief Civil Affairs Officer on General Eisenhower's staff.

¹¹⁰ H. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 13 November 1943, p 291.

note of such stiffness that Massigli later requested that it be modified on the grounds that it was unjust to the French.¹¹¹ As Britain's note of protest had already been delivered, Macmillan, accompanied by Makins, had nothing new to say to Massigli. The latter however, did open up a little and divulged that in his opinion, Helleu "had made a blunder", though he insisted "that the mistakes had not been all on one side". He continued to assert that complete calm reigned in the Lebanon and that British accounts of events were exaggerated and untrue. When pressed by Makins to supply an answer to Britain's demands, he explained that Helleu was effectively suspended by Catroux's mandate and that the liberation of the Lebanese was now Catroux's responsibility, with which he would deal as he saw fit.¹¹² Macmillan confessed that the talk had not been "altogether satisfactory" though he retained his "usual confidence in Massigli's wisdom and fairness".¹¹³

Macmillan also managed to see Catroux on the evening of 13 November before his departure to the Levant. It had been

¹¹¹ See Murphy to Hull, 14 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1030. The particular sentence to which the French objected read: "It is difficult to understand how [the] French whose country is now groaning under [the] heel of the invader, can be unmindful of the aspirations toward independence of another people". Macmillan to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7095/27/89, FO 371/35187.

¹¹² Macmillan to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6957/27/89, FO 371/35185. Massigli had intimated to Murphy that the unilateral action of the Lebanese in violating the mandate, had very possibly been inspired by Spears. Massigli also stated that Helleu "whose judgment apparently he does not rate highly", ordered the arrests "on his own initiative without prior consultation with the Committee", and would be "quietly shelved" once the ministers were released. Murphy to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1026-27.

¹¹³ H. Macmillan, Blast of War, p 422. Murphy recorded that "Macmillan feels, as I do, that Massigli is doing his utmost to arrive at a prompt solution" Murphy to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943., Vol IV, pp 1026-27.

noted by Makins that Catroux, that very evening, had authorised the Commissariat for Information to say that Helleu had acted without reference to Algiers, which completely belied the impression Makins had gathered the previous day. Catroux confirmed this to Macmillan, by stating that Helleu "had made a fool of himself ... [and] had taken these drastic steps without even telegraphing for instructions". Catroux sought to deflect attention from Helleu's actions by attacking British policy which, he alleged, had been none too helpful. He nonetheless professed a desire to see the matter settled urgently in view of the harm being done to Anglo-French interests. From the impression he created during the meeting, Macmillan believed that Catroux would arrive in the Levant "in a mood anxious for conciliation". Dealing with such fraught situations, he reasoned, was "after all his métier and no-one is more practised at it than he". Catroux had even frankly admitted to Macmillan that his main difficulty lay in preserving French face, though he had not seemed unduly perturbed at the prospect, declaring with a smile, "that there were other ways of dealing with the Government than putting them into prison".¹¹⁴ Macmillan obviously felt it wise not to press Catroux too closely on this remark.

There was therefore considerable optimism amongst the British contingent in Algiers that Catroux could be relied upon to conduct affairs in a conciliatory manner and that the matter would soon be settled. This optimism would have evaporated had various letters which de Gaulle wrote on 13 November to Helleu, to Catroux and to Massigli respectively, been public knowledge. De Gaulle's letter to Helleu constituted an unequivocal declaration of support: he affirmed that the forceful tactics Helleu had employed must have been considered necessary, as he had seen fit to employ

¹¹⁴ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6976/27/89, FO 371/35186.

them. Additionally, he assured Helleu that he would not be disavowed. De Gaulle warned that he anticipated considerable difficulties from the British. He remained convinced however, that their tough approach was bluff, as they least of all could afford trouble in the Levant and hence would not carry things too far. The letter went on to advise Helleu of Catroux's impending arrival but stressed that he was returning not to disavow him but to support him in the name of the Committee of Liberation.¹¹⁵

Prior to his dawn departure on 14 November for the Levant, Catroux also received a letter from de Gaulle, who was evidently anxious to make his thinking absolutely clear.¹¹⁶ With the letter, de Gaulle enclosed a report from Helleu and a letter from Baelen, which, he claimed, would serve to illustrate the state of French feeling before the arrests.¹¹⁷ De Gaulle's own letter warned Catroux of the alarmism which he was bound to encounter from Casey and others, and advised him to say nothing publicly that might incriminate Helleu; even if the latter's actions had been a little too forceful, France was solidly behind him. De Gaulle further instructed Catroux to reject out of hand any proposal which might be broached for a conference or a committee of enquiry. He reminded Catroux that what he should seek to obtain was the re-establishment of the existing constitution and a government acceptable to the Committee. Provided France remained firm, he did not believe

¹¹⁵ De Gaulle à Helleu, 13 Novembre 1943, cited in de Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, pp 598-99.

¹¹⁶ De Gaulle à Catroux, 13 Novembre 1943, cited in de Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, p 597.

¹¹⁷ Neither the report from Helleu nor the letter from Baelen are published.

that the English would make serious difficulties; if they did, France would be obliged to vacate the Levant.¹¹⁸

By way of adding force to all of this, de Gaulle also wrote to Massigli, who was the last person due to see Catroux before his departure. The letter instructed Massigli to make it quite plain to Catroux that the arrangements he was permitted to make in Beirut

ne comportent évidemment pas celles qui seraient susceptibles d'altérer notre position mandataire de droit et de fait.

Above all, de Gaulle reiterated his own impression

que la situation locale n'est pas mauvaise, que les gens du Liban et de Syrie attendent de voir si nous restons fermes pour s'accomoder de notre énergie ou tirer parti de notre faiblesse. Dans ce dernier cas, l'affaire est perdue et elle ne doit pas l'être.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ De Gaulle à Catroux, 13 Novembre 1943, cited in de Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, p 597.

¹¹⁹ De Gaulle à Massigli, 13 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Also contained in Papiers Massigli, Vol 1479.

CHAPTER NINE

LE NUAGE QUI PASSE...

i) The View From Carlton Gardens

There can be no doubt that news of Lebanese events came as a completely unwelcome surprise to French representatives in London, where it was felt that the whole affair could only tarnish the Committee's reputation and undo the work thus far achieved in restoring France to her rightful position as a major European power. Carlton Gardens found itself in the embarrassing and difficult situation of having to deal with a serious crisis for which the French were deemed largely responsible, without much information from French sources, or guidance as to the best line of defence.

As soon as the crisis broke, Viénot hurriedly requested information from Algiers or directly from Beirut to help answer the questions and representations with which he was being deluged.¹ He was sure that Massigli would realise the serious feeling the affair had aroused in Britain. Whilst himself admitting that Helleu's measures made a mockery of general democratic principles, he observed, with a certain degree of bitterness, that British parliamentary and journalistic circles inevitably interpreted them in the worst possible light, whereas the machinations of Spears and the Committee's grievances in that respect were given no credence whatsoever. Since the news had broken, Viénot claimed he had received a procession of visitors, all of whom were "les mieux disposés à notre égard". Nonetheless, they had all warned of the dire effect Lebanese events were having on British public opinion. He assured Massigli that

¹ Viénot à Alger, 11 Novembre 1943, No 145-6, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

with the scant information at his disposal, he had done his best to reply to their allegations and urgently requested further information on the origin and the nature of the crisis. In particular, he asked "si les mesures prises à Beyrouth avaient fait l'objet d'instructions expresses du Comité?", as the rumour was rife in London that Helleu had been in Algiers only a few days before carrying out the arrests.²

In a personal letter written "dans le brouhaha des remous de l'affaire libanaise",³ Viénot pleaded for Massigli's unofficial impressions. With only Reuters despatches for information, his own first impressions were

que nous nous sommes lancés dans une terrible bagarre d'où nous sortirons très meurtrés.

The whole incident, he observed, was like "pain bénit" for France's detractors. Indeed, Viénot was concerned that the Lebanese affair would do untold damage to French repute and ruin her chances of success in various aspects of diplomacy. In particular, he worried that the Lebanese affair would divert public attention from the vital question of French participation on the European Advisory Commission⁴, just at

² Viénot à Massigli, 12 Novembre 1943, No 1165-6, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

³ Viénot mentioned that during the course of writing the letter, he had been interrupted over ten times.

⁴ In August 1943, the Russians had suggested the establishment of a Three Power Mediterranean Commission to deal with pressing European problems. Churchill had suggested that the French Committee be invited to join, as he thought it would be "important" to the French and "a step forward in the right direction". (Churchill to Macmillan, 11 September 1943, FO 660/139). The matter was broached with the French and de Gaulle expressed his gratitude, for the proposal meant that the Committee would meet on an equal footing with the three major Allied Powers. (Makins to Strang, 13 September 1943, FO 660/139). The French appetite was thoroughly whetted and London began to be bombarded with enquiries as to when some progress might be expected.

the wrong time.⁵ Massigli and Viénot had both been bitterly disappointed by the decision at the Moscow Council of Foreign Ministers to exclude France. They had been doing their best to effect a reversal of the decision, by stressing the deplorable effect it would have in Algiers; Massigli had even spoken of resignation over the issue.⁶ During early November, it had been observed that the French were trying to play one European power off against another, and had stepped up their campaign even to the extent of threatening to refuse to participate in the subsidiary body, in order to achieve representation on the more prestigious European Advisory Commission. Viénot must have realised that any chance of progress on this front had effectively been scuppered by the events in the Lebanon.⁷

Furthermore, Helleu's action had been most untimely as it had occurred just as the British government proposed naming Duff Cooper as its representative to the CFLN. The appointment had always been open to serious doubt, as Viénot must have known. The Foreign Office had initiated and strongly backed the idea, as it was believed that the high regard which Duff Cooper enjoyed

(Makins to Strang, 20 September 1943, FO 660/139) However, it had been decided at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers (19-30 October 1943), that France would be admitted only to the Italian Advisory Commission and not to the wider ranging European Advisory Council which would sit in London.

⁵ Viénot à Massigli, 12 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

⁶ Dixon to Foreign Office, 27 October 1943, FO 660/139; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 29 October 1943, FO 660/140.

⁷ The French did not gain entrance to the European Advisory Commission until November 1944. See Macmillan, Blast of War, p 410; Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 2 and 7 November 1943, pp 274, 283-84.

would enable him to stand up to the PM over our French policy ... [He] knew France and the French extremely well. He was stout and Gaullist. His lack of activity was also rather an advantage. He would leave the French alone.⁸

Churchill, who had been casting about for a suitable appointment for Duff Cooper had initially preferred the idea of appointing him as Ambassador to Italy. He had been won round by Eden, who, on 6 October, offered Duff Cooper the choice of the Italians or the Free French.⁹ Duff favoured the French option, stating that he believed he could do "good work" with the French and the matter had been deemed settled.¹⁰

Due to an unfortunate combination of circumstances, however¹¹, Churchill had begun to have second thoughts as to his suitability for the post. Duff Cooper wrote to Churchill to assuage his doubts, promising loyally to carry out the policy of His Majesty's Government, but Churchill still foresaw difficulties when Cooper, in view of his Gaullist sympathies, might actually be pursuing a policy in complete opposition to the one which he, the Prime Minister, felt necessary. Churchill's fears centred exclusively on de Gaulle and he placed at Cooper's disposal all the relevant

⁸ Harvey, (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 30 September 1943, pp 302-3.

⁹ John Charmley, Duff Cooper. The Authorised Biography, (London, 1986), p 167.

¹⁰ J. Harvey, (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 8 October 1943, p 305. Churchill later informed Duff Cooper that he had not authorised Eden to offer him the post, but merely to sound him out. Charmley, *op cit*, p 168.

¹¹ According to Duff Cooper's own account, as reproduced by Charmley, *op cit*, pp 167-70, he had attended a dinner on 7 October, during which he had defended de Gaulle against a vehement attack from amongst others, Alastair Forbes, and as a result of which the latter had informed Churchill that he was violently pro-de Gaulle. See also: A. Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget, (London, 1953), pp 315-16.

Foreign Office files to enable him to better understand the nature of the problem. In a letter, he explained his belief that de Gaulle had contracted a deep antipathy towards both Britain and America, and was attempting to split one from the other or both from Russia.

He is a man Fascist-minded, opportunist, unscrupulous, ambitious to the last degree, and his coming to power in the new France would lead to great schisms there and also to a considerable estrangement between France and the western democracies.¹²

For Duff Cooper, who claimed to have had no idea of the extent of de Gaulle's misdemeanours, the material Churchill had provided had been "quite sufficient" to convince him that the General was "a potential source of mischief and a standing menace to Anglo-French, and what is even more important, Anglo-American relations". Nonetheless, pleading his own case, he suggested that "an individual who had the reputation of being pro-de Gaulle and no longer deserved it", would make "a very suitable envoy".¹³ To this argument, Churchill had finally succumbed. Cadogan had just informed Viénot of the decision to go ahead with Cooper's appointment. The Frenchman had been informed on very good authority that by the choice of such a personality, the British government was demonstrating "l'importance qu'il attache au Comité et aux relations franco-anglaises"¹⁴. What worried Viénot was that events in the Lebanon might make Britain, and especially Churchill think a third time about such an appointment.

¹² Churchill to Duff Cooper, cited in Charmley, *op cit*, pp 168-169.

¹³ Duff Cooper to Churchill, cited in Charmley, *op cit*, pp 169-170.

¹⁴ Viénot à Alger, 10 Novembre 1943, No 1128-30, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1551.

By 13 November, Viénot's knowledge of what was happening in the Lebanon was still limited to Reuters despatches; he again telegraphed Algiers that it was absolutely essential for him to obtain information from a French source, especially to refute certain press allegations.¹⁵ More information would have been especially useful for Viénot in a meeting on 13 November with Cadogan. Viénot had resorted to the old ploy of defence by attack and had complained about the sensationalist tones of the British press. Cadogan who was "très raisonnable et très mesuré", had defended the press: given the seriousness of events, he believed it had "on the whole ... treated the matter very objectively"; nonetheless, Viénot recorded that he had also promised that it would be warned to sober down and in future, to bear in mind the tendentiousness of reports emanating from the Middle East.

Cadogan had questioned Viénot closely about the origins of the crisis. The Frenchman had answered that as far as he was aware, Helleu had received very conciliatory instructions in Algiers, and must therefore have encountered severe difficulties on his return to have subsequently adopted such an unexpected attitude. Cadogan had also driven home Britain's displeasure with Helleu's behaviour towards Spears; he had failed to give Spears even the slightest hint of his proposed measures, despite dining with him only a few hours before, and had deceived the British Minister by assuring him that nothing would be done which might create a difficult situation. The British government, Cadogan asserted, had deeply regretted such a lack of collaboration. The mere mention of Spears, however, transferred the advantage to Viénot, who swiftly retorted that such a state of affairs existed only because the French, from their past experiences, had too many reasons to distrust Spears.

¹⁵ Viénot à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 1178-79, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Cadogan's account simply states that when Viénot began to hint at bad personal relations, he had told him that that "was really irrelevant ... [and] could not possibly excuse such lack of co-operation between two Allies".¹⁶ Viénot's report states that Cadogan had admitted "que les torts étaient sans doute à partager". What is clear is that Viénot certainly believed he had escaped very lightly. He reported optimistically that Cadogan had said nothing to imply that British intervention was even being contemplated, but rather, had given the impression that all Britain's trust had been placed in Catroux and his ability to pacify the situation.¹⁷

If anyone realised and appreciated the efforts which were being made by the Foreign Office to prevent matters in the Levant from developing into a full scale show-down between the British and the French, it was Viénot. On 14 November he telegraphed Massigli in Algiers, paying tribute to the Foreign Office policy and all that it had thus far achieved during the crisis:

La tradition constante de la politique française et anglaise depuis le début de l'Entente Cordiale, a été d'éviter dans toute la mesure du possible, que la rivalité qui a toujours opposé la France et la Grande Bretagne dans le Proche Orient, ne vienne pas troubler les relations franco-britanniques. Le Foreign Office est resté, dans une large mesure, fidèle à cette pratique.¹⁸

¹⁶ Viénot à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 1185-89, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999; Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 13 November 1943, E6954/27/89, FO 371/35185. The two separate accounts of the meeting do not correspond particularly well. Cadogan strives to emphasise how stiff an attitude he had adopted with Viénot, whereas to Algiers, Viénot stressed how conciliatory Cadogan had been.

¹⁷ Viénot à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 1185-89, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

¹⁸ Viénot à Massigli, 15 Novembre 1943, No 1203-06, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

ii) The Trouble-Shooter Arrives

As Viénot had correctly reported, Foreign Office officials were indeed impatiently awaiting the arrival of Catroux in the Levant. Casey had ascribed to Catroux a devious rôle as a Fabian tactician; Macmillan however, had confidently predicted that his mission was one of conciliation, and Foreign Office officials inclined more towards the latter view. One man far from eager to see Catroux however, was Helleu. He had not yet received de Gaulle's letter warning him of Catroux's impending arrival, but on 13 November, he received a telegram from Catroux himself, announcing his imminent arrival "avec pleins pouvoirs pour dénouer la crise libanaise".¹⁹ The Délégué telegraphed Algiers on 14 November in utter disbelief about a British broadcast he had heard, which had stated that the Committee was disavowing him and that Catroux was coming in order to "prendre le contrepied de ma politique". He recommended the issuance of a démenti "pour dissiper cette équivoque, qui peut gêner aussi bien le Général Catroux que moi-même".²⁰ Clearly, the thought that the Committee might react adversely to his actions and send Catroux out to the Levant to overrule him and to put matters to rights, had never really entered Helleu's mind.

In a personal telegram to de Gaulle on the previous day, 13 November, Helleu pleaded incredulously that he had taken energetic measures "conformément à l'esprit de nos conférences". Furthermore, he stressed that he had even warned the Lebanese that if he was presented with a fait

¹⁹ Helleu à de Gaulle, 13 Novembre 1943, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308(3).

²⁰ Helleu à Alger, 14 Novembre 1943, No 764, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

accompli, he would reserve his entire liberty of action. In a slightly accusatory tone he continued:

Nous avons décidé qu'il fallait aller jusqu'à passer outre au risque de troubles. Vous m'aviez confirmé l'instruction d'agir sans référence préalable à Spears.²¹

The latter remark is significant. It would seem to imply that Helleu had sought de Gaulle's approval for keeping Spears in the dark as to his actions. Though Helleu evidently believed that he had received his chief's approval to disregard Spears, it is not clear whether or not he had informed de Gaulle of exactly how he proposed to act.

Helleu confessed to de Gaulle that he had hesitated before proceeding with the arrest of the Chief of State,

mais celui-ci s'était mis volontairement en flèche dans l'action contre la France. Il nous avait hypocritement dupé.

He continued reassuringly that there had been no serious or generalised trouble, "malgré l'appui donné par les britanniques aux agitateurs". His measures, he claimed, had been taken,

contre des hommes qui avaient fait huer la France et qui avaient formé une association étroite avec la Puissance qui poursuit depuis des années ici l'éviction de notre pays.

As news of Catroux's arrival had been publicised, Helleu claimed, it had created confusion surrounding his own position: he predicted that he would be obliged "de faire des réserves sur la sécurité au cours des jours qui viennent". He ended his telegram to de Gaulle thus:

²¹ Helleu à de Gaulle, 13 Novembre 1943, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308(3).

C'est votre présence qui sanctionnerait le redressement accompli.²²

His plea was echoed that same day by one Commandant de Sièyes²³:

Permetts à notre vielle amitié que j'appelle très vivement auprès de toi la suggestion de M. Helleu de ta venue immédiate au Levant.²⁴

It is evident from the tone of this correspondence that those responsible for the events in the Lebanon had no hesitation in addressing such correspondence to de Gaulle and they clearly expected their letters to receive a sympathetic hearing.

There were others on the staff in the Délégation Générale who were evidently less certain about how the Committee would react to events carried out in its name in the Lebanon. Once the news broke that Catroux was en route, some thought it more politic to try and curry favour with him. One such a man was Baelen, who described himself to Catroux as "un ancien collaborateur qui a participé sous vos ordres à la lutte journalière pour la défense de la France". He despatched a rapturous welcome to greet Catroux in Cairo:

²² *ibid.*

²³ Commandant de Sièyes: mentioned as a private intelligence officer for de Gaulle in the Levant in 1945.

²⁴ Commandant de Sièyes à de Gaulle, 13 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. On 18 November Helleu sent de Gaulle a message, informing him that he was sending the Commandant to Algiers, as "porteur d'un pli important". He begged de Gaulle to receive him as soon as he arrived. Helleu à de Gaulle, 18 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

Votre présence dissipera les derniers nuages. Elle préviendra les interventions militaires anglaises et doit permettre une clarification avantageuse des rapports franco-anglais au Levant.

Baelen sought to enlighten Catroux prior to his arrival in Beirut, about the state of affairs in the Levant; he stated his personal conviction that the French position would have been lost without the "coup d'éclat" which had occurred, as Bechara el Khoury had broken all his promises and had risen up against France. Baelen remained supremely confident however, that the damage to France's position had now been contained. Spears had been unmasked, "et a peut-être perdu, en une nuit, deux ans de travail anti-français". Moreover, he was dismissive of the threats from Cairo and Bagdad about possible Egyptian and Iraqi intervention. He insisted that British-controlled radio stations were conducting "un campagne de mensonge digne de Goebbels", which only served to highlight the game the British were up to. In Baelen's opinion, there was nothing to worry about: Syria "demeure en expectative, nullement malveillant", and there was "rien de tragique en matière de sécurité".²⁵

Catroux did not actually reach Cairo until the afternoon of 14 November. He immediately fulfilled Casey's worst expectations by postponing the proposed 6.00pm meeting, despite the urgency of the situation, as he claimed to be exhausted and to have a fever. He promised to call on Casey before 9.30 the following morning, before flying to Beirut.²⁶ The pair finally met on Monday 15 November²⁷, when Casey informed Catroux that unless the Lebanese ministers were

²⁵ Baelen à Catroux, 13 Novembre 1943, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308(3).

²⁶ Casey to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E6955/27/89, FO 371/35185.

²⁷ The meeting was also attended on the British side by Major Pavitt, Sir William Croft, and Mr. Hamilton, and on the French side by Baron de Benoist and Captain Filliol.

released in the shortest possible time after his arrival in Beirut, the situation was likely to get out of hand. He warned that Britain would not tolerate any further deterioration in Levant affairs and therefore the very future of Anglo-French relations hung in the balance.²⁸

Catroux replied that Helleu had acted on his own responsibility. Though Casey recorded that Catroux "would give no undertaking as to [Helleu's] early recall", he had stated that his supersession of Helleu "constituted in effect a sanction and disavowal". Catroux had tried to emphasise the importance of leaving all political initiative in the Levant to the French. Whilst he accepted the sincerity of Britain's declarations regarding France's special position, he remained convinced that

a grave factor in the present situation was a general belief that Great Britain intended to undermine and ruin the authority of the French in the Levant.

If Britain did interfere in Levant affairs, the French would prefer to withdraw, and put their case before international opinion to judge. He intended to effect a settlement which encompassed the French declaration of independence, her duties and obligations as the Mandatory power and her responsibility as an Ally, but he would do this "in his own way and time". He refused to regard the British demands as an ultimatum but rather as "a proposal", in dealing with which, he would have to take French prestige into account, as well as the relationship which ideally ought to exist between Allies. As Casey again stressed the need for urgent action, Catroux astonished him by announcing that he did not

²⁸ Casey to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7010/27/89, FO 371/35186; Record of meeting between the Minister of State and General Catroux, Cairo, 15 November 1943, E7387/27/89, FO 371/35192; Casey to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, PREM 3/421; Casey, *op cit*, pp 144-45.

intend to leave for Beirut until the following day, alleging that he needed to consult with the Commander-in-Chief. Nothing Casey said would persuade Catroux otherwise.²⁹

Catroux filed his own account of the encounter with Casey a day later from Beirut.³⁰ He emphasised to Algiers how alarmed Casey had been at his delay in reaching Beirut and how much pressure he had applied to try and persuade him to leave as soon as possible, to dismiss Helleu, to release and to reinstate the ministers. His account stresses the complaints he had himself lodged about Spears, about "la longue série des agissements de Spears et ses interventions dans le choix du Président". Catroux reported that he had told Casey that

l'affaire en question apparaît à l'opinion comme une grave episode de la rivalité Franco-Anglaise et marque que le Ministre d'Angleterre se trouve à l'origine de la présente crise. Casey l'a défendu".³¹

In his memoirs, Catroux recalls that he had maintained that the remedy for all Franco-British difficulties in the Levant lay in "le départ simultané d'Helleu et de Spears".³² Casey however, loyally made no mention of this part of the conversation to London.

General Wilson also saw Catroux briefly on 15 November. Wilson thought he seemed "very tired indeed ... after a two hour slogging match with Casey", and "anxious about his task in Beirut". Like Casey, Wilson stressed the importance of immediate action, and "rubbed in the security aspect from

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Catroux à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1581, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Catroux, *op cit*, p 413.

the Allied point of view".³³ He instructed Holmes to deal similarly with Catroux when he arrived in Beirut, "and avoid where possible the political discussions, except to get things done quickly..."³⁴ In a telegram to the CIGS, he expressed his concern that unless Catroux made a "generous gesture" and quickly, trouble might restart in the Lebanon and might well spread to Syria.³⁵

A second meeting took place between Casey and Catroux on 15 November. Casey creates the impression both in his telegrams and in Personal Experience, that the meeting was spontaneous, that Catroux was "very worried" and wanted a private meeting, as he thought it most important to clear his mind with Casey before departing for Beirut.³⁶ Catroux however, asserts that the meeting took place at Casey's request and reproduces his report of the conversation in his memoirs.³⁷ The two separate accounts of the meeting bear little resemblance, as both men evidently sought to highlight different aspects of the conversation. Catroux recorded how Casey had stressed the effect French behaviour in the Lebanon would have on her future relations with Britain and America. Whilst acknowledging the importance of these relations, Catroux argued that the dignity and rights of France were more important still. He contended that any clarification of Franco-British relations was impossible while Spears remained in the Levant; only after the recall

³³ Wilson to Holmes, 15 November 1943, ADC/437, WO 201/982.

³⁴ Wilson to Holmes, 15 November 1943, WO 201/984.

³⁵ Wilson to CIGS, 15 November 1943, CIC/184, PREM 3/421.

³⁶ Casey to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7012/27/89, FO 371/35185.

³⁷ Catroux, *op cit*, pp 413-14; Catroux à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 389-91, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

of both Spears and Helleu might a return to constitutional life, with Bechara el Khoury at the helm, be envisaged.³⁸

Casey however, reported that Catroux was extremely perturbed that extensive publicity had transformed a Franco-Lebanese dispute into a Franco-British dispute. He had even admitted that by rights, Helleu should be recalled and the government restored, though actually to do so "would be regarded as a straight French capitulation to the British with a complete loss of face to the French". There were things that could be done and others that could not, Catroux declared, and he had actually threatened that "he had to envisage seriously recommending that the French should retire from the Levant". Perhaps realising the strong element of bluff in these threats, Casey was unsympathetic: he pointed out that if Helleu had acted on his own initiative as Catroux had claimed, then it would be perfectly possible to come up with a cleverly worded statement which laid all blame at his feet, and let the Committee off the hook. (Casey really did not believe that Helleu had acted on his own initiative. On 17 November, he wrote to Churchill: "Catroux blames Helleu for everything and says he acted without instructions from Algiers. I do not believe this is true but if they choose to make Helleu the scapegoat, it does not appear to matter to us".³⁹) In the meantime, he reminded Catroux, two very important issues remained at stake -- Anglo-French and probably Franco-American relations, and the Allied war effort in the Lebanon -- and there remained only a limited time in which to salvage them.⁴⁰

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Casey to Churchill, 17 November 1943, Box III, File III, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁴⁰ Casey to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7012/27/89, FO 371/35186; Casey, *op cit*, p 145.

iii) A Time-Limit Determined

In support of Casey's plea for the imposition of a time-limit on the French, Spears had been keeping the Foreign Office well supplied with telegrams describing the deteriorating situation in the Levant. Eddé had failed miserably to form a government of any description, and in Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli, the strikes and general disturbances continued.⁴¹ Spears took particular pains to highlight how crucial his own rôle was as guardian of the peace, by emphasising the increasing desire of many Lebanese to resort to violence. A local chieftain in South Lebanon with over two hundred men at his disposal had enquired of the Legation whether he might commence sabotage activities against the French, and the mayor of Sidon had reported a plan to blow up French installations in the town. It had been stressed to both that Britain wished to avoid any disturbances causing unnecessary loss of life and fortunately the counsels of moderation had been heeded. In addition, the legal government, now in hiding, had planned an attack on Beirut, but Spears had sent a similar message to them to remain calm and to do nothing foolish in view of Catroux's imminent arrival.⁴² A representative of the Ninth Army had also contacted the government with a similar plea and it had promised to remain quiet unless attacked.⁴³ Nor, Spears was keen to stress, were the Lebanese without offers of outside assistance: he had reliable information that representatives of certain Palestinian Arab terrorist

⁴¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7053/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁴² Spears to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, Nos 674 and 675, E6972/27/89, FO 371/35186.

⁴³ Wilson to CIGS, 15 November 1943, CIC/184, PREM 3/421.

organisations had offered assistance to the Lebanese government, though the government had rejected the offer.⁴⁴

Adding to the drama of Spears' reports, he himself was at the centre of an incident with the French. Just after 9.00pm on 15 November, three hours after the curfew, he left the Mission by car for home. As the car slowed down on a hill, a French soldier appeared, brandishing a revolver in the general direction of the car and forcing the driver to stop. The soldier, according to French reports, was quite drunk, easily disarmed, apprehended and marched off by the military police. Spears however, reported that the incident was a good illustration of the mentality of the French in the Levant "who feel they can threaten people with loaded revolvers with impunity" and especially of

the complete lack of discipline of French troops and the utter inability of the French military authorities to control them.⁴⁵

Helleu felt that the incident was being blown up out of all proportion and informed Algiers of his suspicions that Spears was trying

de monter cette affaire en épingle pour obtenir sans doute que le contrôle de la sécurité passe présentement aux mains des britanniques.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7060/27/89, FO 371/35187. Henri Pharaon informed a member of the Spears Mission staff that he had received visits from representatives of certain Palestinian terrorist organisations with offers of assistance. See Note, dated 15 November 1943 in FO 226/241.

⁴⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7017/27/89, FO 371/35186; Spears, *op cit*, pp 255-56.

⁴⁶ Helleu à Alger, 15 Novembre 1943, No 368-69, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Spears certainly wanted more decisive action from his own government. He had not been particularly pleased with the way Casey had handled Catroux, feeling that the Minister of State had let him off too lightly. He reminded the Foreign Office that Catroux had failed to reach Beirut by the 15 November, the date Britain had stipulated. Worse still, Catroux had made it quite plain in conversation with Casey that he intended, on arrival, "to cast about for face-saving devices". It seemed from the statement issued by the Committee on 13 November that the French intended to attempt to bargain the release of the ministers against a reversion to a mandatory constitution, which was certainly far from satisfactory, and given the present temper of the Lebanese people, "doomed to failure".⁴⁷ He professed to understand that the French might find compliance with the British demands unpalatable, but, he admonished, "we simply cannot afford to plunge these countries in bloodshed and chaos out of regard for French "face"."⁴⁸ Above all, Spears was adamant that Britain should not be intimidated by the French threats to withdraw from the Levant as these were "sheer blackmail".⁴⁹

To highlight the potential danger of the situation, Spears reported that the French had sent an armed detachment into the area in which they believed the remainder of the government was in hiding. He warned that this would undoubtedly provoke an angry reaction throughout Lebanon and

⁴⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7009/27/89, FO 371/35186.

⁴⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7050/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* Spears pointed out that there were actually far fewer Frenchmen in the Levant than was generally realised, and the absence of the unco-operative and anti-British ones would be no hindrance.

possibly also in Syria, where tempers were steadily rising.⁵⁰ The only way in which Spears believed Catroux could avoid the risk of serious trouble was by unconditionally releasing the President and his ministers within a few hours of his arrival and by announcing the early reassembly of Parliament. Otherwise, he urged that the French be instructed to withdraw all their troops and personnel to a safe distance, especially in Beirut. He expressed his disgust that the situation had been allowed to drag on so long and called for more decisive action:

Algiers, with their futile complaints about alleged exaggerations in the press, seem incapable of realising the gravity of a situation regarding which they have undoubtedly been misinformed by Helleu. The last turn of the screw must be applied forthwith.⁵¹

Fortunately for Spears, the attitude which the British government was now adopting was hardening. As the days passed, Eden certainly seemed to be taking a stronger line than had hitherto been the case. In discussion with Hankey on 16 November, he revealed that if the French did not meet Britain's demands, as seemed more and more likely, he had decided that the time had come for Britain to make up her mind not only what she was going to do, but also when she would do it. He mentioned that the time seemed to be approaching when, as Casey had proposed, Catroux would have to be informed that, unless Britain received satisfaction within a given time, British martial law would have to be

⁵⁰ The French subsequently commenced military operations against a village thought to be sheltering the government and Spears protested to Catroux, insisting that the troops be recalled. The French however, replied that their troops were merely protecting some ammunition dumps. See Spears to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, No 693, E7052/27/89 and No 696, E7060/27/89; both in FO 371/35187; Spears to Catroux, 16 November 1943, FO 226/245.

⁵¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7009/27/89, FO 371/35186.

declared.⁵² He warned a Cabinet meeting that day that the indications were now that Catroux intended to play for time, and that unless the Lebanese ministers were released within a given time, Britain might be forced to state her proposed actions. The Cabinet however, was reluctant to take such a step; for the moment, it resolved merely to review the situation when more information was available.⁵³

There was a growing concern within the Foreign Office about the steady deterioration of the conditions in the Levant: the food situation was worsening, the French and the Lebanese had only narrowly been restrained from violence, and it was only a matter of time before outside offers of assistance were accepted, thereby inflaming the situation and compromising the military security of a vitally important area. Yet despite all this, there was a real reluctance within the Foreign Office to side with Casey and Spears. A Foreign Office note to Eden, to prepare him for the Cabinet meeting on 17 November, pointed out that serious disorders in the Lebanon might well have grave repercussions in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East; it seemed that unless the Lebanese ministers were released forthwith, Britain's position throughout the region would be critically affected. Whilst all these factors seemed to dictate a need for some positive action from the British to restore the situation, the note stressed that conversely, to declare British martial law would be a very serious step and would have profound consequences for Britain's relations with the French in North Africa. The note advised therefore that it

⁵² Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 16 November 1943, E7102/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁵³ Conclusions of a War Cabinet meeting, 5.30pm, Tuesday, 16 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

would be better to secure the desired result by increasing diplomatic pressure if at all possible.⁵⁴

An additional reminder of the need for circumspection had come in a telegram from Halifax⁵⁵, who had warned that if Britain was obliged to use force, she could expect "considerable [American] criticism and suspicion of supposed British imperial designs in the Levant". He explained that in American minds, the Lebanese situation was analogous to the British imprisonment of Gandhi and Nehru in India⁵⁶, and it was well nigh impossible to get American opinion to see the difference. If Britain waded in too forcefully, the American public, as yet undecided between the French and the Lebanese, "would probably be a good deal more united in suspecting British motives".⁵⁷ Halifax had warned therefore that as far as American sensitivities were concerned, it would be desirable to play down British intervention in the Lebanon as much as possible "and to avoid any excuse for the suspicion that we are trying to exploit the incident for ends of our own, or that we use one set of arguments where India is concerned (that public security requires the arrest of political leaders), and the opposite arguments where

⁵⁴ Note for Secretary of State for Cabinet meeting, 17 November 1943, E7102/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁵⁵ Lord Halifax: British Ambassador to the United States between 1941 and 1946.

⁵⁶ When Casey communicated the gist of Halifax's telegram to Kirk, the American, though admitting that he probably did not have balanced appreciation of American opinion, reacted strongly and claimed that the suggested analogy was "cockeyed" and that the two situations did not compare. Casey to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7134/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁵⁷ Halifax had enclosed a summary of American press coverage of the Lebanese affair to illustrate his case: for example, the Washington Post supported the arrests as a necessary measure until the end of the war, whereas the Washington News criticised de Gaulle's "high-handed dictatorship".

Syria is concerned".⁵⁸ The Foreign Office had already been warned by Colonel Hoskins, (a special emissary of Roosevelt's), that most American officials were convinced that the British Middle East authorities, especially Spears, "intended, by hook or by crook, to wrest the Levant States from the French".⁵⁹ To officials in London, who were loath to contemplate the idea of intervening against the French in the Levant unless absolutely essential, this telegram from Halifax served to highlight the need to proceed with considerable caution.

Nonetheless, when the Cabinet met at noon on 17 November, with hardly any more information at its disposal than had been available at its previous meeting, Eden announced that to avoid further delay, the French must be brought to comply with Britain's demands by a definite time. If they proved willing to dismiss Helleu and to release the Lebanese, he proposed summoning a conference to negotiate a *modus vivendi*. If on the other hand they proved unwilling, he specifically rejected the idea previously mooted, of threatening the Committee with the withdrawal of British recognition. He read aloud to his colleagues a telegram which he proposed to send to Casey. This instructed the Minister of State, if there had been no promising signs from the French by the evening of 18 November, to fly to Beirut first thing on 19 November and to inform Catroux that unless the British demands were satisfied by 10.00am on Sunday, 21 November, British martial law would be declared, on grounds of military necessity and without any political implications. The Cabinet approved the despatch of the

⁵⁸ Halifax to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7032/27/89, FO 371/35186.

⁵⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 16 November 1943, E7032/27/89, FO 371/35186.

telegram.⁶⁰ A second telegram examined other possible scenarios: if Catroux recommended, as he had threatened, a total French withdrawal, then Casey should inform him that Britain would regret the decision, but would be forced to take over; if Catroux released the Ministers, though without reinstating them -- for, as the telegram pointed out, Britain was "not insisting on the immediate re-establishment of the old Government" -- the next stage would be to persuade Catroux to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the Lebanese under Britain's good offices.⁶¹

iv) Much Ado About Nothing

As Spears had described, in Algiers the French were defiantly maintaining that nothing was amiss in the Lebanon. There was no hint of self-criticism in the local press, the whole tone of which was one "of injured innocence".⁶² With headlines such as "The Lebanese incidents have been grossly twisted and exaggerated. Calm reigns throughout the country", the French press pursued its "ostrich-like policy" and continued to "soft-pedal" events in the Lebanon.⁶³ Particularly great prominence was given in Algiers to a report in *The Times* which criticised the sensational despatches which other papers had featured, and reported

⁶⁰ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, noon, Wednesday, 17 November 1943, CAB 65/36; Foreign Office to Casey, 17 November 1943, E7102/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁶¹ Foreign Office to Casey, 17 November 1943, E7102/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁶² Algiers to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, E7058/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁶³ Makins to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, FO 226/245; Makins to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7091/27/89 and Makins to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, E7079/27/89; both in FO 371/35187.

that "profound calm" now reigned in the Lebanon. The Committee too made similar assertions: it published a communiqué on 15 November to the effect that foreign news sources had given a fundamentally inaccurate picture of the Lebanese situation. Blame continued to be laid at Riad Solh's door for provoking the whole affair by presenting Helleu with a fait accompli. Subsequent events had been "grossly distorted and exaggerated"; Lebanon was completely calm and, on arrival, Catroux would put an end to any misunderstandings which persisted.⁶⁴

Considerable efforts being were made by Macmillan's staff to pull the wool from French eyes. Makins made a strong protest to Massigli about the incident outside the Spears Mission. The latter appeared "much disturbed and said that if the facts were as stated, the action of French troops was objectionable".⁶⁵ A written report on the Tripoli incident was also handed to Massigli on 17 November, and met with a similar response: Massigli replied that the facts, "if true, were terrible". Macmillan tried to emphasise to Massigli that if calm was preserved in the Levant, it was due to the continual efforts of British officials to restrain the emotions of the people. He pointed out that had Britain wanted to, she "could have set the whole Levant States ablaze", but instead, she had thrown her whole weight "towards peace and quiet".⁶⁶ These efforts to alert the French in Algiers to the real nature of the problem in the Levant States may have had some impact on Massigli personally; no change however, was discernible in the official French attitude.

⁶⁴ Algiers to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7062/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁶⁵ Algiers to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, E7057/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁶⁶ Algiers to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7136/27/89, FO 371/35188.

In a telegram despatched on 16 November to its missions abroad to enable them "de contrebattre les informations fausses ou tendancieuses...", the Committee rigidly adhered to its original line: the Lebanese had provoked Helleu to suspend the constitution and to arrest the government. It was stated however, that "en raison de l'urgence, l'avis préalable du Comité sur les mesures envisagées ne fut pas sollicité". The telegram alleged that the population had understood the necessity of such measures and had remained perfectly calm throughout the Levant; the only demonstrations of any importance had taken place in Beirut. Foreign correspondents had presented an entirely false impression of the situation and "ont inconsciemment servi les buts de la propagande allemande".⁶⁷

Similarly, on 16 November, de Gaulle made a speech to a specially summoned meeting of the Constituent Assembly, in which he contended that Lebanese behaviour had been considered unacceptable by Helleu and by the Committee on three separate counts: the government had unilaterally modified an international statute which it was not entitled to modify; this had been carried out in a manner which amounted to a provocation of France; finally, the government's action was of a nature to disturb the political and strategic conditions of the area. De Gaulle stressed that France herself was unable to unilaterally renounce a mandate which had been conferred on her by the League of Nations. Catroux had promised in 1941 to proceed with the establishment of Levant independence and the present crisis had made no difference to that policy: the Committee still wished to see a normal constitutional situation prevail in the Lebanon. However, France was obliged to protect her own traditional position in the area and to preserve the peace

⁶⁷ Alger à Londres, Moscou, Washington etc., 16 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

and tranquillity of an area so vital to the Allied cause. Catroux was currently on the spot, with Lebanese agreement, studying the best means of solving the problem. De Gaulle did his best to play down the affair, making use in his speech of a phrase which he claimed to have borrowed from Poincaré: "Le nuage qui passe n'obscurcira pas l'horizon". This was to become the keynote of all press reports in Algiers the following day.⁶⁸ The Foreign Office was not impressed; when Hankey received a copy of the full text of the speech, he commented that it was "mostly "bla" ", and continued:

I see very little likelihood that anyone in Algiers except M. Massigli knows what is really the issue. The general atmosphere is make-believe.⁶⁹

However, until Catroux's arrival in Beirut on 16 November, the French Committee had very little information on which to base its judgment. It had had to rely almost exclusively on Helleu's reports, and these, as in the early stages of the crisis, had continued to minimise events in the Lebanon and to protest against any sources which said differently: "Tout est calme ici, mais l'activité britannique est constante et menacante", claimed Helleu on 15 November. He added that he had received information that the Political Officer at Deir ez Zor had been instructed to keep relations with the French to a strict minimum "en raison des atrocités françaises".⁷⁰ Similar unconfirmed reports had also reached the British military establishment that all Political Officers in Syria had received such

⁶⁸ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7097/27/89, FO 371/35187; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7162/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁶⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 18 November 1943, E7104/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁷⁰ Beyrouth à Alger, 15 Novembre 1943, No 1568, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

instructions, and that the French regarded this as almost a breach of diplomatic relations.⁷¹

On 16 November, Helleu wrote to Massigli at great length, complaining about Reuters reports, which continued to be "généralement grossièrement mensongères". He accused certain British agents, motivated purely by spite, of orchestrating "une campagne d'information mensongère", which on 13 and 14 November, "atteignit son paroxysme. Le Liban fut dépeint comme étant entièrement à feu et à sang ... on s'efforça, en outre, de donner l'impression que les troubles avaient pris le caractère d'un véritable mouvement révolutionnaire". British controlled radio stations and Reuters together, he alleged, had outdone Radio Berlin, and he underlined that the campaign was as damaging to the Allied war effort as it was to French interests, for in effect, it constituted "un manoeuvre d'excitation et un appel à la révolte".⁷²

Even after Catroux's arrival, Helleu kept up a barrage of telegrams to Algiers, asserting that he continued to receive "de très nombreux témoignages de satisfaction et de reconnaissances suscitées par les mesures que j'ai prises pour redresser la situation".⁷³ Furthermore, troops from the seventh battalion which he had sent into the mountains had been welcomed warmly, Damascus remained "absolument calme", and in Beirut, the strike was a sham, as shops were in fact selling their goods but with their shutters partially

⁷¹ PICME to War Office, 17 November 1943, E7118/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁷² Helleu à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1803/DC, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁷³ Helleu à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 409; Helleu à Alger, 18 Novembre, No 427; Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

closed.⁷⁴ Rumours of food shortages were being circulated by the British, who "veulent prouver à la population qu'eux seuls peuvent assurer le ravitaillement". Moreover, he insisted that there was no question of a united Arab front against the French: "J'en ai eu une première preuve dans l'attitude plus correcte du gouvernement syrien".⁷⁵

v) Breaking the Rules of Fair Play

On the French side, it fell to Viénot however, to try and wake Algiers up to the damage French action in the Lebanon had done and was continuing to do, to French standing in Britain. No matter how temperate and measured the Foreign Office reponse had been, the same could not be said for the reactions of large sections of the British press and public opinion, the scale and acuteness of which had surprised Viénot. By citing examples of the sensationalist headlines carried by British newspapers, he hoped to bring home to Algiers the gravity of the situation. France faced "une violente prise de position de l'opinion britannique contre le Comité et la politique française". Indeed, the popular press was proving so critical that Viénot thought it improbable that the British government would be able to ignore it for much longer.⁷⁶

In fact the staff at Carlton Gardens had been obliged to make frequent complaints about the excesses of the British press. At a meeting on 16 November with British representatives, the French alleged that British newspapers

⁷⁴ Helleu à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 408 et No 410; Helleu à Alger, 18 Novembre 1943, No 427; Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁷⁵ Helleu à Alger, 18 Novembre 1943, No 423-26 et No 428-9, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

"n'avaient pas joué le jeu".⁷⁷ Viénot informed Algiers on 17 November that he possessed proof that Reuters had colluded

avec certains journaux britanniques pour leur passer à propos des incidents du Liban informations anti-françaises et pour stopper celles qui nous sont favorables.⁷⁸

A "very embarrassed" Roché subsequently brought up the "painful and delicate matter" with Mack⁷⁹. Though the latter refused "to admit any French complaint in connection with the Lebanon", and asked Roché to supply "chapter and verse", he admitted subsequently in a minute, that there was "substance in M. Roché's complaint". Roché had added that the general attitude of the British press over the Lebanese "gave the impression that they were waiting for an opportunity to attack the French".⁸⁰

This was certainly a common feeling amongst French representatives in London. Viénot had earlier recorded his surprise at the virulence of the British press, and though by 17 November, the tone of the newspapers was much calmer, he thought it more and more obvious "qu'une campagne a été montée contre nous".⁸¹ The Foreign Office itself however, had been sympathetic and had promised to do what it could, for example in suppressing the fact that Britain was demanding

⁷⁷ Viénot à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1215-17, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁷⁸ Viénot à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 1256, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁷⁹ W. H. B. Mack: Counsellor in the Foreign Office; subsequently employed as Political Liaison Officer with US forces in Great Britain, with rank of Acting Assistant Under Secretary of State.

⁸⁰ Minute by W. H. B. Mack, 18 November 1943, E7316/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁸¹ Viénot à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 1272-79, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

Helleu's recall, to thereby avoid adding any further to Catroux's difficulties.⁸² There was a general recognition that Cadogan had been as good as his word, and had succeeded in moderating the tone of the press a little. All this had served to convince Viénot

que le Foreign Office ... est étranger à ces manoeuvres. Ce sont d'autres milieux qui ont saisi l'occasion de lancer une attaque.⁸³

Viénot certainly suspected a conspiracy of sorts against France. He had already reported the hostile attitude of Reuters but felt that it was not purely by chance that the Daily Express and the Evening Standard had adopted "une attitude insultante" towards France, or that the Daily Sketch "colporte d'invraisemblables récits":

Derrière ces journaux dont le grand public est friand, il ne me paraît douteux que certains gens de la cité aient agi sans se montrer. Ce serait néanmoins limiter la portée de la manoeuvre que d'en attribuer les mobiles aux seuls intérêts de tel ou tel groupe financier. Le problème est plus vaste et de caractère politique. Sans vouloir le simplifier, on peut admettre que certains milieux conservateurs ne cherchent pas tant à évincer la France du Levant qu'à porter un coup au Gaullisme dont les tendances "de gauche" les inquiètent dès aujourd'hui, [et] les préoccupent moins que l'avenir.⁸⁴

Viénot believed that these circles saw in the Committee

les signes avant-coureurs d'un régime qu'ils dénoncent déjà comme socialisant et communisant. Les entreprises de la presse populaire conservatrice se sont trouvées facilitées du fait qu'au même moment, mais pour des raisons diamétralement opposées, les

⁸² Viénot à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1215-17, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸³ Viénot à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 1272-79, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

doctrinaires et travaillistes, par la voix du News Chronicle et du Daily Herald, ont critiqué notre politique dans les termes les plus sévères. Des soupçons de fascisme ont encore aggravé dans l'opinion les dégâts produits par des soupçons du socialisme.⁸⁵

Viénot claimed that the British press had brutally broken "les règles du Fair Play", and had lacked dignity throughout the episode:

De l'aveu général, jamais depuis bien des années on n'avait assisté à un tel déchaînement. Les procédés employés, indignent d'ailleurs de nos amis les plus fidèles et les plus sûrs, mais cette campagne a laissé des traces.⁸⁶

The Foreign Office sympathised to a large extent with the French case, though it was pointed out that French censorship in the Levant had contributed to some of the inaccuracies and sensationalism. Moreover, there was reason to be "seriously perturbed" by the completely misleading information the French press in North Africa was disseminating.⁸⁷ As Macmillan observed, the officially inspired and controlled local press continued to create the impression that there had been "much ado about nothing", with the consequence that opinion would be taken aback if events took a more drastic turn.⁸⁸

Indeed, a certain suspicion existed within the Foreign Office itself that not all departments within the government were as sympathetic as the Office itself towards the French. That suspicion was fuelled when the French handed them a

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 18 November 1943, E7316/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁸⁸ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7137/27/89, FO 371/35188.

copy of a directive issued to all sections of the BBC at 3.00pm on 16 November. The directive made extensive use of a particularly damning Evening Standard article, and warned that in view of the gravity of the Lebanese situation, Britain might have to take drastic action. "Therefore", it continued, "cut out the anodyne and the whitewash and let London speak firmly in a British voice". Fortunately, due to French protest, the directive was withdrawn before any harm was done, but the Foreign Office was concerned to know where "the wheeze" had originated and suspected Number 10, the Political Warfare Executive or Special Operations Executive.⁸⁹ A later PWE directive, Viénot was pleased to be able to report, instructed the BBC to comment on the Lebanese situation "avec réserve".⁹⁰

Certainly an improvement in the tone of the British press did manifest itself and by 19 November, Viénot observed that the sensationalism had all but disappeared.⁹¹ If by 20 November however, the press had ceased to publish the more alarmist reports of hitherto, it nonetheless still contained "des articles qui prouvent que la crise libanaise continue de préoccuper gravement les milieux politiques". It still seemed to be felt in Carlton Gardens that Algiers appreciated neither the gravity nor the urgency of the Lebanese situation. Even among those who were better disposed towards the French, and who were prepared to allow them "le temps de souffler", there was a feeling "de désapprobation latente". Reproaches were levelled at the French on the one hand for minimising the full significance of the affair, as evinced by the Algerian press, and on the

⁸⁹ Minutes by W. H. B. Mack, 18 November 1943 and R. M. A. Hankey, 28 November 1943, E7293/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁹⁰ Viénot à Alger, 20 Novembre 1943, No 1339-40, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁹¹ Viénot à Alger, 19 Novembre 1943, No 1296-7, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

other for not having demonstrated more of a spirit of collaboration towards the British: that Helleu had failed to inform Spears of his intentions still weighed heavily even upon Spears's detractors.⁹²

vi) "Pour Partir en Guerre Contre L'Angleterre..."

Viénot had already tried to impress upon Algiers that the repercussions of French action would be wide and far-reaching. The situation was extremely serious and he considered that it was now being aggravated by two hitherto unforeseen factors. Firstly, little or no credence was given in Britain to the possibility that Helleu had acted on his own initiative. British opinion was convinced that the serious measures to which Helleu had resorted, must have been decided upon in advance by the Committee.⁹³ In two separate telegrams Viénot pointed out that an announcement made in Algiers that Helleu had himself been responsible for his actions, had created a slight détente, only to be dissipated by a broadcast from Brazzaville of a communiqué from the Délégation Générale in the Levant, formally declaring that the Committee approved Helleu's measures. The broadcast had caused an uproar in the London media circles where it had been interpreted as an official expression of the Committee's attitude. Viénot urgently requested the issuance of "un démenti officiel, immédiat et catégorique" to ensure that the press were unable to continue to exploit the communiqué.⁹⁴

⁹² Viénot à Alger, 19 et 20 Novembre 1943, No 1317-18, No 1323-24, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

⁹³ Viénot à Alger, 14 Novembre 1943, No 1197-1201, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁹⁴ Viénot à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1240-41 et No 1242-43, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

A further complicating factor in the affair, Viénot reckoned, was the natural tendency of the British to establish a cause and effect relationship between the events in Beirut and the recent alterations in the Committee:

Des suspicions ou même des accusations qui dépassent de beaucoup la crise libanaise, s'expriment ouvertement, soit qu'on mette en cause les prétendues tendances dictatoriales du Général de Gaulle, soit le prétendu nationalisme dont s'accompagnerait la résurrection française, soit une prétendue politique anti-britannique du Comité.⁹⁵

He pointed out that emotions the Lebanese incident had provoked served only to demonstrate Britain's permanent preoccupation with Near Eastern questions. The sentimental attachment of the British people to the Middle East meant that the authorities were on constant alert as to developments there. Britain's policy of support for pan-Arabism was largely undertaken, he maintained, to assure the tranquillity of the area, which the War Office considered vital. Britain could hardly turn a blind eye therefore to what appeared to be a policy of force, threatening the security of the entire region. Britain's concern with the peace and quiet of the area was only heightened by the fact that it might shortly become a base for forthcoming military operations.⁹⁶

Viénot had been bitterly upset by Lebanese events as he continued to believe that the French cause had made real progress in Britain in the previous three months. There was a growing interest in the Resistance and all things French;

⁹⁵ Viénot à Massigli, 14 Novembre 1943, No 1197-1201, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁹⁶ Viénot à Alger, 15 Novembre 1943, No 1203-1206, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592. Operations were due to commence early in the following year in the Aegean and unless Turkey could be persuaded to allow the Allies use of her airfields, bases in the Levant would be used.

the idea that France should play an active rôle in European affairs was becoming increasingly widespread, as was the tacit acceptance of the Committee as the organ of government of France in the future. Even the phlegmatic acceptance which Britain had accorded the recent purge of the Committee had foreshadowed "une évolution heureuse de la politique anglaise à notre égard, évolution que freignait seulement le souci de ménager l'Amérique". The present crisis, he feared, had set back and compromised progress in each of these domains and he concluded:

En tout cas, elle fournit une précieuse diversion aux éléments qui nous sont défavorables et qui désirent éviter que ne se pose sérieusement devant l'opinion, la question de notre participation à la Commission européenne.⁹⁷

Viénot had been still more depressed to receive Massigli's despatch containing de Gaulle's instructions to threaten Britain with the possibility of a French withdrawal from the Levant. As the telegram had conveniently arrived incomplete, Viénot had deliberately chosen not to make the démarche as instructed. Instead, he remonstrated with Massigli that the whole notion was ridiculous: a French withdrawal would completely destroy any modicum of prestige and authority that France still possessed. Moreover, her place would immediately be seized by others, whereupon Spears and his entourage would have scored "un succès définitif". If the threat was made, it would be interpreted by the Foreign Office "comme l'annonce d'un appel du Comité à l'opinion française contre l'Angleterre", and would compromise everything which he, Viénot, was fighting to protect. He continued:

L'appel du peuple français contre les Alliées, car il faut voir clairement que c'est de cela dont il s'agit, signifierait un triomphe sans précédent de

⁹⁷ Viénot à Alger, 14 Novembre 1943, No 1197-1201, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

la propagande allemande et vichyiste. Il créerait le trouble et le découragement les plus graves dans la France occupée.⁹⁸

Vienot demanded to know whether the Committee was prepared to accept the dire consequences which would inevitably result if he carried out the threat. He himself was not prepared to do so.

In a separate personal and private letter to Massigli, Viénot fully acknowledged that his telegram would provoke "des remous sérieux". He explained however, that he had thought long and hard about it. He had no intention of telling the British that France was ready to abandon the Lebanon, nor of denouncing to the people of France the Allies on whom the Free French depended. He stressed to Massigli that if the order to make this démarche to the British had come after, and in spite of, the observations he had made, he would have resigned. He had only realised that de Gaulle had already uttered to Makins⁹⁹ the threat of a French withdrawal, when he had obtained a complete version of the telegram. This fact however, altered nothing as far as he was concerned: he had accepted his post in London

pour faire un autre travail. Pour partir en guerre contre l'Angleterre, un autre s'en chargera.

He explained that his failure to act upon his instructions had placed him in a moral dilemma, and confessed that he had been driven to confide in Lord Tyrrell¹⁰⁰. Tyrrell had deemed the situation "tragique" and had immediately set about arranging a meeting with Cadogan in which, Viénot assured

⁹⁸ Viénot à Alger, 16 Novembre 1943, No 1219-1227, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

⁹⁹ Catroux had made the same threat to Casey on de Gaulle's instructions.

¹⁰⁰ Lord Tyrrell: former ambassador to Paris, 1928-1934.

Massigli, he would say all that he himself had already said and more, particularly concerning Spears, "qu'il tient pour le plus grand responsable et coupable. Et cela aura beaucoup plus porté que si c'était moi qui l'avais dit".¹⁰¹

Faced with such a tortured letter from his friend and colleague, Viénot, Massigli replied at great length. He pointed out that the Committee's decision to withdraw all French troops and personnel from the Levant if things turned out badly, had not been taken without first weighing up the seriousness of the measure. Nothing would be worse however, than

le maintien sur place d'un délégué général de la France dans une position humilié et sous le contrôle de fait du représentative britannique, alors que, en théorie, la responsabilité du mandat continuerait à incomber à la France.

He admitted that between the wars, it had been a firm rule of Franco-British relations not to allow Levant disputes to impinge upon general Anglo-French relations. Though no doubt the rule still held good, Massigli suspected that on this occasion, Riad Solh, Nahas Pasha, and Spears had conspired to sabotage it. He was certain that Riad Solh, whom Helleu had warned not to precipitate matters, would never have dared to present the French with a fait accompli "sans avoir pris l'avis de ses conseillers naturels". Nahas Pasha was obviously exploiting the incident "au profit des plans pan-arabes du Caire", but Egyptian reactions were all the more remarkable, Massigli felt, when contrasted with the attitude of prudent reserve maintained by Damascus.

As the situation in the Levant now seemed to be reaching something of a détente, Massigli left it to Viénot himself to gauge whether or not to threaten possible withdrawal from

¹⁰¹ Viénot à Massigli, 16 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

the Levant in conversation with the Foreign Office. He warned however, that if Viénot decided in favour of using the threat, it should not be reproduced "dans un document écrit". Massigli explained that he had been pressed only that morning by Macmillan for an answer to the British demands, and wondered exactly what the British intended to do. Only a few weeks before, he had had no cause to doubt that Britain was as good as her word, with no intention of challenging France's right to preserve her own pre-eminent position in the Levant. Yet now, the moot question seemed to be whether Spears's success had effected a change in Foreign Office thinking, so that

si les libanais se montraient prêts à secouer l'influence française, il n'y avait pas lieu pour le gouvernement britannique de les décourager et de se compromettre à défendre notre position.

Evidently reluctant to contemplate this possibility, Massigli drew attention to de Gaulle's speech to the Consultative Assembly the previous day. Despite the present crisis, this had stressed the Committee's desire to pursue a policy of emancipation for the Levant; provided nothing untoward happened in the Levant in the meantime, Massigli observed, it provided Britain with ample opportunity

de reconsidérer sa politique et d'envisager la situation au Levant avec plus de calme. En tout cas, l'attitude que le gouvernement britannique observera dans les jours qui viennent, nous éclairera sur ses intentions véritables concernant notre établissement au Levant.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Massigli à Viénot, 17 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

CHAPTER TEN

THE CRISIS UNFOLDS

i) Macmillan Visits Churchill Aboard HMS Renown

In attempting to bring about a quick and painless solution to the Lebanese crisis, the Foreign Office had suffered only slightly from immoderate interventions by the Prime Minister; fortunately, when such interventions had occurred, Eden and the Cabinet had been able to limit the damage. As HMS Renown sailed past Gibraltar on the evening of 15 November, Macmillan was granted an excellent opportunity to temper further the Prime Minister's attitude towards the French over the Lebanese affair. He was picked up by the Renown, and questioned a great deal about the French situation by Churchill. Makins, who joined the party for lunch the following day, noted that Churchill

was in a very bad humour about the French. He fumed against de Gaulle and seemed almost anxious to seize the opportunity afforded by the Lebanese crisis to try and break with him once and for all.¹

Makins thought that Churchill seemed "very much put out by the reorganisation of the Committee". He and Macmillan tried to explain to him how the political situation in Algiers was moving out of the "Giraud/de Gaulle" phase and that a new epoch was in the making.² It was Macmillan's belief that new and healthy forces were emerging in Algiers, signalled by the arrival of representatives of the Resistance from France to join the Consultative Assembly. These men, he was sure, were "by no means slavish or adulatory supporters of de

¹ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

² *ibid.*

Gaule"; they were completely independent and would provide "a strong and critical opposition".³

Although Macmillan recognised that Churchill was "still violently anti-de Gaulle", and that the Prime Minister feared "a sort of de Gaulle dictatorship, hostile to Britain and mischievous, if not dangerous", he nonetheless tried again, in conversation with him on the morning of 16 November, to explain his own views about these new forces, which would challenge de Gaulle's authority to a certain extent. Macmillan went on to describe the Lebanese situation as "a test case": if the affair was handled with "some tact as well as energy", and ultimata were avoided "except if absolutely necessary", Britain would gain the support of Catroux, Massigli and at least half, if not two thirds, of the Committee, placing de Gaulle in a minority of three or four. He felt obliged to point out however, that while Spears remained in Beirut, "there would be open and bitter warfare between us and the French". Churchill, he recorded, "did not much like this".⁴

Though Macmillan had found Churchill "enormously" interested in his theories, they seem to have had little impact in reality. Makins noted that the Prime Minister was disposed to listen to their argument "but obviously did not altogether accept it".

He said he did not mind de Gaulle in a Committee but he would not tolerate him in a position of supreme authority. He wanted a strong and friendly France, but he did not see that arising under de Gaulle's leadership.⁵

³ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 15 and 16 November 1943, pp 293-95.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

As the ship approached Algiers on 16 November, the Prime Minister did not disembark but defied Macmillan's advice and sent for his old friend, Général Georges, who had recently been ousted from the Committee, "in order to mark his displeasure with de Gaulle".⁶ Though he was not with the Prime Minister very long, "according to Desmond Morton⁷, he had time enough to make a bitter personal attack on de Gaulle and so to add fuel to the Prime Minister's anger".⁸ During the course of the afternoon, Churchill sent a chaser telegram to Casey, enquiring whether the Lebanese Ministers had yet been released and reinstated. He demanded to know moreover, whether Spears was being "properly supported", and whether, presuming the goodwill of the population, there were sufficient British troops to take over effective control. In conclusion, his telegram had declared:

It is not intended by His Majesty's Government to wait indefinitely for the release of the arrested Government of the Lebanon.⁹

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ According to Makins, Desmond Morton had been instructed to disembark at Algiers "apparently for the principal purpose of trying to pin on de Gaulle the responsibility for the outbreak in the Lebanon". Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432. Macmillan was to pay tribute to the assistance provided by Morton during the Lebanese crisis, as he knew Churchill's mind "very well and how he will react to a particular way of putting a point or an argument". Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 24 November 1943, p 302. So too, Makins thought he had been "most helpful" and appeared "to have a good grasp of the more fundamental issues involved". Makins to Strang, 26 November 1943, FO 800/432.

⁸ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

⁹ Churchill to Casey, 16 November 1943, T1976/3, PREM 3/421.

ii) Catroux In Beirut

Catroux finally reached Beirut early on 16 November and was greeted by Helleu and his entourage, most of whom, he realised, did not welcome his presence. In his memoirs, he claimed that this did not offend him, as he understood their mentality, which to a large extent mirrored that of the entire French community in the Lebanon. He realised that these people regarded themselves as guardians and protectors of the mandate; their recent behaviour had been determined by the fact that they had viewed the unscrupulous dealings of Spears and the Lebanese as "un défi à la France qui exigeait une riposte retentissante".¹⁰

Spears offered the Foreign Office a different interpretation as to why the French had been impelled to take such action: he believed that a great many Frenchmen in the Levant were "real Vichyites", who were "corrupt" and "not interested in an Allied victory". Most suffered additionally "from an inferiority complex since their defeat in 1940" which tended "to make them more assertive than they would normally be". In the main, their extraordinary behaviour had been activated by their "disappointment and anger" at discovering that the Lebanese people did not like them and were in fact, plainly disillusioned that they, the Fighting French, hardly differed from the "old gang". When they realised that Christians and Moslems alike longed for their departure, their bitterness "exceeded all bounds". Unwilling to accept that the fault was theirs, they looked for a scapegoat, "and of course, it was the British, who were intriguing to get them out of the Lebanon".¹¹ Thus the

¹⁰ Catroux, *op cit*, p 414.

¹¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7376/27/89, FO 371/35192. Against this last sentence, Hankey minuted cynically: "So some are".

two men, on whose shoulders rested the lion's share of the responsibility for resolving the Lebanese crisis, assessed the rationale of French behaviour in the Levant.

Catroux deliberately set out to distance himself from Helleu, by refusing to lodge at the Résidence des Pins, and staying instead in the centre of Beirut. Travelling through the city, he was struck by the torn and tattered posters of de Gaulle, while those of Churchill were untouched, a contrast, he felt, "qui illustre le fond du débat".¹² He immediately launched into a series of interviews and consultations to try and form an exact picture of the situation. One of those he saw first, in an entirely deserted Petit Sérail, was Emil Eddé, alone and completely unable to form a government.¹³

It was not until 17 November, at 11.00am, that Catroux met with Spears for what the latter described as one and a half hours of "perfectly cordial but sterile" conversation.¹⁴ The meeting began badly when Spears reminded Catroux that Britain had expected the release of the Lebanese ministers over twenty four hours previously. Catroux immediately retorted that he was unaware that he was operating under an ultimatum and resented that implication. Spears tried unsuccessfully to deny the impression he had created of the existence of an ultimatum, explaining that there was merely a time by which His Majesty's Government expected its demands to be met. He pointed out that the Lebanese people had so far been kept quiet by announcements that everything would be put to rights when Catroux arrived and unless he

¹² Catroux, *op cit*, p 414.

¹³ *ibid*, Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7110/27/89, FO 371/35187.

¹⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7093/27/89, FO 371/35187; see also Spears, *op cit*, p 260-261.

now acted promptly, they might turn against him. Spears mentioned that in his opinion, if Catroux were to release the ministers and restore the position prior to Helleu's arrests and decrees, "there was still a possible chance for the French, but that otherwise ... the French position was lost". Britain would not back down or give way and "the longer the delay, the greater the blow to French prestige". Spears believed that the only way Catroux could maintain both his personal position and that of France "was to lay the blame on Helleu, where indeed, from what he said, it rested".¹⁵

Catroux protested that he had to take certain psychological factors into account, especially the mandatory outlook of many of the French, but Spears was unsympathetic. He argued that such delaying tactics only fuelled fears already current, that the French intended to try and bargain with the Lebanese for the release of their government. Catroux adamantly maintained that France's position throughout had been based on the mandate, and that unless he was given complete freedom to negotiate in his own manner and at his own pace, the French would withdraw from the Levant. With some embarrassment, he subsequently refused Spears permission to visit the Lebanese detainees at Rachaya, and when Spears questioned French rights in the matter, Catroux countered with the precedents Britain had herself established in Egypt, Burma, India and even in Britain itself. The conversation ended politely, though as a parting shot, Catroux remarked pointedly that he believed that a peaceful solution to the crisis depended largely on the Major-General himself. Spears concluded, from the meeting, that Catroux was "prepared to go to any length to save what he considers to be French prestige, although he

¹⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7093/27/89, FO 371/35187.

recognises that the struggle has been engaged on very unfavourable ground for France".¹⁶

Immediately after his meeting with Spears, Catroux telegraphed some initial observations to Algiers. The conversation had been "dure", albeit "courtoise dans la forme".¹⁷ He believed that Helleu had acted in the Lebanon "en consultant seulement un très petit nombre de collaborateurs". He commented that the Délégué seemed to have gained the impression from his brief visit to Algiers early in November,

que vous souhaitez le voir agir vigoureusement au besoin. Il a estimé, et avec lui nombre de Français, que le prestige de la France aurait sombré s'il n'avait pas agi comme il l'a fait. Cette préoccupation légitime en soi lui a fait perdre de vue [les] répercussions locales et internationales de l'affaire. Il a visiblement procédé comme aurait pu le faire un Haut Commissaire à [l'] époque du mandat autoritaire. Cette conception attardée, qui a omis de considérer les facteurs actuels du problème franco-libanaise, nous a conduit à une impasse dont nous ne sortirons pas sans dommage.¹⁸

The arrest of the government, Catroux continued, had gravely wounded Lebanese national pride and dignity and had

fortement affecté la confiance qu'on nous accordait, et accentué le courant qui porte déjà les libanais vers l'Angleterre. Helleu fait figure de colonisateur et Spears de libérateur ... Voici les quelques éléments du problème qui en soulignent la

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Catroux à Alger, 18 November 1943, No 414-17, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575; also printed in Catroux, *op cit*, pp 418-19.

¹⁸ Catroux à Alger, 17 Novembre 1943, No 392-99, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

complexité, et dont la difficulté fondamentale est l'hypothèque britannique.¹⁹

Catroux evidently thought it best to warn Algiers sooner rather than later that he could not foresee France emerging from her dilemma unscathed, for he continued:

Dès que j'apercevrai des solutions, je vous en aviserai, mais dès maintenant, il est évident qu'elles nous coûteront de sacrifices.²⁰

Later that afternoon, Catroux interviewed General Holmes and informed him that he appreciated the gravity of the military situation and hoped to arrive at a solution within the next forty eight hours. He stated that Helleu had acted without instructions and that he and Boegner would eventually be dismissed. He stressed that he felt nonetheless that Britain was "asking a great deal in demanding the removal of Helleu and the complete reinstatement of the government".²¹ From this report therefore, it is quite evident that Catroux had gained the impression, from his conversations with both Casey and Spears, that Britain was demanding the reinstatement of the Lebanese government.

iii) Release Or Reinstatement?

Yet in reality Britain was not demanding any such thing. When Foreign Office officials received Spears's account of his meeting with Catroux, they were furious with him. It was pointed out that "this remarkable representative" had

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ CinC,(ME) to CIGS, 17 November 1943, CIC/192, E7132/27/89, FO 371/35188.

"exceeded his instructions at every turn in what ought to have been an important conversation".²² Firstly, due to what was deemed to be Spears's blatant mismanagement and mishandling of the situation, Catroux had gained the impression that Britain had imposed a time-limit ultimatum on his mission, which was patently untrue: the only time-limit Britain had set was that Catroux should arrive in Beirut by Monday 15 November. Secondly, without authority, Spears had urged Catroux for a return to pre-11 November conditions, implying the immediate restoration of the Chamber and of the government, whereas London had not judged this practicable until a *modus vivendi* had been established between the French and the constitutional régime.²³ Sir A. Cadogan minuted his disapproval:

Although it is too late, I think we ought to draw Sir E. Spears's attention to these departures from our instructions, if only to make him more careful in the future.²⁴

In fact, from the outset, the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, had demanded no more than the release of the ministers. On 12 November, the Cabinet had taken the conscious decision not to increase the British demands to include reinstatement. Again, in the Cabinet-approved instructions sent to Casey on 17 November, it had been decided to impose a time-limit on the French, but there had been no mention of increasing the British demands to include reinstatement.

When Spears actually saw these instructions, after his interview with Catroux, he was most disconcerted: he

²² Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 18 November 1943, E7093/27/89, FO 371/35187.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 18 November 1943, E7093/27/89, FO371/35187.

strongly challenged the Foreign Office view that the Lebanese had behaved at all provocatively, and whilst he was "relieved" that the Cabinet had at long last seen fit to lay down "a definite schedule", the time-limits prescribed seemed to him unduly protracted.²⁵ What filled him with "the gravest apprehension" however, was the apparent belief in London that the Lebanese would accept anything less "than complete restoration of the Government with full constitutional powers" and recognition as such. If Britain tried to treat the Lebanese ministers as anything other than a government, he argued that the only effect would be that "thenceforward, the entire force of public odium would be concentrated on us instead of the French", and "our moral standing in the Middle East would be completely destroyed". He reminded the Foreign Office that the solution of the Lebanese crisis was regarded throughout the Middle East "as a test case of the sincerity of our attitude towards the Atlantic Charter".²⁶ Having fired off these telegrams, Spears sent another to Casey begging him to support these views and to call the Prime Minister's attention to the matter.²⁷

Complying at once with Spears's request, Casey protested both to the Foreign Office and to Churchill that to work for the release of the Ministers and not their immediate restoration as a government, was "monstrous".²⁸ His telegram to the Foreign Office explained that he had been "greatly surprised" by the arrival of instructions that if Catroux would release the Lebanese ministers, then Britain was not

²⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, No 705, E7111/27/89, FO371/35188.

²⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, No 704, E7111/27/89, FO 371/35188.

²⁷ Spears to Casey, 17 November 1943, E7111/27/89, FO 371/35188.

²⁸ Extract from R. G. Casey's diary, Entry for 17 November 1943, Box III, File IV, Spears Papers, MEC.

demanding their reinstatement. Only the day before, 16 November, Casey had received a specific enquiry from Churchill as to whether the the Ministers had been released and reinstated.²⁹ Instructions from the Foreign Office however, appeared "to visualise their physical release only, and as private individuals pending parleys with [the] French and ourselves". Casey claimed that this had come as a great shock, as until now, he had "assumed throughout that the release of Ministers meant their release as Ministers, i.e. that reinstatement of Ministers was a corollary of their release".

From his conversations with Catroux, Casey was positive that the French General had interpreted the British demand for the release of the Ministers as including their reinstatement. In a separate telegram to Macmillan, Casey emphasised this point:

No-one in this part of the world has contemplated the release of the Ministers without their immediate reinstatement. I spoke to Catroux consistently in the sense of release and reinstatement and he understands the matter in this sense. Mere release would not stop trouble in the Lebanon and would brand us as condoning French action.³⁰

Certainly Casey's feeling is vindicated by Holmes's report of his conversation with Catroux. Casey pointed out that the release of the Ministers as private individuals would create all sorts of problems as to their exact status. Moreover, he felt that to make their reinstatement dependent on the outcome of negotiations, during which, even with Britain as honest broker, the States would be subject to heavy pressure

²⁹ Cadogan believed that the matter of reinstatement had been "a little obscured by the Prime Minister's telegram". Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 18 November 1943, E7093/27/89, FO 371/35187.

³⁰ Casey to Macmillan, 18 November 1943, Box III, File IV, Spears Papers, MEC.

from the French to conclude a draft treaty, would be "a heavy sanction to impose on the wretched Lebanese government", already humiliated by its forcible seizure and imprisonment. In Casey's opinion, the French were "the greater sinners of the two", and if Britain pressed only for the release of the Ministers, she would be seeming to condone French behaviour; he "would infinitely prefer that the Lebanese ministers be released as a government and that we then have our conference with them and the French".³¹

To secure additional backing, Casey took his instructions and the reply he had sent, to a Defence Committee meeting on 18 November, which gave him its full support. It ruled that given the tense and deteriorating situation in the Lebanon, "the mere release (and not reinstatement until later) of members of the Lebanese government would not ensure internal security in the Lebanon..."³² Casey had evidently drafted in the Prime Minister's assistance too, for on 18 November, Eden received the following brusque enquiry from Churchill in Malta:

Surely release of imprisoned Ministers means their release and reinstatement as Ministers, otherwise they will have been overthrown by an essentially lawless act?³³

³¹ Casey to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7119/27/89, FO371/35188. An entry in Sir Miles Lampson's diary records how Casey had informed him of the confusion surrounding his instructions. Lampson records that he told Casey "I entirely shared his view that anything so footling [i.e. insisting only on release of Ministers and not their reinstatement] would be intensely damaging to our prestige not only with the Moslem world but throughout the world in general". Killearn Diaries, Entry for 18 November 1943, MEC.

³² Casey to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7142/27/89, FO 371/35188.

³³ Churchill to Eden, 18 November 1943, FROZEN 33, PREM 3/421.

That the Foreign Office had not endorsed the notion of reinstating the Lebanese Ministers is plain from the report of a conversation between Sir Alexander Cadogan and Viénot on 18 November. Realising that their quarrel was not with Viénot and his colleagues, the Foreign Office had refrained as much as possible from making stern representations about the Lebanese situation to Carlton Gardens. The policy however, backfired to a certain degree, when the French in London were forced into a position of requesting that the Foreign Office issue such representations, so that they in turn might use them to pressure Algiers. On 16 November, Roché had seen Cadogan and revealed to him that Viénot was in a difficult situation, having received instructions of which he "did not altogether approve". (Presumably Roché was referring to the telegram Viénot had received instructing him to threaten a French withdrawal from the Levant). Though he (Viénot) was presently consulting Algiers about them, Roché suggested that it might be helpful if Eden would see him to repeat and reinforce the representations which Macmillan was making in Algiers. Roché explained that Viénot had many friends on the Committee, and it was thought that his reports of the British representations would undoubtedly strengthen Massigli's hand.³⁴

Seeing the wisdom of lending force to a voice of conciliation, Cadogan had duly recommended that Eden see Viénot, but, when Eden's busy schedule did not permit a meeting, he saw the Frenchman himself on 18 November.³⁵ Eden had instructed Cadogan to impress upon Viénot both the urgency and the gravity of the position. It was feared that a dangerous situation might be developing and if Catroux indulged in a policy of delay, he might precipitate trouble.

³⁴ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 16 November 1943, E7159/27/89, FO 371/35188.

³⁵ A report of the conversation was sent to Casey on 19 November. See Foreign Office to Casey, 19 November 1943, E7036/27/89, FO 371/35186.

In reply, Viénot warned Cadogan of his conviction that the Committee would be loath to accept Britain's idea of a conference to settle the dispute as this would internationalise a purely Franco-Lebanese dispute. Cadogan however, pointed out that internationalisation of the question might provide the Committee with its only escape route. When Viénot further warned that the French would find it extremely difficult to agree to the reinstatement of the Lebanese ministers, he had been reassured categorically by Cadogan that Britain had not yet asked for their reinstatement and that this was a matter which would have to be discussed later.³⁶ Cadogan therefore reliably informed Viénot that Britain would be satisfied with the mere release of the ministers on the very day the Cabinet chose to reinterpret its demand to include reinstatement. Here surely were the ingredients for a classic misunderstanding.

Eden in fact attended a Cabinet meeting at 5.00pm on 18 November, already equipped with a draft reply to Casey, which adhered to the original British demand for the mere release of the Ministers; it argued that Britain's insistence on the immediate reinstatement of the government would make it remarkably difficult for the French to meet Britain's demands and moreover, would increase the likelihood of a deadlock between the French and the Lebanese.

Within the Cabinet however, there was considerable discussion of the telegrams from Casey and Spears. Both men in their memoirs lay heavy emphasis on the effect in the meeting of the "great clamour" which Casey had created over reinstatement. Spears is quite adamant in his account that were it not for the fuss created, "the Foreign Office would have accepted "release" -- not reinstatement -- and the pass

³⁶ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 18 November 1943, E7159/27/89, F0371/35188.

would have been sold".³⁷ Lord Moyne, who was present at the Cabinet meeting on 18 November, subsequently wrote to Casey privately informing him of the great weight his telegram had carried.³⁸ The point was certainly made and finally carried in Cabinet that as Catroux had already been given the impression that the release of the Ministers implied their reinstatement, Britain could not afford to recede from that position, especially as in British eyes, the imprisoned ministers constituted the *de jure* government of Lebanon and should therefore be recognised as such.

It was further agreed that Casey and Spears should endeavour to bring both sides together; to prevent another flare-up, it was recommended that once the Ministers were released, the Lebanese Parliament should not meet, and that some method should be found to ensure that during the negotiations, neither side should take any steps to vary their position in any way. Despite the fact that Spears had gone to great lengths to absolve the Lebanese of any guilt, it was contended that they "were not without blame and that if the French had not taken such precipitate and unjustified action, we might well have thought it right to support France against the attitude adopted by the Lebanese".³⁹

This attitude on the part of the War Cabinet highlights the fundamental difference in thinking between London-based officials and those in the Middle East. The Foreign Office could not but attach blame to the Lebanese for their rash actions. Prevalent in Foreign Office minds was the feeling that the only indefensible part of the French action had been the arrest of the Lebanese ministers and attendant disorders. Had the French confined their action, after the

³⁷ Spears, *op cit*, p 258.

³⁸ Casey, *op cit*, p 148.

³⁹ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 5.00pm, Thursday, 18 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

Lebanese provocation, to merely dissolving the Lebanese Parliament, Britain would have found it difficult to protest.⁴⁰ In contrast, Spears *et al* believed that the Lebanese would never have rushed through the Reform Bill had the French not pushed them into so doing, and that provocation was wholly on the French side.⁴¹

Though Eden was unable to secure Cabinet agreement to confine the British demand to require the mere release of the Lebanese ministers, he did manage to secure an extension of twenty four hours to the time-limit to be imposed on the French "as there might be some doubt as to the exact request ... put to the French and as Catroux might have to refer to Algiers".⁴² The telegram eventually despatched to Casey offered no apologies or explanations for the confusion about reinstatement but merely stated, very curtly, that his instructions had always intended that the Lebanese ministers should be released to take up their posts. Casey was warned however, that on release, the Lebanese should do nothing to vary the position from what it had been before 11 November,

⁴⁰ See Memorandum by Sir M. Peterson, 17 November 1943, E7183/27/89, FO 371/35189. Peterson had set out to "examine and estimate" the French case, and "to draw up such arguments as can be adduced in support of French action in the Lebanon", in view of the possibility of British intervention there. Cadogan commented that while the memorandum "put the case very fairly", nothing could justify "the manner of the French reaction, which could not have been more stupid or deplorable". *ibid*, Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 17 November 1943.

⁴¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, No 704, E7111/27/89, FO 371/35188. C. W. Baxter recorded that as a result of the Cabinet meeting on 18 November, it had been decided "to say nothing about Lebanese provocation of the French"; he supposed that therefore, Sir E. Spears would "have to be left under the impression that we agree with his mistaken thesis that no such provocation ever took place!". Minute by C. W. Baxter, 19 November 1943, E7111/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁴² Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 5.00pm, Thursday, 18 November 1943, CAB 65/36. The time-limit now was to be 10.00am on Monday, 22 November 1943.

until future procedure (and the telegram stressed that this did not necessarily imply a draft treaty but merely some form of settlement to last the war) had been negotiated with the French under British good offices. The Foreign Office could not resist reminding Casey

that but for French action, we should have continued to press the Lebanese government not to take unilateral action in the matter of the constitution...

A further telegram warned him that Catroux might possibly be "under a misapprehension as to the precise nature of our demands". The position was therefore to be made "abundantly clear" to him, though he was now to be given until 10.00am on Monday, 22 November to comply with British demands.⁴³ Both these telegrams were copied to the Prime Minister.

Casey and Spears must have breathed a sigh of relief. However, even if their representations had not had the desired effect in persuading the Cabinet to demand reinstatement, representations from the United States might well have done the trick instead. The American Embassy in London had rather belatedly informed the State Department on 18 November (actually after the Cabinet meeting had occurred and decided in favour of reinstatement) that Britain was only insisting on the release of the Lebanese ministers and not a return to the *staus quo ante*.⁴⁴ From Egypt, Kirk volunteered his opinion that this expedient was "immoral in concept and pernicious in effect".⁴⁵

⁴³ Foreign Office to Casey, 18 November 1943, Nos 3648 and 3649, E7119/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁴⁴ Winant (Ambassador in the United Kingdom) to Hull, 18 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1036-37.

⁴⁵ Kirk to Hull, 20 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1038.

The State Department was confused: it had received information from Algiers that Macmillan had been instructed on 13 November to demand the release and reinstatement of the ministers.⁴⁶ Yet around the same time, other reports from different sources mentioned only that Britain was demanding the release of the Ministers.⁴⁷ Either the discrepancies went unnoticed or else it was simply taken for granted that on their release, the ministers would automatically resume their status. It subsequently seemed however, that Britain contemplated a solution which did not involve the restoration of the duly elected Lebanese government. By the time clarification was sought, the Embassy in London was able to reply:

Opinion has somewhat changed in the Foreign Office regarding the restoration of the arrested Ministers to authority. It is now felt that the Lebanese Government should resume its functions as soon as practicable and it is believed that the Lebanese Ministers will realise that they should in future act less abruptly.⁴⁸

iv) Calculated Indiscretions

In Algiers Macmillan was by now beginning to be extremely worried about the Lebanese situation. He knew that the Prime Minister was much annoyed by the affair and did not accept the view that Helleu had acted without reference

⁴⁶ Wiley (Algiers) to Hull, 13 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1025.

⁴⁷ Kirk to Hull, 13 November 1943, p 1023; Murphy to Hull, 13 November 1943, p 1026; Memorandum of conversation by Alling, 13 November 1943, p 1029; Wadsworth to Hull, 14 November 1943, pp 1030-31; all in FRUS, 1943, Vol IV.

⁴⁸ Winant to Hull, 20 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol 4, p 1038; see also *ibid*, Winant to Hull, 21 November 1943, pp 1039-40.

to Algiers.⁴⁹ He felt that Spears was "out for trouble and personal glory", whilst Casey was "so weak as to be completely in his pocket". He feared that Catroux, always "a little leisurely" in his approach, hated Spears so much that he might "be led to commit an error of judgment".⁵⁰ Moreover, as he had stressed to Churchill, Macmillan clearly disapproved of the idea of issuing an ultimatum, as London now seemed to be contemplating.

He saw Massigli at noon on 17 November and left him an aide-mémoire, reminding him of Britain's demands, to which no official reply had been received, of the extreme gravity and urgency of the situation and of the need for an early and satisfactory solution. Massigli professed to be working for the release of the ministers and expressed confidence that the matter would soon be resolved. He explained that though Helleu would never work in the Levant again, the Committee would not summarily dismiss him mid-crisis, as France would thereby lose "altogether too much face".⁵¹ When Macmillan pressed him as to the exact nature of Catroux's powers, Massigli replied that Catroux had authority either to proceed at his own discretion, or else to consult the Committee, but informed Macmillan that it ought to be sufficient for the Foreign Office to know that Catroux "se trouve sur place, muni de pouvoirs exceptionnels".⁵² He assured Macmillan that he was anxious to see the matter resolved and suggested that de Gaulle's speech to the Consultative Assembly had demonstrated the French desire to

⁴⁹ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

⁵⁰ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 17 November 1943, pp 293-95.

⁵¹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7100/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁵² Massigli à Viénot, 17 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

deal moderately with the situation. Macmillan stressed that what Britain now wanted "were deeds not merely words".⁵³

Unfortunately for Macmillan, on the very day of this conversation with Massigli, the British Cabinet had decided in favour of an ultimatum. Within a matter of hours, he duly received a telegram informing him that unless anything developed by the evening of 18 November, Casey would fly to Beirut on 19 November and announce to Catroux that British martial law would be imposed by 21 November⁵⁴. Macmillan was consequently advised to let the Committee know "that the sands are running out".⁵⁵

Macmillan thought the time-limit "rather short" and was puzzled by the vagueness of his instructions. He enquired of the Foreign Office whether, like Casey, he should also inform the French in Algiers of the exact date on which the supply of sand would be exhausted, or whether this was to be a job purely for the Minister of State? He was informed by Peterson that it would be best to leave Casey to deal with the matter.⁵⁶ Macmillan however, decided to ignore these instructions and permitted Eric Duncannon⁵⁷, to put out a

⁵³ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7100/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁵⁴ After the Cabinet meeting on 18 November, the ultimatum was extended by a further twenty four hours, to expire on 22 November.

⁵⁵ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 17 November 1943, E7102/27/89, FO 371/35187.

⁵⁶ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 18 November 1943, p 296; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943; Peterson to Macmillan, 18 November 1943; both in FO 660/38.

⁵⁷ Eric Duncannon: Member of the Minister Resident's Staff, Algiers, 1943-44; Second Secretary at Paris Embassy, 1944-48.

"calculated indiscretion", believing it could do no harm.⁵⁸ In a subsequent conversation with Palewski⁵⁹ therefore, Duncannon mentioned that if de Gaulle could be persuaded to send immediate instructions to Catroux in the sense Britain required, the "indignity of the British ultimatum" could probably be avoided. Palewski's reaction however, was not encouraging. He stated that de Gaulle "would never accept an ultimatum if one was submitted". Duncannon observed that Palewski had shifted uneasily in his chair, had thrice repeated "Je crois qu'il refusera" and then whined plaintively "It would be a pity to break up Anglo-French relations over such an issue".⁶⁰

The Foreign Office meanwhile was "disturbed at the complete lack of progress and the apparent failure of anyone in North Africa to realise the real seriousness of the position in the Lebanon, both actual and potential". Given the suspicion that Helleu's reporting was "as inept as his political sense", Macmillan was requested to make absolutely sure that the French were in the picture.⁶¹ At a meeting on 18 November however, Massigli stubbornly maintained that "in his opinion, the incident had been neither so grave as [British] information represented, nor so insignificant as he had been led to believe from his own sources".⁶² The

⁵⁸ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 18 November 1943, p 296.

⁵⁹ Gaston Palewski: Chef de Cabinet to de Gaulle, 1942-46.

⁶⁰ Record of conversation with M. Palewski, by Eric Duncannon, 18 November 1943, FO 660/38.

⁶¹ Foreign Office to Algiers, 18 November 1943, E7113/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁶² Macmillan to Foreign Office, No 2409, 18 November 1943, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

Foreign Office was forced to conclude that strong representations were not having the necessary effect.⁶³

In fact, the meeting between Macmillan and Massigli that day was extremely important. Massigli disclosed to Macmillan that the French continued to suspect British motives in the Middle East. In the past, he observed, the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay had successfully combined forces to prevent the conflict of French and British Middle Eastern interests from affecting more general politics and diplomacy. He subsequently reported to Catroux that he had requested an assurance from Macmillan that the Foreign Office would continue to act in the same way,

ou si, pour des raisons diverses, on estimait à Londres, le moment est venu de changer de position et de revendiquer pour la Grande Bretagne une situation éminente dans tous les pays de l'Orient arabe?⁶⁴

The Committee and particularly de Gaulle, he added, "could not resist this interpretation", and de Gaulle was now not only threatening a French withdrawal from the Levant, but his own resignation too.⁶⁵ Macmillan did his best to reassure

⁶³ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 19 November 1943, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁶⁴ Massigli à Catroux, 18 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁶⁵ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7155/27/89, No 2409, FO 371/35188. When the Eastern Department received this telegram, the opinion of the Western Department was sought on the likelihood of de Gaulle actually carrying out his threats of withdrawal and resignation. R. L. Speaight thought it unlikely that he would resign over an issue which did not effect his own internal position. He did think, however, that it was very likely that he would order a complete withdrawal from the Levant if British martial law was proclaimed and announced matter of factly that this "would surely be the best thing for him to do both from his point of view and ours". Minute by R. L. Speaight, 19 November 1943, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

Massigli that British policy was "clear and simple": her most immediate aim was to ensure that order reigned in the Levant and she had no intention of expelling the French, still less of leaping into their shoes. Even if individual Englishmen were suspected of "hankering after the lure of imperial expansion", the entire British Government, Churchill and Eden included, "had most strongly emphasised the honesty and sincerity of our purpose" and was doing its best "to rebuild France as a great nation".⁶⁶

Though he did not confess as much to London, Macmillan had also given Massigli some very strong hints about Casey's latest instructions, and pressed him, in the Committee's best interests, to have Helleu removed and the Ministers released as quickly as humanly possible. This is evident from the telegram which Massigli subsequently sent to Catroux:

Pour autant que j'ai pu le comprendre, on espère à Londres qu'un *modus vivendi* interviendra à très brèf délai; faute de quoi, le commandement militaire britannique prendrait l'autorité en mains.⁶⁷

More importantly, what is also clear is that Macmillan quite specifically informed Massigli that Britain was not demanding the reinstatement of the Ministers for the moment. Massigli's telegram to Catroux continues:

J'ai naturellement évité toute discussion sur la solution qui pouvait être donnée sur place à la crise. Par contre, le Ministre [Macmillan] a attiré avec insistance mon attention sur le fait que son Gouvernement, s'il demandait la mise en liberté des personnages arrêtés, ne réclamait pas au premier stade, leur réinstallation dans leurs fonctions. Ces

⁶⁶ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, No 2409, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁶⁷ Massigli à Catroux, 18 Novembre 1943, No 426, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

personnages devront même être informés que leur attitude a été jugée à Londres provocante.⁶⁸

Massigli evidently left the meeting with Macmillan on 18 November under the clear impression that Britain was demanding only the release of the Ministers and not that they be reinstated. That impression had in fact been correct until the British Cabinet met at 5.00pm and overruled Eden on the matter of reinstatement. For the second time in two days, Macmillan's diplomacy in Algiers was nullified by Cabinet decisions in London.

When Macmillan reported his conversation with Massigli to London, he was economical with the truth. He mentioned only that Massigli had received two telegrams from Catroux, who thought that the British demands were "very hard to swallow" and had emphasised particularly the difficulty involved if the Ministers, once released, automatically resumed their governmental positions. He reported that when questioned by Massigli as to whether release meant reinstatement, he had fudged the issue somewhat by replying that Britain wished to get back to a position "before the crisis", and had wished to facilitate an "honourable negotiation and reconciliation".⁶⁹ Yet Massigli's report to Catroux states quite categorically that Macmillan had insistently drawn his attention to the fact that Britain was not demanding the reinstatement of the Ministers.

Macmillan's intentions were clear: he sought to exploit a certain ambiguity in the British demands to interpret them as favourably as possible for the French, hoping thereby to allow Massigli the maximum room for manoeuvre. His policy came unstuck however, when Catroux on 19 November chose to

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, No 2409, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

read aloud the account he had received from Massigli of his meeting with Macmillan the previous day, to Casey and Spears. Spears, who had received a copy of Macmillan's account, was quick to detect and point out to the Foreign Office "the very considerable difference in emphasis between the two versions", though he elicited no response.⁷⁰

Presumably Catroux only read aloud part of the telegram from Massigli, for much of it concerned Spears himself. Massigli had mentioned to Catroux that he had additionally raised with Macmillan, who had put up rather a feeble defence, the question of the Spears and his personal policy. Macmillan had assured Massigli that Spears was "a Minister taking instructions from His Majesty's Government" and gave his word of honour "que c'est M. Eden et non pas le Général ... qui déterminera en dernier ressort, la politique britannique". Massigli had however, observed to Catroux: "Nous savons malheureusement, d'expérience, combien des assurances de ce genre sont insuffisantes". In fact, Macmillan had felt sufficiently strongly about Spears to send a separate telegram to London concerning this aspect of his conversation.⁷¹ After reading it, Hankey could only minute in agreement:

I do think French suspicions of Sir E. Spears have become ineradicable and that they represent a serious threat to the success of any diplomatic efforts we make -- with possible grave consequences on the Allied war effort.⁷²

What is plain from the meeting between Macmillan and Massigli, is the length to which Macmillan was prepared to

⁷⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7195/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁷¹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, No 2410, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁷² Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 19 November 1943, E7155/27/89, FO 371/35188.

go to assist the French, especially Massigli, in their dilemma. Whilst he did his utmost to be as conciliatory as possible, Catroux in Beirut was having to deal with the more aggressive and confrontational approach of Casey and Spears. The discrepancies in the attitudes of the British were to a certain extent natural and understandable, but it was inevitable that the French would detect them and seek to exploit them. Macmillan was unfortunate when Catroux unwittingly alerted Spears to his game, with the result that Spears, who was already impatient of Macmillan and his concern for the French, was to become increasingly suspicious of the policy being pursued in Algiers.

v) Voices of Conciliation

Macmillan's resolute efforts in Algiers to shore up any cracks caused by the Lebanese incident in the Anglo-French alliance were matched by those of his counterpart Viénot in London. Despite his strong suspicions that certain British circles were seeking to take advantage of the French dilemma in the Lebanon, Viénot remained firmly convinced that the Foreign Office strongly disapproved of such a strategy. Seeking to bolster trust in the good faith of the Foreign Office, he sought to rationalise the situation, and plied Massigli with information which he believed accounted for Britain's sensitivity about the Lebanese situation, and which Massigli could use to rally those in the Committee whose faith in Britain was flagging. One of the reasons for Britain's concern, he alleged, was her hope of "une accentuation plus marquée de l'attitude turque favorable aux alliées".⁷³ He went on to explain that in her attempts to woo the Turks, Britain was prepared to guarantee that any future Arab Federation would not pursue an anti-Turkish policy; it

⁷³ Viénot à Massigli, 17 Novembre 1943, No 1264, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

was feared however, that the present excitement among Arab nationalists would worry Turkey and render her less amenable to British persuasion.⁷⁴

From information gleaned by Dejean and passed to Algiers, Massigli tried to explain to Catroux why Britain was so concerned to see the matter settled so quickly:

La hâte britannique dans cette affaire, l'intérêt que parait y porter le Premier Ministre lui-même, peuvent d'ailleurs s'expliquer en partie par le désir d'avoir créé une situation nette à la veille de la très importante conférence politico-militaire⁷⁵ qui va se réunir en Egypte.⁷⁶

In view of the proposed conference, Viénot had further commented:

On sent dès lors combien les événements du Liban sont gênants pour le gouvernement britannique et pourquoi il désire obtenir un règlement immédiat.⁷⁷

To convince Algiers further of British good faith, Viénot drew on conversations he and his staff had had with various Foreign Office officials about British policy in the

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ The British were particularly worried that current operations in the Mediterranean were suffering as a result of the build-up for the proposed cross-Channel operation, scheduled for May 1944; Churchill preferred that the Allies should attempt to bring Turkey into the war and should concentrate their efforts on Italy, the Balkans and the Aegean in the immediate future. To resolve the growing divergencies of opinion, Churchill had proposed a meeting with Roosevelt to take place in Cairo and a subsequent tripartite meeting with Stalin at Teheran during November and December 1943.

⁷⁶ Massigli à Catroux, 18 Novembre 1943, No 426, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁷⁷ Viénot à Massigli, 20 Novembre 1943, No 1321, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

Middle East. He reported at length on a recent conversation between one of his staff and an official temporarily attached to the Foreign Office, who had spent fifteen years in an administrative capacity in various parts of the Middle East. This man had attempted to explain the point of view of the average Englishman in the Middle East. It was generally felt, he had claimed,

que la Grande Bretagne a dans le Moyen Orient, des intérêts qui dépassent, sans comparaison possible, ceux de la France et qu'elle devait, par conséquent, se substituer à elle.⁷⁸

Imbued with such views himself, the official had returned to London in May, and within three days, when he realised that Government policy did not coincide at all with his own thinking, had offered his resignation. On the advice of his chiefs, he had remained in his post simply to observe events, and had eventually come to modify his views "en les replaçant progressivement dans la perspective des relations générales franco-britanniques". He confirmed that

sur ce plan, dans les plus hauts sphères du gouvernement, on a la ferme conviction que la France doit maintenir ses positions dans le Proche Orient.⁷⁹

The official had insisted that the War Cabinet maintained rigorous control over the activities of British officials in the Middle East. He was challenged by his French colleague with the view that nonetheless, British officials and especially the Political Officers, ably assisted by Spears, were working for the eviction of the French. The British man was stumped by this and could only offer an exposé on the psyche of General Spears:

⁷⁸ Viénot à Massigli, 18 Novembre 1943, No 247, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1243.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

Celui-ci serait nettement francophile, mais, comme beaucoup de diplomates qui n'ont en aucun contact avec l'administration, lorsqu'il s'est trouvé en Syrie, dans un poste administratif, il aurait pris très à coeur ses devoirs d'assurer la prospérité des libanaises, ravitaillement par l'OCP etc; il se considère, dans une certaine mesure, comme chargé d'une mission à cet égard, pensant que les administrateurs français n'ont pas su administrer convenablement ce pays.⁸⁰

The official had expressed his own regret that the country was not managed by French colonial administrators, who had always impressed him by "leurs qualités administratives et humaines".⁸¹

Viénot also thought fit to forward to Massigli a copy of a letter he had received from Professor C. Schaeffer, whose testimony Viénot considered valuable because of the close relations he had long enjoyed with British specialists, particularly the Arab specialists at Chatham House⁸². Schaeffer described himself as having "une certaine vision des lignes générales que [la Grande Bretagne] va suivre dans les pays musulmanes".⁸³ He viewed the Lebanese affair as "l'étincelle lancée dans la poudre", and though France would not escape unscathed, he was confident that "il sera possible d'éviter l'explosion".⁸⁴ His letter had continued:

Je peux vous assurer que rien ne sera fait du côté Londres pour tirer avantage de la situation créée par une précipitation des deux antagonistes: Liban

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Chatham House was where the Foreign Office Research Department was housed.

⁸³ Professeur C. Schaeffer à Viénot, 17 Novembre 1943, forwarded to Massigli by Viénot on 18 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁴ Schaeffer à Viénot, 17 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

et Comité. La majorité des spécialistes du Foreign Office savent pertinemment qu'affaiblir à l'extrême la position française en Syrie et au Liban, ou en précipitant son départ de ces pays, équivaldrait à avancer d'autant le départ de la Grande Bretagne de Palestine, d'Iraq et d'ailleurs. Aux yeux des Arabes, nos deux nations sont également détestables. Ils acclament les Anglais aujourd'hui pour qu'ils aident à débarrasser les pays arabes des Français. Le tour des Anglais viendrait ensuite, et plus facilement.⁸⁵

Pierre Francfort was another voice of conciliation issuing from London. With Viénot's express approval, he took the liberty of writing to Massigli "sur les aspects de la question du Levant, vue de Londres".⁸⁶ Whilst he realised the fact that he had never visited the Levant exposed him to the charge of misunderstanding the particular nature of the problems there, he nonetheless felt the better equipped to examine those problems objectively and without prejudice. He also appreciated that he was open to the charge of being tainted by the influence of British conceptions about the Arab world, but thought it important to realise that there were views different from France's own, as well as a different way of tackling problems.

Britain played a dominant rôle in the Middle East with interests there which she conceived to be more considerable than those of France; with remarkable opportunism, she had successively employed a variety of policies there. In comparison, Francfort considered that French policies were practically all bankrupt and were stultified by a rigid

⁸⁵ *ibid.* Giving substance to this observation, Viénot reported the following day that, according to the Cairo Press Association, the President of the Legislative Council of Transjordan had declared that his government "recherchait toujours avec les alliées britanniques, moyens d'assurer complètement l'indépendance et la souveraineté de la Transjordanie. Viénot à Massigli, 19 Novembre 1943, No 1298, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁸⁶ Francfort à Massigli, 19 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

conservatism, which had triumphed over all attempts at reform. Her traditional rôle as protector of the minorities was outmoded now that those minorities had woken up to the idea of an Arab community. Nor could France rely, in the last resort, on the legitimacy of her mandatory rights, for neither the Arabs nor the Anglo-Saxons upheld such a legalistic conception of the mandate. Besides, Francfort reminded Massigli, "nous avons renoncé au mandat quand cela nous a paru légitime et ... le Comité National Français a, d'un trait de plume, changé le mandat sur le Cameroun en annexion pure et simple".⁸⁷

In the equation of conflict between France, the nationalists and the British, a factor which Francfort believed had to be taken into account was the present weakened state of France. It was impossible without real political or military means to continue to maintain a negative stance, especially when a rethinking of strategy could only be to France's advantage. He pointed out that even if the pan-Arab idea was not very realistic, one of its inherent dangers (and one which the British had cleverly foreseen and circumvented), was that it might become an anti-British propaganda weapon. By adopting a policy which satisfied Arab aspirations, the British had deflected that weapon from themselves, but were now directing it towards the French, whose policy they perceived to be ruining their plans.

Francfort advocated that France should play a waiting game. Inter-Arab rivalries were already manifesting themselves and could only increase. When she was stronger, France could reassert herself: she could offer assistance to Syria and Lebanon and "jouer au Levant le jeu que les Anglais se préparent à jouer entre l'Egypte, l'Iraq, la

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Palestine etc." Presently, with her outdated and worthless conceptions of prestige and influence, France was isolated in the Middle East and decried by the Arabs for the well-known inadequacies of her administration. She should rethink her propaganda strategy and her means of influence. In leaving the British alone to demonstrate their flair and imagination, the French were depriving themselves "de toute possibilité de rayonnement". Francfort reminded Massigli that as long ago as March, he had suggested that the French should

reprendre dans une certaine mesure, la formule d'unité arabe à notre compte pour montrer aux Syriens que nous étions décidés de satisfaire leurs aspirations et même à les soutenir pour que la Syrie prenne parmi les Etats arabes une direction à laquelle son évolution avancée et son prestige lui donnaient droit.

In conclusion, Francfort outlined his vision of the rôle France should seek to play:

Je crois donc ... qu'il faut au Levant, s'il n'est pas trop tard, donner des preuves absolues et répétées autant en parôles et déclarations qu'en actes, de notre compréhension et de notre sympathie, pour des idées de collaboration dans le monde arabe qui s'oriente vers le système des grandes unités régionales, idées qui semble devoir inspirer particulièrement la réorganisation du monde d'après-guerre.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FASHODA RECALLED

i) Helleu Appeals To De Gaulle

If the Foreign Office thought it had trouble with its main representative in the Levant States and the subversive rôle he was often suspected of playing, the French were beset by similar problems. They had realised how crucial it was that the British believed their assertions that Helleu's actions had not been authorised by the Committee. With that aim in mind, Viénot had assured Mack in conversation on 17 November that Helleu had acted without reference to Algiers¹. Yet only the following day, the press reported that a spokesman had claimed that Helleu's decisions had always had the full approval of the Committee. Viénot demanded to know whether this was now the official viewpoint and pointed out that it could not fail "de produire le plus fâcheux effet".² Massigli acted immediately: he telegraphed Helleu expressing surprise over the declarations being ascribed to him and especially a communiqué from the Délégation Générale which had stated that "le Général de Gaulle et le Comité ont approuvé les mesures que vous avez prises". He pointed out that far from sanctioning his activities, the Committee

pour sauvegarder le prestige français, a le souci de vous couvrir alors que le Gouvernement britannique demande expressément qu'il soit mis fin à votre mission.³

¹ Minute by W. H. B. Mack, 17 November 1943, E7103/27/89, FO 371/35187.

² Viénot à Alger, 18 Novembre 1943, No 1288, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

³ Massigli à Helleu, 18 Novembre 1943, No 425, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

Massigli reprimanded Helleu, pointing out that declarations such as he had made

ne sont pas de nature à faciliter notre tâche et à nous permettre de trouver la solution de conciliation que l'intérêt supérieur de la France exige.⁴

To Viénot, Massigli sent a reassurance that Helleu had acted on his own initiative and that any reports from Reuters or from any other sources to the contrary, were "dénuées de tout fondement".⁵

As far as Helleu himself was concerned however, considerable confusion still surrounded his position and an already awkward situation was being further complicated by his refusal to accept that he had been superceded by Catroux. On 17 November, he sent a personal telegram to de Gaulle, disclosing that he had discovered that Catroux, in the presence of a Lebanese personality, had expressed disapproval of the arrests. The rumour was already spreading, Helleu alleged, that he had been disavowed. Declaring that "ma personne a peu d'importance", he went on to explain his wider concerns:

Il s'agit de sauver les positions de la France dans tout l'Orient et, avec elles, notre prestige. Mon avis est donc formel: nous ne pouvons, sur le plan local, envisager de solution qui comporterait un retour à la situation antérieure. Notre cause est, moralement et juridiquement, inattaquable. La mauvaise foi de nos adversaires apparaît chaque jour davantage. Je crois donc qu'en tenant bon, nous l'emporteront (sic).⁶

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Massigli à Viénot, 19 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁶ Helleu à de Gaulle, 17 Novembre 1943, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308 (3).

Helleu seemed almost impervious to the diplomatic furore that his actions of almost a week before had raised. He evidently found it extremely difficult to come to terms with the situation which now obtained in the Levant. He remained adamant that France's position was unassailable, and as a result, saw no reason for compromise, least of all for a climb down by France. He seemed convinced that maintaining a firm stand would see France through. He bitterly resented Catroux's decision to have as little to do with him as possible, and, unwilling to be pushed to one side, he once again telegraphed to de Gaulle on 18 November, asking to be informed urgently of any solutions Catroux had proposed. He advised that it would be a fundamental error not only to restore the Lebanese government under Bechara el Khoury but even to consider this as an option. Whereas Riad Solh was a dangerous agitator, Khoury, he felt, had been unmasked "comme un simple agent anglais". The President held personal and public responsibility for violating the constitution, and as "un affairiste et opportuniste sans scrupules", would remain "un simple marionnette aux mains des Anglais".⁷

Later that same day, Helleu fired off yet another personal telegram to de Gaulle. A communiqué had been issued that morning to the effect that Catroux hoped shortly to announce a solution to the present crisis. Having been excluded from all his dealings, Helleu expressed his fear that Catroux had taken irrevocable decisions "de nature à mettre gravement en péril les intérêts français". He felt himself duty bound to suggest that Catroux should be ordered immediately to defer any decisions which had not first received de Gaulle's approval.⁸

⁷ Helleu à de Gaulle, 18 Novembre 1943, No 1601, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁸ Helleu à de Gaulle, 18 Novembre 1943, No 1606, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

In yet another personal telegram to de Gaulle, Helleu attributed the British haste to force a solution to the crisis, as a ploy to prevent the French from gaining any breathing space in which to resolve the matter. Given the fact that the situation in the Levant was "dans l'ensemble très calme" and that there was no sign of a united Arab front materialising,

les Anglais se rendent compte en effet que ... leur intervention sera d'autant moins justifiée devant l'opinion internationale qu'elle sera plus retardée. Le faux prétexte de la sécurité militaire dans le Middle East (sic) perd chaque jour de sa force. Une grande partie de l'opinion locale se lasse de la grève et de l'incertitude ... Nous devons donc nous efforcer de gagner le temps que les Anglais veulent nous refuser.⁹

The considerable number of personal telegrams Helleu sent to de Gaulle during the Lebanese crisis, as well as their content, clearly demonstrate that the Délégué Général believed that he had the sympathy of his chief and could rely on his support. Helleu was evidently convinced that de Gaulle was not as well informed about the situation in the Levant as he might be. He therefore sought to offer him the benefit of his perspective, in the hope that once he realised exactly what Catroux was doing and the effects of his actions on the French position, he would take steps to overrule him.

Even as late as 19 November, Helleu appears to have been behaving as though he was experiencing some dreadful nightmare from which he would shortly be roused. He telegraphed de Gaulle that it had been proposed to issue the following communiqué, stating that his actions had always had the Committee's approval:

⁹ Helleu à de Gaulle, 19 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

Le porte-parôle du Comité de la Libération déclare aujourd'hui:

"Les suggestions d'un désaccord entre les membres du Comité de la Libération National et le Délégué Français au Liban, M. Helleu, concernant la responsabilité de ce dernier dans les mesures prises au Liban sont dénuées de fondement. Les mesures prises par M. Helleu pour protéger les intérêts français au Liban, ont reçu toujours l'approbation des membres du Comité National de Libération".¹⁰

Helleu expressed his surprise to de Gaulle that Catroux had expressly forbidden its publication, claiming that the statement was "dénué de fondement" and "contraire à la vérité".¹¹ The very despatch of the telegram implied an expectation on Helleu's behalf at least, that de Gaulle would somehow come to his rescue and put everything to rights.

Despite the extreme ambiguity of his position, Helleu continued to send telegrams to Algiers for more general consumption, asserting that all continued to be well. He described a visit of Catroux's to Bkerke on 19 November as "une imposante manifestation d'amitié franco-libanaise" and claimed that a petition which was presently circulating in Beirut, approving his action and "condamnant en termes très vifs les meneurs britanniques", had received numerous signatures.¹²

He additionally sent Massigli a lengthy note, distilling the views of an unnamed foreign consul¹³, who, he claimed,

¹⁰ Helleu à de Gaulle, 19 Novembre 1943, No 1602, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Helleu à Alger, 19 Novembre 1943, No 438-441, No 444, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

¹³ Massigli suspected that the consul in question was Delcoigne, the Belgian representative in the Levant.

was both impartial and had long experience of the Levant, on the origins of the crisis and on the methods to be employed to remedy it. The basic premise of the note was that the present crisis was the result of "un plan [britannique] ourdi depuis longtemps pour évincer les droits et intérêts français au Levant...". This was all too evident from the anti-French campaign presently being waged by the British-controlled press agencies and radio stations in the Middle East. Britain's Levant policy was inspired by numerous motives and served a variety of ends: by manipulating and patronising Arab nationalism, Britain hoped to achieve a certain prestige among Arab states to offset the bad impression being created by the pro-Zionist lobby in Palestine and in London; she hoped to rid Syria and Lebanon of the trappings of French administration which had hitherto cramped her own freedom to expand economically and politically. With the creation of an Arab federation, to which Britain would hold "tous les leviers du commande au point de vue politique", she would create a system of buffer states, "destinés à servir de rempart contre une poussée éventuelle de la puissance soviétique". Nor would Britain stop there: by employing the same tactics and posing as the protector of Moslem countries, she would aim for North Africa, via Egypt and Libya, "créant ainsi une vaste zone impériale méditerranéenne, englobant tous les pays arabes et faisant jonction avec les éléments islamiques des Indes".

Faced with such a "vaste plan d'hégémonie", the consul advised that France should take adequate steps to defend herself. She should increase her military effectives in the Levant, though she should refrain from any provocation of Syrian nationalists. A serious propaganda campaign ought to be mounted to enlighten the population about the implications of the policy of hegemony which Britain was pursuing in neighbouring Arab states. France should refuse to negotiate any arrangement with the Lebanese which might be considered to be of dubious legality internationally and

which might lose France prestige. Rather, she should adopt a policy of wooing the Syrians and negotiate a provisory accord with them, based on the 1936 treaty, and reinforced by "une entente spéciale". The French could then sit and wait for the Lebanese reaction to all this and adopt the appropriate attitude accordingly.¹⁴ Helleu had evidently been much impressed with this analysis which made Britain's Levant policy the linchpin of a much wider and grander imperial design and therefore served to justify his own rôle and actions to defend and protect French interests.

The tone and content of Helleu's various telegrams and communications worried Massigli considerably. He confided in a letter to Viénot that Helleu

témoigne dans ses communications d'une assurance qui me fait craindre que certaines instructions lui aient été données avant son départ d'ici dont je n'aurais point eu connaissance ... il y a aussi certaines déclarations de portes-parôles dont on ne peut retrouver l'origine et qui sont bien étranges, de mêmes certaines émissions de Radio Brazzaville.¹⁵

Massigli suspected therefore that he had perhaps not been party to all that had been said about the Levant during Helleu's stay in Algiers. Subsequent events served only to heighten his suspicions and fulfil his worst forebodings.

ii) De Gaulle Overruled

Macmillan was growing more and more gloomy about prospects of a settlement. Frustrated by the bombardment of telegrams from London, Beirut and Cairo, most of which were

¹⁴ Helleu à Massigli, 19 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

¹⁵ Massigli à Viénot, 20 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

"either unnecessary, foolish, obscure or undecipherable", he privately accused the Cabinet of "dithering". Makins too, expressed disillusion with the instructions winging their way to Algiers, and confessed that there had been

some difficulty in discerning the policy of His Majesty's Government in the Lebanese affair. Admirably balanced and judicious telegrams have issued forth, presumably from the Eastern Department, but they have alternated with much more violent and rigid instructions. We seem at the moment to have got ourselves into a position from which we cannot withdraw without losing face or go on without a serious quarrel with the French. I suppose we accept the injury to Anglo-French relations which must follow from our taking over in the Levant States. My principal doubt is whether we really want to do this and whether it will not merely mean that the populations of the States will turn against us rather than against the French.¹⁶

Macmillan further believed that Spears wanted "a Fashoda" and was "determined to elevate himself and to degrade the French". In complete contrast, he was convinced that he himself, given the opportunity, could secure all that Britain required from the French, without alienating reasonable and moderate Frenchmen or destroying the progress made over the previous year.¹⁷ In a telegram to the Foreign Office, he warned that in his opinion, the Committee, on present form, would not meet Britain's demands, but would simply allow events to take their course:

They (i.e. the French) will then take refuge in injured innocence and appeal to the sense of chivalry of the world as a great country of whose temporary weakness unfair advantages are being taken for imperialistic ends.¹⁸

¹⁶ Makins to Strang, 18 November 1943, FO 800/432.

¹⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 19 November 1943, p 297.

¹⁸ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, No 2415, E7178/27/89, FO 371/35189.

Yet at a meeting between 10.00am and 1.00pm on 19 November Macmillan's pessimistic forecast about the Committee was not borne out.

The Committee met to discuss Catroux's proposals for dealing with the Lebanese situation. Catroux had informed the Committee that his investigations in the Levant had served only to convince him further of how deep a wound Helleu's action had inflicted on Lebanese national pride. On 17 November, he had sent Bart¹⁹ on an unsuccessful mission to try and tempt the rump Lebanese government out of hiding. The Délégué Adjoint had however, been met by a firm refusal from the government even to negotiate with the French before the release of the interned ministers.²⁰ The interviews he had conducted himself had been no more successful and even the Maronite Patriarch was insisting on the release of the Government.²¹ The Lebanese people, Catroux reported, had evidently united as never before in a climate of protest which, if allowed to continue, could only lead to trouble. For the moment everyone was holding back, awaiting the outcome of his presence, the effects of British pressure and wondering whether the Syrians would eventually climb down off their fence:

En bref, la situation était une situation préinsurrectionnelle, dont l'évolution dépendait du caractère de mes décisions.²²

¹⁹ M. Bart: appointed the new Délégué Adjoint for the Lebanon.

²⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 November 1943, E7109/27/89, FO 371/35187.

²¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7140/27/89, FO 371/35188; Spears to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, E7166/27/89, FO 371/35189. Spears commented that it was "a remarkable instance of the strength of public opinion" that the Patriarch had taken this stance.

²² Catroux, *op cit*, p 416.

In the wake of several bombing incidents²³, including one in the Petit Sérail, in which four Lebanese gendarmes were injured²⁴, Catroux had advised the Committee that, in view of the risks inherent in the situation, he thought it necessary to act quickly to satisfy public feeling. He outlined how he considered the situation might best be handled: he proposed releasing the Ministers, but restoring only Bechara el Khoury to his former position with a new Cabinet; he proposed restoring the Chamber but not allowing it to reassemble for a few weeks. If Bechara el Khoury proved unaccommodating, then Catroux warned that he saw no solution other than a return to the constitutional position prior to Helleu's arrests. Though he realised that this would be a bitter blow, he thought it would prove "moins funeste à notre prestige et à notre position que les conséquences de troubles à la répression desquels l'étranger serait forcement mêlé". Whatever the position, the Délégué would, by arrêté, nullify the constitutional reforms which the Chamber had passed.²⁵

Massigli himself was surprised and pleased by the disposition demonstrated by the Committee on 19 November to fall into line with Catroux's proposals. Writing to Viénot

²³ Spears to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7132/27/89, FO 371/35188; Spears to Foreign Office, 18 November 1943, E7208/27/89, FO 371/35189.

²⁴ This incident took place on the evening of 17 November. Algiers was informed that the four gendarmes had submitted written testimonies and that they "déclarent et jurent sur le coran, que ce sont des "military police" britanniques qui ont jeté la bombe". Beyrouth à Alger, 18 Novembre 1943, No 431, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575. The testimonies of the four gendarmes, Abdala Boukhari, Aduan Omari, Moussa Yaghi and Mohamed Makouk, can be found in Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 4H 308.

²⁵ Catroux à Alger, 18 Novembre 1943, No 418-22, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575. Also printed in Catroux, *op cit*, pp 416-17.

the following day, Massigli gently chided him for underestimating "l'importance de l'intrigue" he had had to face. His struggle with the Committee had been rendered all the more difficult up until now since "les opinions modérées n'y étaient défendues que par des hommes pour qui le Général n'avait que mépris ou soupçons". On 19 November however, Massigli explained that he had received strong support within the Committee for accepting Catroux's proposals from Le Troquer, Frenay and Astier and commented that "cela change pour moi beaucoup de choses". He had succeeded finally in bringing the majority of the Committee "sauf les compagnons de la première heure, à prendre position pour les solutions de compromis".²⁶

In fact, Massigli had confided to Macmillan immediately after the Committee meeting, that de Gaulle had actually proposed the despatch of an intransigent reply to Catroux, but after a lengthy discussion, had been overruled. The reply finally despatched to Catroux authorised Helleu's recall when he considered French face would suffer least. It also authorised the physical release of the President and his Ministers, though Bechara el Khoury was to be urged to form a new government with a new Prime Minister, which would then negotiate its position with the French.²⁷

Though Massigli had emphasised what a responsible and governmental attitude the Committee had demonstrated, he had also confessed to Macmillan that to ensure a favourable decision by the Committee, he had been obliged to make great play with the assurances Macmillan had offered the previous evening, about the underlying principles which motivated British policy towards the Levant, and especially his

²⁶ Massigli à Viénot, 20 November 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

²⁷ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, No 2417, E7165/27/89, FO 371/35189.

insistence that Britain was not demanding the reinstatement of the Lebanese ministers. The contentiousness of the reinstatement issue was only just beginning to dawn on Macmillan. In a telegram to the Foreign Office, he indicated that it was not easy to reconcile Casey's latest instructions that the Lebanese personalities should be released as President and Ministers and not as private individuals, with the report of Cadogan's conversation with Viénot, when the latter had been assured that Britain was not asking for reinstatement of the Lebanese government.²⁸

As far as Macmillan could now discern, the Committee seemed poised to comply with Britain's demands. It had authorised Catroux to deal with Helleu and to release the Ministers. However, Macmillan realised only too well from his conversation with Massigli and from a recent statement the Committee had issued, that while the French might release the government, they would never agree to its restoration to power²⁹. For Britain now to step up its demands and to insist on the reinstatement of the government would completely upset the apple-cart and certainly invalidate his claim that by using his own methods, he could get all that Britain wanted from the French. He expressed the hope to London that the question of automatic reinstatement "would not prove insurmountable".³⁰

iii) Une "Démarche Comminatoire"

Unfortunately, evidence in Algiers on 19 November that the Committee was about to yield even in part to Britain's

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, No 2420, E7189/27/89, FO 371/35189.

³⁰ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, No 2417, E7165/27/89, FO 371/35189.

demands, came far too late to forestall Casey who had been instructed to fly to Beirut and issue Catroux with an ultimatum failing some definite indication by the evening of 18 November that France was about to comply with Britain's demands. Casey duly flew to Beirut on 19 November, whereupon Catroux was summoned to a 5.30 meeting at Spears's house.

In accordance with his plans to try and persuade Bechara el Khoury to resume his position with a new Cabinet, Catroux had interviewed the Lebanese President on the evening of 18 November. Despite Khoury's internment and his attempt to justify the Lebanese action, Catroux reported to Algiers that the Lebanese President remained "le serviteur de l'entente franco-libanaise" and was "fidèle à la France et n'avait jamais adhéré à la cause britannique ni la cause arabe".³¹ Catroux had outlined for the President the terms which Helleu had been authorised to offer the Lebanese and suggested that if he would now accept them, he would be restored to power, provided that he disbanded Riad Solh's Cabinet. Bechara el Khoury however, refused to have anything to do with such a scheme.³²

Undeterred, Catroux had seen Riad Solh on 19 November. The Prime Minister explained that his reactions had been provoked by the attitude of Helleu and his staff. He claimed that he would have behaved differently had he been afforded more consideration. He actually offered his resignation to Catroux, though he did so in the certain knowledge that his colleagues and compatriots would never accept this.³³ Catroux

³¹ Catroux à Alger, 19 Novembre 1943, No 445-453, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575. See also Catroux, *op cit*, pp 419-20.

³² *ibid.* For Bechara el Khoury's account of his meeting with Catroux, see A. Susser, Western Power Rivalry and its Interaction with Local Politics in the Levant, 1941-46, (University of Tel Aviv, 1986), pp 448-49.

³³ Catroux, *op cit*, p 420.

claims that at this stage in his negotiations, faced with the continued intransigence of the Lebanese which seemed set to wreck his own plans for compromise, he had decided to recommend to the Committee that the Ministers should be released and that they should all resume their functions. However, he claims that "une démarche comminatoire de Casey me fit différer ma prise de position".³⁴

Indeed, at the 5.30 meeting with Spears and Casey, the Frenchman was presented with an aide-mémoire, referring to the French non-compliance with British demands.³⁵ It went on to state that if the Committee would reinstate the Lebanese government by 10.00am on 22 November, Britain would propose a conference under her auspices to negotiate a *modus vivendi* for the duration of the war. If the Committee failed to comply by that time, then Britain, for reasons of military necessity, would declare martial law and British troops would release the imprisoned Lebanese. The aide-mémoire stressed that Britain's action would involve no political consequences, and should not be taken to represent any intention to substitute British for French influence in the Levant.³⁶

According to Casey's account, Catroux accepted the situation "calmly" and the tone of the discussion was "friendly throughout".³⁷ The text of the aide-mémoire was discussed paragraph by paragraph to prevent any

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ See Casey, *op cit*, p 145; Spears, *op cit*, p 262-66; Catroux, *op cit*, p 420-22.

³⁶ Beirut to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, E7160/27/89, FO 371/35188. The complete text of the aide-mémoire is printed in full in English in Spears, *op cit*, pp 265-66 and in French in Catroux, *op cit*, pp 420-21.

³⁷ Casey to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, E7160/27/89, FO 371/35188.

misunderstanding and Catroux made several observations on it. He disputed Britain's right to declare martial law, and enquired whether martial law would be enforced in Syria as well as the Lebanon. He warned that the Committee would never agree that the settlement of the Lebanese affair should form the subject of a tripartite conference and further pointed out that the time-limit Britain wished to impose was extremely short. He claimed that he had not wasted a moment since his arrival, but was hampered in his task by the slowness of telegraphic traffic between the Levant and Algiers.³⁸ Casey assured him that to expedite matters, the text of the aide-mémoire would be telegraphed to Macmillan and communicated to Massigli, though he pointed out that "in any event, the two British demands were unchanged and had been in Massigli's hands for a week".³⁹ Yet in fact, as Casey knew very well, he had himself been obliged to question the Foreign Office about the exact interpretation of the British demands only the previous day. Though Casey made no reference in his account to the Foreign Office of any such comment, Catroux claims in his memoirs that he actually pointed out that the restoration to power of the government had not formed part of Britain's demands on 13 November.⁴⁰ As a parting shot, Catroux declared that for him, the aide-mémoire conjured up memories of the Fashoda incident. Casey, as an antipodean, failed to

³⁸ Spears was extremely sceptical about Catroux's lament about the slowness of telegraphic traffic. Reflecting on the meeting the following day, he recalled that Catroux had read aloud a telegram from Massigli "which had obviously reached him within a very few hours of despatch", having forgotten that he had previously assured them that it took "two to five days to receive telegrams from Algiers". Spears to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7195/27/89, FO 371/35190.

³⁹ Casey to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, E7160/27/89, FO 371/35188.

⁴⁰ Catroux, *op cit*, p 422.

understand the reference and was obliged to request an explanation from Spears, who willingly obliged.⁴¹

Despite the apparent urgency of the situation, Catroux did not report the British ultimatum to Algiers until 10.00am the following morning. Although he considered it was the Committee's responsibility to decide how best to respond, he examined the options: France might refuse to meet Britain's demands, provisionally withdraw from the Levant and redeploy all her personnel, thereby preserving her national dignity and her rights, at least theoretically. Yet such a solution would mean the final loss of the Levant, as, in Lebanese eyes, the French would be withdrawing because they had no desire to make amends for what was generally regarded to be an illegal act of violence akin to totalitarian methods. Moreover, if Britain was left to release the government and to re-establish normal constitutional life, France would be completely discredited. Thus, despite the harsh nature of the British demands, Catroux was inclined to recommend

le geste généreux d'oubli et de réparation que le Liban attend de nous ... un geste total concernant la remise en place de tous les internés.

All things considered, then, Catroux advocated capitulation to the British demands, though in view of the position of influence he enjoyed personally in the Levant, he still hoped to accomplish a solution "sans faire subir à la France une perte de prestige".⁴²

⁴¹ Casey to Foreign Office, 19 November 1943, E7160/27/89, FO 371/35188; Catroux, *op cit*, p 421; Spears, *op cit*, p 263.

⁴² Catroux à Alger 20 Novembre 1943, No 456-61, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575. Also printed in Catroux, *op cit*, p 422.

In a second telegram to Algiers, Catroux tried to justify his verdict, by describing the reality of the situation which France faced: Eddé was without support and

l'opinion libanaise, presque totalement, et celle de la Syrie entière, attend de nous la réinstallation de tous les internés car les mesures prononcées par Helleu ont profondément ému la dignité nationale et jeté le discrédit sur la France et le Comité.

Catroux was convinced that unless the government was freed and reinstated, popular unrest would merely grow and paralyse the formation of any other government as well as provoking certain trouble. He emphasised again however, that he was sufficiently well-placed personally "de faire au bénéfice de la France le geste total du pardon".⁴³

Shortly after the despatch of these telegrams on the morning of 20 November, Catroux met with Spears, who pressed him as to what instructions he had received from Algiers. Catroux eventually revealed that he was to reinstate the President "if he deemed this opportune"; the other ministers were also to be released, but to be deprived of office permanently. All decisions regarding the future of Helleu had also been left to him. When Spears pointed out that this "so-called solution" would be unacceptable to Britain or indeed to any other interested power, Catroux made "very little effort" to defend the Committee. He claimed however, that it had not witnessed, as he had done, the strength and unanimity of public feeling in the Lebanon, but "saw the question mainly in terms of prestige and face-saving". According to Spears, Catroux hinted strongly that he had not come to Beirut with full powers, but that had he had a free hand, the crisis would have been satisfactorily resolved by then, an assertion which Spears did not doubt. The conversation, he reported, had been "entirely cordial" and

⁴³ Catroux à Alger, 20 Novembre 1943, No 462-64, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Catroux, who "was in his most amenable frame of mind", had "evidently been impressed by the firmness of the line we had taken last night". He had hinted

even more clearly that de Gaulle was the only stumbling block. Massigli ... and the newer members of the Committee were perfectly aware of the new spirit of democracy in the world and would not have attempted to put the clock back.

Spears felt that Catroux thought that the matter "was now for London and the Committee to decide" but "did not believe that de Gaulle would give way".⁴⁴

iv) "Historians Will Not Fail To Observe..."

Early on 20 November, despite his reluctance to do so, Macmillan was obliged to present Massigli with the text of the aide-mémoire already delivered by Casey to Catroux in Beirut the day previously. (Catroux did not telegraph his own report to Algiers until 10.10am on 20 November). Due to Duncannon's "calculated indiscretion" about a time-limit, Massigli must have gathered that a British time-limit was imminent. In addition, he had received a telegram from Viénot, who had learned

d'une source très sérieuse que le gouvernement britannique aurait décidé que l'état de siège serait proclamé au Levant lundi prochaine si, d'ici là, une solution n'était pas intervenue.⁴⁵

Massigli claimed nonetheless, to be "much moved by the shortness of the period allowed in the ultimatum". Intent on doing all he could to assist his colleague in his struggle

⁴⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7191/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁴⁵ Viénot à Alger, 19 Novembre 1943, No 1317-18, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

with the Committee, Macmillan agreed not to deliver the aide-mémoire formally until after a proposed Committee meeting that morning, during which Massigli hoped to obtain agreement to the immediate dismissal of Helleu, as well as to the release of the Ministers without resort to the British ultimatum.⁴⁶

If Massigli was surprised by the shortness of the time-limit, he must have been even more surprised by the discrepancy between Britain's original demand for the release of the Ministers and the present demand in Casey's aide-mémoire for their release and reinstatement, and he seized upon this immediately. Only two days before, Macmillan had categorically assured Massigli that Britain was not demanding the reinstatement of the government. He now confessed to the Foreign Office that he was "still not clear on this point" and as far as his conversation with Massigli had gone, had "done [his] best to confuse the issue".⁴⁷ Macmillan reminded the Foreign Office that the original demands "dealt with physical release and did not necessarily imply the reinstatement of powers"; it seemed to him "essential that this point should be made clear beyond doubt", for it would be "dangerous to risk the future of Anglo-French relations on a point so ill-defined and on which we appear so undecided".⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, No 2423, E7193/27/89, FO 371/35189.

⁴⁷ *ibid*; Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 20 November 1943, p 298.

⁴⁸ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, No 2424, E7193/27/89, FO 371/35189. Another aspect of his instructions which Macmillan queried was the ruling that the Lebanese government should do nothing to alter the position from what it was before 11 November, i.e. prior to the arrests. Macmillan wondered whether this then meant that the Reform Bill, passed by the Lebanese on 8 November, was to be regarded as a *fait accompli*? The Foreign Office merely replied that this would be dealt with during the negotiations for a *modus vivendi*. Macmillan to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943; Foreign Office to Macmillan, 20

As soon as the Committee meeting ended on the morning of 20 November, Massigli hurried to inform Macmillan that he had gained the Committee's approval for the immediate recall of Helleu, as well as for the release of the Ministers. Thinking that he had thereby as good as satisfied Britain's demands, he made an "earnest plea" that the ultimatum should be extended "to allow of further discussion of other issues involved", i.e. the question of reinstatement, especially in view of the slowness of his telegraphic communication with Catroux. Relaying this request, Macmillan urged the Foreign Office "to consider most seriously the acceptance of such a solution". He continued:

I find it difficult to believe that it is in the interests of His Majesty's Government to force a breach with the French Committee on an issue narrowed to this point ... we ourselves take the view that the [Lebanese] Prime Minister acted precipitately in passing reforms; it might not be unreasonable at least to negotiate about the exact composition of the new Ministry. Moreover, the French, having made these two major concessions would have granted our original demands as presented here on 13 November.⁴⁹

Macmillan's continual pleas to London for clemency for the French had already outraged Spears, who commented angrily that the French Committee appeared "to have no conception of the principles of democratic Government". The Lebanese government, he maintained, was the product of genuine elections and Bechara el Khoury would never agree to form a new government, nor would the country permit him to do so. As for the French insistence that any negotiations must be purely Franco-Lebanese, Spears wondered "what the

November 1943, E7197/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁴⁹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7190/27/89, FO371/35189.

rest of the world would think of our connivance at such a grim farce in which the lamb would sit down alone with the wolf at the conference table?"⁵⁰

Spears confessed in his memoirs that

[his] two greatest worries were the Foreign Office, which ... resembled a jelly-fish, and a stinging one at that, drifting as de Gaulle willed, and Algiers, where Macmillan wilted in the range of that irascible man's overpowering presence.⁵¹

To counter any effect Macmillan's pleas for leniency might be having, Spears stressed to the Foreign Office that Britain would have "failed utterly in the eyes of the whole of the Middle East if the Ministers upon their release, are not treated as a government". He argued that since Britain had never ceased to recognise the Ministers, "our original demand for release could only have implied in logic their release with a view to enabling them physically to resume the functions which they are constitutionally entitled to perform". In his view, it would be "absolutely fatal" to allow the French to insist on the nomination of a new government, and he confidently claimed to have no doubt that Britain would abide by its decision not to accept this.⁵² Negotiations with the President alone, apart from being constitutionally unsound, would also be totally unacceptable to public opinion in the Lebanon and throughout the Middle East. For once the Foreign Office considered Spears' remarks "impossible to controvert".⁵³

⁵⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7186/27/89, FO 371/35189.

⁵¹ Spears, *op cit*, p 272.

⁵² Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7224/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁵³ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 November 1943, E7165/27/89, FO 371/35189.

In line with the Cabinet decision of 18 November about reinstatement, over which he himself had been forced to back down, Eden ruled that the French contention that as they had yielded on the recall of Helleu and the release of the Ministers, their restoration to power was not an issue, would not do.⁵⁴ Two telegrams were accordingly despatched in quick succession to Algiers, emphasising that the Lebanese ministers, "on being released, must clearly resume their functions".⁵⁵ Macmillan's hopes that the question of reinstatement would not prove "insurmountable" were rapidly evaporating. Though due in Cairo, he decided to remain in Algiers to continue his efforts to persuade London to his way of thinking. He would obey instructions and inform Massigli that Britain insisted on the reinstatement of the Lebanese government, but for good measure, he issued another plea for a postponement of the 10.00am 22 November time-limit, commenting:

Historians will not fail to observe that the solution now proposed is an acceptance of [the] only formal demand made on [the] French Committee ... on 13 November 1943. The new demand, namely the automatic reinstatement of the Ministers as a Government which Sir A. Cadogan informed Viénot on 18 November ... had not yet been put forward, has only now been made to Catroux on 19 November and communications are so bad that the Committee has not yet received his report.⁵⁶

Macmillan argued that if Britain accepted the recall of Helleu and the release of the government, this did not necessarily constitute acceptance of the French contention

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 20 November 1943, E7165/27/89, FO 371/35189; Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 November 1943, E7194/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁵⁶ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7204/27/89, FO 371/35190.

that a new government was required, but merely paved the way for a conference at which that contention could be discussed. He continued:

We are, it seems, endangering the Anglo-French relationship and undoing the work of many months toil for a difference which is now much reduced. Moreover, the vote at this morning's Committee shows a development of independence and judgment which needs to be fostered. I hope you will pass this on to the Prime Minister.⁵⁷

Just in case Churchill failed to see the telegram, Macmillan sent another directly to him, stressing that the Committee's concessions to date satisfied the only formal demands Britain had ever made on the Committee. He continued to argue that Casey's aide-mémoire had introduced what was "essentially a new demand". Given that this was the case, and taking into account Cadogan's assurance to Viénot, the slowness of telegraphic traffic and the encouraging signs of independence being displayed by the Committee, Macmillan earnestly recommended that Churchill allow an extension of the time-limit on the French.⁵⁸

Within the Foreign Office it did seem that there was "a reasonable chance" that matters might still be settled amicably, if a little extra time was allowed to sort out the reinstatement matter. Nonetheless, it was considered essential that there should be no relaxation of pressure on the French to release the ministers and to begin negotiations for a *modus vivendi*. A decision was therefore taken in the morning of 21 November to extend the time-limit by forty-eight hours, to expire at 10.00am on Wednesday 24

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Macmillan to Churchill, 20 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

November⁵⁹, and telegrams were despatched urgently to Casey and Spears informing them accordingly.⁶⁰ The telegrams explained that Britain was happy to accept the French recall of Helleu and the release of the ministers, but insisted that they reinstate the ministers, as they were the constitutional government of the Lebanon and recognised as such. They, and not Eddé, were the persons with whom the *modus vivendi* would have to be arranged, though the manner in which they exercised their functions in respect of any reform or modification of the status quo, would be a matter for negotiation.

A short telegram rather abruptly instructed Macmillan to refer to Casey's instructions and ordered him to await Cabinet instructions.⁶¹ A further telegram attempted to explain the inconsistencies he perceived in Foreign Office instructions: it was admitted that Britain originally intended to demand only the release of the government and the recall of Helleu, but if the French failed to oblige, then it had been decided that reinstatement should also be demanded; when Casey met Catroux on 15 November, however, he had taken the line that Britain's demands included reinstatement and in view of the French failure until then to meet Britain's demands at all, it had subsequently been decided to support that attitude. Realising that there would be justifiable indignation and probably trouble throughout the whole Middle East if the ministers were only released, Britain had to demand reinstatement too. On the other hand, if the government was reinstated and allowed an entirely free hand, it was feared that they might "precipitate a

⁵⁹ Note for Secretary of State by R. M. A. Hankey, 21 November 1943, E7204/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁶⁰ Foreign Office to Casey, 21 November 1943; Foreign Office to Spears, 21 November 1943, E7204/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁶¹ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 21 November 1943, FO 226/245.

series of disputes possibly more serious than the present one"; thus, Britain also had to insist on the negotiation of a *modus vivendi*. No attempt was made to explain Cadogan's conversation with Viénot on 18 November.⁶²

v) The Prime Minister Takes Over

On 21 November, Massigli presented Macmillan with the text of a communiqué which the French Committee proposed to issue at 5.00pm that day. Macmillan commented:

The French decision is rather clever. It makes it appear to be done by them on their own, or on Catroux's advice. It recalls Helleu: it liberates and restores to his functions the President of the Lebanon republic: it liberates only (and leaves the point of their status obscure) the Ministers. But it does appear at least a voluntary decision and does save some face.⁶³

Although he knew there would be "further trouble" over the reinstatement of the Ministers, for the moment, Macmillan was satisfied to have got this far.⁶⁴

In Beirut however, Spears was far from satisfied. The day had begun badly when a member of the French Air Force on road patrol shot at a military car containing two British soldiers, seriously wounding a Major Morton within.⁶⁵

⁶² Foreign Office to Macmillan, 21 November 1943, E7193/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁶³ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 21 November 1943, p 299.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7242/27/89, FO 371/35190; Beyrouth à Alger, 21 Novembre 1943, No 1005, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. The French account alleged that the British car failed to stop at a checkpoint, and recounted a similar incident several days previously, when the British car in question had

Agitation grew considerably when publication of the French communiqué revealed that the Committee intended to play false by reinstating only Bechara el Khoury. Spears reported that he had received an urgent note from the Lebanese government warning of the "incalculable consequences" which any further delay in reaching a solution would have.⁶⁶ There were numerous explosions all over Beirut throughout the night and Eddé, a prime target, realising the game was up, hurriedly departed in a French van, for an unknown destination.⁶⁷

Spears had done his best to stress to London the extremely dangerous situation which now obtained. The strike in Beirut, despite French bribes and threats, remained "virtually complete", and represented, Spears believed, a striking testimony to the strength of public feeling. Patience was "at breaking point" and he feared that British counsels of restraint would soon be insufficient to maintain order: various Lebanese deputies were tired of waiting and many were proposing to return to their constituencies to stir up active revolt. "All", he noted, "were urged to refrain from giving the French any excuse for further bloodshed and I think they will follow my advice".⁶⁸ In Syria, students had gone on strike to protest at the lack of action from their government. Jamil Mardam had informed Catroux on 21 November that unless the Lebanese government were reinstated, the situation would get out of hand, and French prestige in Syria would be doomed. Spears commented that Catroux himself was now of this opinion, but was afraid

knocked down the guard which tried to stop it.

⁶⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7250/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁶⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7257/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁶⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7210/27/89, FO 371/35190.

that the Committee and de Gaulle could not be made to see this.⁶⁹

Casey provided additional support by backing Spears up solidly. He informed the Foreign Office that he feared "trouble on a big scale" as the situation in Lebanon and also in Syria, was "very close to breaking point". Only the daily expectation that a satisfactory solution was imminent held people in check, but he expected an eruption before the new deadline on 24 November. He explained that while he understood and appreciated the desire to give the French more time, this could not be

at the expense of many lives in the Levant and a much more difficult situation for our army to have to tackle if it comes to martial law in the end.⁷⁰

Spears observed similarly that "the present outward "calm" [was] entirely illusory". The Committee's attempts

to gain time by proposing further discussions on a point which in reality admits of no compromise, are liable, if successful, to plunge [the Levant] into bloodshed and disorder.

Moreover, if disorders did occur, "a very grave responsibility" would rest on Britain "for failing to cope with the situation in time".⁷¹

At a meeting at 4.00pm on Sunday 21 November, Eden found the Cabinet in total agreement with his view that while it

⁶⁹ *ibid*; Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7249/27/89, FO 371/35190. See also Catroux, *op cit*, p 422-23, for text of letter Jamil Mardam addressed to Catroux on 21 November 1943.

⁷⁰ Casey to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7223/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁷¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, E7224/27/89, FO 371/35190.

was "very tempting" to accept Macmillan's opinion that now the French had conceded so much, the immediate reinstatement of the Ministers should not be insisted upon, "in practice, this would not provide any real solution of the difficulty". Given that it now appeared that Catroux had not been invested with plenipotentiary powers as had previously been thought, it was decided that diplomatic efforts should be concentrated on the Committee itself and that Macmillan should remain in Algiers until the matter was satisfactorily resolved. Although concern had been expressed lest some proposed British troop movements in the Levant on the night of 21-22 November caused "undesirable repercussions", Eden voiced the opinion that "on the whole the effect of these moves would probably be salutary". It was finally agreed that the decision of whether or not they should proceed should be left to the authorities in Cairo.⁷² The Cabinet directed that a telegram should be sent to Macmillan, recapitulating the situation and requesting clarification on any doubtful points. The "essential point" the telegram should make was that

the Ministers, once released, should be free to resume negotiations for a *modus vivendi* with their status as Ministers unimpaired. Otherwise there was a risk that the negotiations would degenerate into a discussion of what personalities should be included in a new Lebanese government.⁷³

Consequently, on 22 November, Macmillan received a telegram asking whether it was correct to presume that disagreement with the French was now limited purely to the status of the Ministers. It explained that the French proposal merely to release the Ministers would create

⁷² Casey to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7202/27/89, FO 371/35190; Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 4.00pm, Sunday, 21 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

⁷³ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 4.00pm, Sunday, 21 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

certain difficulties: as the Ministers would definitely refuse to enter negotiations as private individuals, another deadlock would ensue and the *modus vivendi* negotiations which Britain hoped would commence within twenty four hours of their release would be delayed indefinitely. Even if negotiations were begun with the President alone, which the French might well suggest, they would then "turn primarily on the question of finding new Ministers acceptable to the French instead of being concentrated on the constitutional issue". The Cabinet had therefore decided not to yield on the question of status; the French would have to meet this demand by the deadline as no further extension was possible. By way of small compensation however, it was pointed out:

It may make things a little easier for the French if the expression "reinstatement" of the Ministers is not used. Instead, we should maintain that [their] status is unaffected by their imprisonment and that therefore on release, they continue as before to be the legally constituted Ministry unless removed by constitutional process.⁷⁴

Macmillan replied that he had informed the French by letter that Britain believed that the arrested Lebanese had never lost their status and on their release, they were to be treated as Ministers with whom the *modus vivendi* negotiations would be conducted. He doggedly continued to press for a certain degree of latitude for the French, given that it would appear to most people that they had succumbed to British pressure. He admitted that he was avoiding a meeting with Massigli for the moment, as the latter would certainly ask whether martial law would still be applied on 24 November over the reinstatement issue; despite his clear instructions, Macmillan still professed to be uncertain about the matter. He correctly suspected that the French

⁷⁴ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 21 November 1943, E7191/27/89, FO 371/35190.

were attempting to arrange a deal with the President, involving a change of Ministry:

It looks to me as if this whole dispute will ultimately turn on the person of Riad Solh. Of course I realise the great strategical and political importance of the maintenance of our prestige in the Middle East, but will you declare martial law ... on this single point? Will public opinion at home support this attitude or may we not create undeserved sympathy for de Gaulle? I think the Americans will regard such action as hankering after imperialistic expansion. They are already very suspicious. Ironically, the only beneficiary will be de Gaulle himself.⁷⁵

Though the Cabinet met at 5.30 on 22 November to discuss the situation, the matter had effectively been taken out of its hands. On 21 November, the Prime Minister had arrived at Alexandria and had then flown directly to Cairo for the Sextant Conference⁷⁶, where he was able to acquaint himself more fully with the Lebanese situation. He telegraphed to Eden on 22 November that he was "much disturbed" to learn of the further postponement of the ultimatum, and hoped no trouble would arise in the Levant in the meantime. "We ought not", he admonished, "to risk loss of life and widespread disorders to save de Gaulle's face". In view of his recent

⁷⁵ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, Nos 2448 and 2449, E7248/27/89, FO 371/35190.

⁷⁶ See M. Gilbert, *op cit*, p 559. Gilbert states that Churchill flew to Cairo "where he was to stay in the villa of Lord Moyne, the Minister Resident". Churchill actually stayed at Casey's villa, loaned to the Minister Resident by its owner, Chester Beatty. Lord Moyne was in fact Deputy Minister Resident at Cairo between 1942 and 1944. The first two sessions of the Cairo (or Sextant) Conference took place on 23 and 24 November and discussed the Far Eastern offensive and the pros and cons of the proposed cross-Channel offensive as against the Mediterranean campaign. The Conference was adjourned for Churchill and Roosevelt to fly to Teheran for a conference with Stalin between 28 November and 1 December. The fifth and final session of Sextant occurred on 6 December. See M. Gilbert, *op cit*, pp 560-601.

arrival and his lack of "Macmillan's slant", the Prime Minister had thus far refrained from intervention, but intended, as Eden was anyway shortly due to join him⁷⁷, "to take over the handling of the situation from noon Tuesday", [i.e. 23 November].⁷⁸

In Cabinet, Eden agreed that the Lebanese situation, from now onwards, might indeed "be much better handled in the Middle East than in London", a view which received general assent. The view was expressed however, (a tribute to Macmillan's efforts), "that as the concessions made by the French went a considerable way to meeting [Britain's] demands, it was unnecessary and might be embarrassing to leave the original ultimatum unchanged", leaving Britain obliged to impose martial law if the Government was not reinstated. It was considered that it might be better to withdraw the threat to impose British martial law by 10.00am on 24 November, but to make it clear that Britain reserved the right to proceed with such an imposition should it be deemed necessary in the future.⁷⁹

A telegram was consequently drafted, setting out the situation as viewed from London. It was thought that everything now seemed to depend on the local reaction to the French concessions. If they were favourably received, and the French and the Lebanese at least began to communicate, then the Cabinet thought it would be "a false step" to declare British martial law, and especially unwise to do so purely because the French had failed to comply over reinstatement. Britain had no desire to declare martial law if at all avoidable: it would tie British troops in the

⁷⁷ Eden arrived in Cairo on 25 November 1943.

⁷⁸ Churchill to Eden, 22 November 1943, FROZEN 66, PREM 3/421.

⁷⁹ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 5.30pm, Monday, 22 November 1943, CAB 65/36.

Lebanon and probably in Syria too and such a serious breach in Anglo-French relations would create a gift-wrapped opportunity for German propagandists. Moreover, the effects on American opinion and on the French resistance would be far from salutary. While it was felt therefore, that no definite date for action should be set, thereby assisting the more moderate members of the Committee, it was also appreciated that the imposition of a time-limit on the French had done some good. It was therefore proposed, provided the local situation allowed, to keep the threat of a possible imposition of martial law hanging over the French, in the hope of bringing them into line over reinstatement. It then might be possible "to adjust the remaining differences under the threat of martial law but without resort to it". A copy of this telegram was sent to Churchill, which ended "Of this, you are clearly the best judge, since you are much nearer the theatre than we are ..."⁸⁰ With this disclaimer, the War Cabinet and the Foreign Office largely relegated themselves to the rôle of spectators for the final stages of the Lebanese drama.

⁸⁰ Eden to Churchill, 22 November 1943, GRAND No 153, PREM 3/421; Foreign Office to Algiers, 23 November 1943, E7248/27/89, FO 371/35190.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CRISIS RESOLVED

i) The Problem Of Helleu

Catroux had warned Algiers in a telegram on 20 November that the problem of Helleu and his continued presence in Lebanon had become a matter of some urgency. He had advised that a successor for Helleu must be found without delay and suggested Viénot or perhaps Chataigneau in the interim.¹ In fact, the question of what to do with Helleu was proving a headache for Massigli, there being considerable reluctance within the Committee, mainly from de Gaulle, to disavow him. After a struggle however, with only de Gaulle and two others against him, Massigli managed to gain the Committee's agreement to Helleu's recall.² He telegraphed Catroux advising him that if Helleu's presence in Beirut was complicating his consultations and if his departure would ensure the success of his mission, "dans son élément indispensable (élimination de Riad Solh du pouvoir)", he was authorised to inform the Délégué that he was urgently required in Algiers.³ This decision, Massigli explained, represented "un compromis pour l'immédiat" and one which, he suggested, Catroux might find useful when pressing Casey for a postponement of the British ultimatum.⁴

¹ Catroux à Algier, 20 Novembre 1943, No 462-64, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

² Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 20 November 1943, p 298.

³ Massigli à Catroux, 20 Novembre 1943, s.n., Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁴ Massigli à Catroux, 20 Novembre 1943, No 437, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

After publication of the French communiqué on 21 November, Massigli ordered Catroux, if he had not already done so, to instruct Helleu to return to Algiers and, in the interim, to make Chataigneau Délégué Général. This proved to be a great deal easier said than done: Catroux presented Helleu with an invitation to leave immediately for Algiers "pour fournir personnellement, et dans le plus bref délai, un complément d'information sur le développement de l'affaire libanaise". Helleu continued to be obstructive: he replied that he would not depart until he had received a direct order to do so from de Gaulle.⁵ Catroux requested that a telegram in the required sense be issued without delay "car il est convenable que M. Helleu quitte le Levant sans retard".⁶ De Gaulle duly despatched a telegram for Helleu, emphasising that he would be most interested to hear his reports and offering him "l'expression de mon amitié".⁷ Acknowledging receipt of the telegram the following day, Helleu announced that his attitude was, "et restera toujours, absolument réservée"; he promised to refrain from expressing any opinion of a political nature before reaching Algiers, but requested a few days' grace to arrange his affairs.⁸

Catroux evidently felt the need to try and explain his attitude towards Helleu in greater depth. He reassured de Gaulle in a subsequent telegram that he would not permit Helleu's departure to assume "le caractère d'une brutale disgrâce". He felt obliged to inform his chief however,

⁵ Helleu à de Gaulle, 21 Novembre 1943, No 1638, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁶ Catroux à de Gaulle, 21 Novembre 1943, No 1639, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁷ de Gaulle à Helleu, 21 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁸ Helleu à de Gaulle, 22 Novembre 1943, No 1642, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

that long before his more recent transgressions Helleu had lost all prestige with the Syrians and Lebanese:

On savait trop que l'âge avait usé en lui les ressorts du travail, qu'il ne suivait pas les affaires, et, qu'à certaines heures de la journée, il cessait d'être lucide, ce dont je viens de faire, à deux reprises, la constatation personnelle. C'est vous dire combien il m'a été pénible de devoir, pour suivre vos recommandations personnelles, me solidariser et solidariser la France avec M. Helleu à l'occasion d'un acte de force qu'il persiste à regarder comme un acte de haute opportunité politique, alors qu'il a soulevé l'indignation du peuple libanaise et provoqué le fracas international que vous savez. C'est pourquoi il ne convient, à mon avis, que le Comité paraisse le couvrir, car le Levant et le Monde ne le comprendraient pas.⁹

Ironically, Catroux was also obliged to report to Algiers that Baelen and Boegner, who had both been closely associated with Helleu's actions, had resigned and that their continued presence in Beirut had also become impossible.¹⁰ Shortly afterwards, the text of Baelen's letter of resignation was transmitted to de Gaulle by Helleu, along with a letter from Boegner avowing that he endorsed Baelen's sentiments completely. Baelen's letter consisted largely of a diatribe against the British, and read as follows:

⁹ Catroux à de Gaulle, 23 Novembre 1943, No 1614, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁰ Catroux à Alger, 21 Novembre 1943, No 483, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575. Casey had mentioned in a previous telegram that he was implementing steps to ensure the safety of General Spears "against the possibility of interference on the initiative of ill-intentioned individuals". (Casey to Foreign Office, 20 November 1943, E7202/27/89, FO 371/35190). Spears's comment on the news of the resignation of Baelen and Boegner and their imminent departure for Algiers was: "I am now safe", the strong implication being that Baelen and Boegner were the "ill-intentioned individuals". (Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7324/27/89, FO 371/35192). "Elimination of Boegner is big news", observed Hankey. (Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 24 November 1943, E7328/27/89, FO 371/35192).

Quel que doive être le règlement de la crise suscitée par l'Angleterre à propos des [rapports] Franco-Libanais, cette crise a déjà fait apparaître clairement que les vues et les méthodes de la politique anglaise ne diffèrent pas, en l'occurrence, des vues générales et des étapes connue de la politique Hitlérienne: sollicitations des principes pour des fins pratiques, préparation du terrain par la corruption de personnes interposées, campagnes de mensonges, menaces de force. Cette constatation me prive de la sérénité nécessaire à l'accomplissement d'une tâche qui exige des contacts avec la légation britannique, la Mission Spears, et les nombreux organismes que le Gouvernement de Londres a installés au Levant à titre civil ou militaire. J'ai l'honneur en conséquence, de me démettre en vos mains, les fonctions que j'exerce...¹¹

Catroux was subsequently informed however, that "dans les circonstances présentes", it was impossible to accept the resignations from Baelen and Boegner; though the pair should not remain in Beirut, Catroux was instructed to order them to return to Algiers, where they would be granted "une nouvelle affectation".¹² Whether this was an indication of the extreme shortage of qualified staff suffered by the Committee or rather an expression of loyalty to two loyal compatriots who had unwittingly become scapegoats in a diplomatic incident, is difficult to assess.

ii) Catroux Advocates "Le Geste Généreux"...

Yet if finally Massigli had succeeded in persuading de Gaulle and the Committee to give way over the recall of Helleu, he had been less successful over other issues: he was obliged to inform Catroux that the Committee persisted in thinking that Riad Solh "ne doit pas être rappelé au

¹¹ Helleu à de Gaulle, 23 Novembre 1943, No 1653, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

¹² Alger à Catroux, 23 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

pouvoir actuellement" and adamantly maintained that any conference which might be convened must be purely Franco-Lebanese. If, notwithstanding the concessions France had made in her communiqué, the British went ahead and proclaimed martial law on 22 November as threatened, (Massigli was as yet unaware of the British decision to extend the deadline), Massigli disclosed that the Committee had decided that French officials should remain at their posts while refraining from any collaboration with the British authorities, and all troops should be confined to barracks.¹³ Massigli added that a letter had been sent warning Britain that if she carried out her threat of declaring martial law, she must bear full responsibility for ensuing events as well as for the deplorable consequences which would unfold for future Anglo-French relations.¹⁴

In addition to these instructions from Massigli, Catroux received a personal communication from de Gaulle, claiming that these decisions represented the unanimous verdict of the Committee. In particular, he repeated

que si le sentiment du Comité s'est trouvé acquis au rétablissement de Bechara el Khoury dans ses fonctions, il est formellement opposé au rappel de Riad Solh et de ses collègues actuellement. D'autre part, j'insiste auprès de vous pour que le retour de M. Helleu prenne l'aspect d'un appel en consultation et non pas un désaveu brutal.¹⁵

De Gaulle was sure that Catroux shared his opinion that Helleu's situation was inextricable due to "des odieuses intrigues de l'Angleterre". Alluding to that section of

¹³ Massigli à Catroux, 21 Novembre 1943, No 444, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁴ These observations had been contained in a covering letter attached to the French Committee's communiqué.

¹⁵ de Gaulle à Catroux, 21 Novembre 1943, No 446, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

French opinion which was unwilling to condone weakness, especially in the face of British meddling, he stated that he saw no advantage in condemning Helleu's act of force. He continued:

Je doute que les Anglais exécutent maintenant leurs menaces de prendre le pouvoir au Liban sous couvert de la loi martiale. Si toutefois, ils le faisaient, le Comité pense unanimement que nous ne devrions à aucune prix, nous accrocher à une position impossible.¹⁶

In these circumstances, de Gaulle advised Catroux that all French officials should be withdrawn from their posts and troops confined to barracks. If the British maintained "leur usurpation", all French personnel would have to assemble in Beirut and "le dernier stade serait le départ de Beyrouth pour l'Afrique du Nord". In conclusion, de Gaulle offered his opinion

qu'il y a intérêt à convaincre Bechara el Khoury, car à la limite, nous n'hésiterons pas à procéder de la sorte, le laissant à la discrétion des Anglais. Ceci peut contribuer à lui faire entendre raison.¹⁷

At 8.30pm on the evening of 21 November, Catroux informed Algiers that he had asked Casey for a forty eight hour extension of the ultimatum. Mentioning the certainty of insurrection and the inevitability of British intervention unless something was done, Catroux offered his opinion

que nous devons opter entre deux décisions: celle de maintenir l'internement de la totalité des prisonniers ou celle de remettre en liberté et en fonctions tous les internés sans exception. Je me

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

suis prononcé et je me prononce pour cette seconde solution.¹⁸

In a strictly personal and lengthy reply to de Gaulle, he sympathised with his chief's predicament:

Je conçois pleinement la haute préoccupation nationale qui inspire vos réactions devant les injonctions britanniques. Je les ressens aussi.

He asserted however, that he stood by his previous recommendation -- the reinstatement of the entire Ministry -- "car, à côté du conflit franco-britannique, je ne dois considérer que les suites du grave différend franco-libanais". Catroux explained that if France vacated the Lebanon, she would not only surrender her reputation as the mother of liberty, but would also leave the field entirely free for her rivals, most notably the British, who would derive

le bénéfice de restaurer les libres institutions que nous avons suspendues. Et il serait funeste que notre départ du Liban soit attribué à notre refus de rétablir, en même temps que la Constitution, les hommes qui en dirigeaient les rouages et en qui s'est cristallisé le sentiment national depuis qu'ils ont été écartés.¹⁹

Catroux went on to try and explain again that French coup d'état tactics had sorely disappointed the Lebanese, who in trying to rationalise them, had tended to attribute them to a mistake by the Délégué Général, which they expected the Committee to correct. If reparation was made, then all would be forgotten; otherwise, the Lebanon would turn decisively against the French Committee. Moslems and Christians alike solidly backed Bechara el Khoury and Riad

¹⁸ Catroux à Alger, 21 Novembre 1943, No 481-82, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁹ Catroux à de Gaulle, 21 Novembre 1943, No 1635, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Solh and were confident of outside support. Lebanese national feeling had at last taken shape and the mandate had been deemed abolished. Catroux was quick to point out however, that these developments did not mean that French advice would henceforward be spurned:

On demande seulement que [les conseils] soient donnés discrètement et que les apparences de la souveraineté et de l'indépendance soient respectées... ²⁰

Catroux tried to convince de Gaulle that all was not lost provided "nous savons faire généreusement le geste qu'on attend de nous, qui relèvera notre prestige et nous permettra une reprise d'influence avec une équipe française renouvelée bien entendu". This was why he had insisted upon the release and reinstatement of all the ministers and he remained convinced that if he carried these measures out in the Committee's name, they would not be viewed as concessions made purely as a result of British injunctions. When all was said and done, however, Catroux promised that unless he received other instructions to quash them, he would carry out the orders which he had received regarding the application of martial law and withdraw all officials and troops. He explained however, that he had forbidden the garrison at Rachaya to oppose a British operation to release the interned Ministers but that "afin de matérialiser l'acte de violence accompli par les Britanniques, la porte de la citadelle sera tenue fermée et devra être forcée par eux".²¹ Thus, even though the French would not actually resist the British, the fact that they would be obliged to storm the door of the fortress would symbolise their act of aggression against the French.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

Catroux attempted to postpone a 10.00pm meeting with Spears on the evening of 21 November, but on the latter's insistence, was forced to attend. After a statement by Holmes, Catroux was now aware that the British ultimatum had been extended until 10.00am on Wednesday 24 November. He informed Spears that he had referred urgently to Algiers but unless he received an absolute veto from the Committee, he intended to reinstate the Government. Spears warned him that if he was forbidden by Algiers, Britain would be obliged to declare martial law at 10.00am on 24 November. Catroux claimed to understand this point and the fact that Britain recognised the imprisoned Ministers as the constitutional government of the Lebanon.²² Spears remarked that if on the other hand, the Committee did allow Catroux to act as he proposed, "the next step would be the conference on British soil to negotiate a *modus vivendi*". Predictably, Catroux balked at the idea of France negotiating under British auspices on a footing of equality with Lebanon, "this tiny state"; he maintained as a general line that the negotiations should be conducted between the mandatory power and the mandated territory without foreign intervention. "He also made it quite clear," Spears reported disgustedly, "that he was thinking entirely in terms of the 1936 Treaty".²³

Immediately after his meeting with Spears, Catroux telegraphed Algiers yet again: the terms of the Committee's communiqué, he commented, led him to believe

que vous n'avez pas exclu l'hypothèse que, lors de mes négociations avec Bechara el Khoury pour le rétablissement de la vie constitutionnelle, je puis remettre en place le Président du Conseil et ses ministres. Ainsi que je vous l'ai marqué avec

²² Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, No 735, E7252/27/89, FO 371/35191.

²³ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 November 1943, No 736, E7252/27/89, FO 371/35191.

insistance, c'est avec cette condition seule que nous résoudrons la crise localement. Hormis cette solution, nous courons à un échec des plus graves que je me refuse à affronter.²⁴

Catroux obviously resented the implication in the Committee's communiqué of 21 November that it was on his recommendation that the decision had been taken to release all the Ministers but to reinstate only Bechara el Khoury. This mistake, he commented in his memoirs, "était de nature à compromettre la solution du conflit".²⁵ His annoyance was evident and expressed in a heavily critical telegram despatched in the afternoon of 22 November. He informed Algiers that whatever general advantages the communiqué had been thought to possess, its issuance had been most maladroit as far as the Levant was concerned, especially as it had been published before he had had the opportunity to comment, still less to prepare, guide and enlighten public opinion as to how to react. The Lebanese people were insistent that their government would have to be reinstated; merely to release the government was insufficient and would result only in a greater defiance and a stricter observation of the strike than hitherto. He expressed his anger thus:

Je déplore que le Comité ne m'ait pas suivi en cette importante matière et j'insiste de la façon la plus pressante pour qu'il revise sa position. Je suis certain en effet que portés par l'opinion, les anciens Ministres s'installeront eux-mêmes au siège de Gouvernement et reprendront leurs activités. En pareille hypothèse, je ne recommencerai pas l'opération d'Helleu en les faisant chasser *manu militari* et nous serons en présence d'un Gouvernement soutenu par la population, reconnu par les britanniques et non acceptés par nous ... Je signale par ailleurs que la rédaction du Comité attribue à mes propositions la totalité des mesures qui ont été décidées alors que je me suis prononcé

²⁴ Catroux à de Gaulle, 21 Novembre 1943, No 1639, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

²⁵ Catroux, *op cit*, p 424.

nettement contre la non-réinstallation des Ministres. Ceci n'est pas pour faciliter ma tâche.²⁶

iii) Released But Not Reinstated

The Lebanese ministers were released eleven days after their ordeal had begun, at 11.00am on 22 November, to a rapturous reception from immense crowds in Beirut.²⁷ Considerably less than rapturous was the welcome they received from Catroux. He saw both Khoury and Solh shortly after their return to Beirut, and immediately attempted to persuade the President to dissolve his government "as a gesture of reconciliation and regard for France".²⁸ Khoury claimed he had no moral justification to dissolve his Cabinet, and would lose all credibility if he did so. He could only part company with his ministers by dismissing them and he was adamant that he had no grounds for doing this. Finally and above all, public opinion would not tolerate the eviction of Riad Solh; even though the latter was prepared to resign, his departure from the political scene would create serious trouble.

According to Spears's report of the meeting, Catroux promised that he would telegraph urgently to Algiers and request authority for the government to remain in office; in the meantime, he suggested that Bechara el Khoury should function without ministers. Khoury refused categorically,

²⁶ Catroux à Alger, 22 Novembre 1943, No 485-87, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

²⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7254/27/89, FO 371/35191; Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7324/27/89, FO 371/35192.

²⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7328/27/89, FO 371/35192; Catroux à Alger, 22 Novembre 1943, No 488-91, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Catroux's telegram is printed in full in Catroux, *op cit*, pp 424-45.

announcing that he would install himself and his Ministers by Wednesday 24 November "whatever the reactions of Algiers might be". Spears commented that general feeling among the returned ministers appeared to be "that all that is necessary from now on is to reinstall themselves and ignore the French completely..."; they regarded themselves as independent and wanted no French interference.²⁹

Spears reported that Catroux had given him "the most positive assurances" that he would expend all his energy in trying to get the Committee to reconsider its position about reinstatement.³⁰ Catroux was certainly as good as his word. He informed the Committee of the gist of his meeting with the two Lebanese, and continued thus:

Aujourd'hui, devant l'enthousiasme de l'accueil que reçoivent les internés, je suis si persuadé qu'en décevant le sentiment public, nous risquerions de graves aventures et nous nous aliénerions définitivement les populations des deux pays, que je ne me sens pas le droit d'exécuter vos instructions. Celles-ci me paraissent surtout conçues en vue de résister aux exigences britanniques et elles omettent par trop les facteurs psychologiques et humains. C'est parce que j'ai cette matière sous les doigts que je ne peux pas m'y rallier.

Je pourrais certes notifier simplement la décision du Comité au Président restauré et vous remettre ma démission. Mais cette méthode n'éviterait pas les conséquences et ne ferait qu'accroître l'excitation des esprits et servir les Britanniques. Mon devoir est, dans la circonstance -- je m'en excuse auprès du Comité -- de ne pas suivre ses instructions. Je donnerai donc demain après-midi à Bechara el Khoury, mon agrément à la réinstallation de son ministère. J'aurai le sentiment en ce faisant, d'avoir non seulement évité la ruine de notre cause, mais aussi redressé notre

²⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7328/27/89, FO 371/35192; Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7306/27/89, FO 371/35191.

³⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7247/27/89, FO 371/35190.

crédit. Il nous faut en effet, faire ici désormais une politique positive et nouvelle.³¹

Catroux thus felt sufficiently strongly about the reinstatement issue and the emotion it was arousing in the Levant, to propose acting on his own initiative to reinstate the Lebanese government.

He continued to worry however, that his reports had had insufficient impact in Algiers, especially on de Gaulle. On 23 November, he despatched another lengthy telegram, in which he attempted to describe the harm done to the French cause by the small group of men who had surrounded and inspired Helleu. These men had no more conception now of the mistakes they had made and the damage they had committed than they had done before the coup de force of 11 November. Otherwise well-gifted, they had not known when to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the life of the Lebanon and to call a halt to their daily squabbles with the Spears Mission. They were completely unaware that a vulnerable and sensitive Lebanese nationalism had been born and was growing before their very eyes, which could not endure a rigid tutelage, still less a régime of force. "L'art de Spears", Catroux observed, "a été de discerner ce phénomène, de l'encourager et de le soutenir". This growth of nationalist spirit meant that the Lebanese government took the proclamation of independence seriously and regarded the mandate as abolished in practice. The suspension of the constitution and the brutal imprisonment of the Government had been resented as an affront to national dignity and, Catroux observed, had been taken to represent French decadence:

Et il faut bien que l'on sache que le coup du 10 Novembre a produit comme une cristallisation de

³¹ Catroux à Alger, 22 Novembre 1943, No 488-91, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Also printed in Catroux, *op cit*, pp 424-25.

l'idée nationale et a, plus que la défaite de 1940, affaibli la foi et l'admiration des Libanais pour la France.

On ne reconnaît plus en nous les fils spirituels de la Révolution française.³²

Catroux's telegram ended with an impassioned plea:

C'est pourquoi notre redressement doit être effectué sur le plan moral, là où nous avons péché contre l'esprit en employant la force. C'est pourquoi nous ne reprendrons notre figure que par une réparation totale de notre erreur. C'est pourquoi nous devons adapter notre comportement politique aux susceptibilités du sentiment libanais; pourquoi enfin, comme je vous l'ai télégraphié, je ne peux pas, sans nuire à la France, exécuter la décision du Comité. Notre situation morale qui est notre seule force ne peut être sauvegardée et refaite qu'à ces conditions.³³

iv) Macmillan's and Massigli's "Little Conspiracy"

It was small wonder, in view of the fierce opposition de Gaulle was raising to the idea of reinstatement, that when Macmillan finally saw Massigli at 10.00pm on 22 November about the Lebanon, the latter was "very depressed".³⁴ Macmillan had been avoiding meeting Massigli, and as he had predicted, one of the first questions the Frenchman uttered was whether Britain intended to enforce her new deadline (i.e. imposition of British martial law at 10.00am on 24 November) over the one outstanding point of reinstatement. He disclosed that he had received a telegram from Catroux

³² Catroux à de Gaulle, 23 Novembre 1943, No 1614, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Also printed in Catroux, *op cit*, p 426.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 22 November 1943, p 299. Macmillan and Murphy had already seen Massigli earlier in the day, on a different matter.

who proposed reinstating the government on his own authority unless expressly forbidden to do so by the Committee. Massigli was therefore hoping that the Committee, at its next session, might be brought to allow the reinstatement of the Lebanese government, purely on the basis of Catroux's advice and without the Damoclesian device of the British ultimatum.

With this hope in mind, the pair engaged in a "little conspiracy". It was arranged that Macmillan would write an appropriate letter³⁵, restating the British position, which he would delay despatching until after Massigli had departed for the Committee meeting arranged for the following morning. Then, if Massigli was asked during the Committee meeting, whether or not the British ultimatum still applied, he could reply that he did not know.³⁶

According to Macmillan the ruse "worked out well". The French Committee assembled at 10.00am on 23 November, whereupon de Gaulle had remarked facetiously that he supposed their task was to discuss another British ultimatum. Massigli was able to deny this as Macmillan's letter did not arrive until 11.30am. Instead, he read aloud Catroux's telegram, which warned that the situation had forced him to the conclusion that he must reinstate the

³⁵ The letter acknowledged the French concessions and singled out reinstatement as the only outstanding difficulty. It described the strained situation in the Levant and the general opinion that it could not be stabilised unless reinstatement occurred. It referred to the measures of military security which Britain had authorised would be put into operation on 24 November and requested an early decision from the Committee on the matter of reinstatement in view of the need to inform His Majesty's Government with all possible expediency. Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

³⁶ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 22 and 23 November 1943, pp 299-300; Macmillan, Blast of War, pp 428-29; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7310/27/89, FO 371/35191.

ministers on his own authority. (As Massigli later informed Catroux, the Committee had no idea that de Gaulle had already replied to Catroux in its name, insisting that Riad Solh must not be reinstated, and that Catroux had in fact subsequently decided that he could not disobey the Committee.)

After consideration of this information from Catroux, the Committee decided that Catroux should be permitted to proceed as he had outlined and reinstate the government. It seemed that all that was left for the Committee to do was to place the seal of approval on his proposals. There had nonetheless been, as Massigli later told Macmillan, "a most painful scene": de Gaulle had been "in a terrible mood and had been very rude to him". Massigli had twice offered his resignation, though this had been refused by acclamation. After a considerable struggle, he was finally able to swing the Committee to agree to the reinstatement of the Lebanese Ministers "by a good majority -- only de Gaulle, Pleven and Diethelm against him".³⁷

Massigli's own private correspondence confirms the seriousness of the situation he had faced. He wrote to Viénot on 24 November, that the Lebanese affair had occasioned

une crise très sérieuse au sein du Comité même, dans laquelle le Président [de Gaulle] s'est trouvé en fait isolé avec quelques fidèles. Un échange de propos assez vifs entre le Général et moi m'amené à donner ma démission; j'ai dû la reprendre à la demande du Comité en raison du débat en cours à l'Assemblée. Cela vous donne, en tout cas, le ton...³⁸

³⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 23 November 1943, p 300.

³⁸ Massigli à Viénot, 24 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

To Hoppenot³⁹, Massigli wrote of "un vif incident entre le Général et moi". Helleu, he explained, "avait tout à fait perdu la tête, ainsi que ses jeunes Turcs, et il faut, une fois de plus, raccomoder la porcelaine cassée ..." ⁴⁰. A letter to Monnet described "une grande bagarre entre lui [de Gaulle] et moi; des mots vifs ont été échangés". Fortunately, Massigli continued, the situation had eventually been resolved satisfactorily "en empêchant tout discours incendiaire", and Massigli added significantly, "autres folies que l'on avait préparées". ⁴¹ Massigli entrusted a note for Catroux to Count Ostrorog⁴², describing his difficulties and the scene with de Gaulle. "Mais il faut que vous sachiez ceci: la grande majorité du Comité était avec moi et notamment les hommes de la Résistance -- le Troquer, qui est excellent, d'Astier, et même le groupe de la Résistance de l'Assemblée. La suite n'est plus que chronique". ⁴³

Certainly Massigli acknowledged his debt both to individual members of the Committee and also to the

³⁹ Henri Hoppenot: representative of the CFLN in the United States.

⁴⁰ Massigli à Hoppenot, 25 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1481.

⁴¹ Massigli à Monnet, 24 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1484.

⁴² Count Stanislas Ostrorog: of "a Bosphorus background"; had served in China and then in Syria as Assistant High Commissioner in the 1930s; he had been First Secretary in Moscow until 1940 and then served Vichy in the Far Eastern Department before rallying to the Free French. Algiers pointed out that he was often confused with his brother who was rumoured to be a Vichy agent. See Z292/192/17, FO 371/36051 and FO 226/41. He was posted to the Levant after the November crisis.

⁴³ Massigli à Catroux, 25 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1484.

Consultative Assembly. He particularly praised Le Troquer⁴⁴ as "une recrue de tout premier ordre ... avec lequel je m'entends parfaitement sur toutes les questions essentielles et qui vient de m'être un grand appui dans l'affaire libanaise".⁴⁵ In a letter to Viénot, Massigli again singled out Le Troquer with the interesting comment: "Encore quelques semaines et Le Troquer sera le leader du Comité; j'en suis très heureux car nous nous entendons parfaitement et réagissons de même sur les points essentiels".⁴⁶

Massigli was evidently also delighted with the way the Consultative Assembly was shaping up. In a previous letter to Viénot, he had expressed his intention of utilising the Assembly:

Je voudrais aussi me servir de l'Assemblée consultative. Il y a là quelques hommes de qualité et, dans l'ensemble beaucoup de bon sens et de prudence dans le domaine extérieur.⁴⁷

Several days later, Massigli was able to record:

L'Assemblée a réagi exactement comme il le fallait et je me suis senti très fort dans la discussion d'hier, de pouvoir faire état d'une délibération du groupe de la Résistance, qui m'avait convoqué quelques heures auparavant et qui m'avait exposé

⁴⁴ André Le Troquer: Commissioner for the Interior, then Minister for War; described by Macmillan as "a straightforward, if rather silly little man", he had not long since arrived in Algiers. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 17 November 1943, p 295.

⁴⁵ Massigli à Monnet, 24 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1484.

⁴⁶ Massigli à Viénot, 24 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

⁴⁷ Massigli à Viénot, 20 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

nettement son sentiment. D'où un rechauffement de la température pro-alliée...⁴⁸

v) De Gaulle Counter-Attacks

However great his struggles, Massigli had at least been successful. Immediately after the Committee meeting, the shortest of telegrams was quickly despatched to Catroux: "Le Comité, réuni ce matin, a pris acte de votre initiative".⁴⁹ In a more lengthy telegram, Massigli confirmed that the Committee was aware of and upheld Catroux's initiative and added his own words of approval:

Personnellement, je désire vous exprimer ma complète solidarité. La décision que vous avez prise était celle qui, au point de vue où en étaient les choses, ménageait le mieux l'intérêt français. La plupart de nos collègues partageaient ce point de vue.⁵⁰

He informed Catroux:

[Le Comité] a pris acte de vos décisions et n'a pas eu à les approuver, les considérant comme acquises; il croyait en effet, que vous preniez dans l'après-midi même, les mesures envisagés.

Yet what most of the Committee members had not realised, when they met on the morning of 23 November was that de Gaulle had already despatched a reply to Catroux's letter proposing to reinstate the Ministers on his own authority. It was only later on 23 November, when a telegram from Catroux arrived, referring to a telegram from de Gaulle

⁴⁸ Massigli à Viénot, 24 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1480.

⁴⁹ Alger à Catroux, 23 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁵⁰ Massigli à Catroux, 23 Novembre 1943, No 442, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

about which the Committee had known nothing, that Massigli began to realise what had been going on.⁵¹

As the Committee was assembling in Algiers, Catroux had been appalled to receive the following telegram from de Gaulle:

Etant donné l'ultimatum anglais que le monde entier connaît et qui est toujours suspendu sur nous, vous ne pouvez rappeler Riad Solh sans que ce rappel prenne le caractère d'une humiliation infligée à la France par l'Angleterre.⁵²

De Gaulle had instructed Catroux to inform Casey

que votre mission de reconstruction de la vie constitutionnelle au Liban est impossible sous la menace britannique et que vous ne la reprendrez qu'une fois cette menace [sera] retirée. Le Comité délibérera sur ce point demain matin et fera connaître publiquement sa position vis-à-vis du chantage anglais. J'évoquerai moi-même la question demain après-midi à l'Assemblée consultative et je ne doute pas de son sentiment. En tout cas, vous ne pouvez rappeler Riad Solh tant que le Comité s'y oppose. Or, il s'y oppose.⁵³

In view of the bitter reference to the British ultimatum, "que le monde entier connaît", it is possible that de Gaulle was particularly enraged by the leakage of news of the ultimatum in Algiers, which Macmillan reported the following day.⁵⁴ Owing to the fact that it was believed that the leakage had come from French sources anyway, there was not a great deal of sympathy for the French plight:

⁵¹ Massigli à Catroux, 24 Novembre 1943, No 454, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁵² de Gaulle à Catroux, 22 Novembre 1943, No 450(?), Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7300/27/89, FO 371/35191.

Casey, whilst insisting that both Cairo and Beirut had been careful not to allow the impression of an ultimatum to gain confirmation, thought that "any reasonably intelligent newspaper man" might have guessed that "in the circumstances, something that might be called an ultimatum had been lodged".⁵⁵ The Foreign Office similarly felt that it had done what it could to suppress news of the ultimatum "in order to save French face", but if they let the news out themselves, there was little that could be done.⁵⁶

Whatever had inspired de Gaulle's rage, the telegram he despatched certainly stopped Catroux in his tracks. The extent of his shock is evident from a conversation he had with Spears on the afternoon of 23 November, when he revealed to the British Minister that early that morning, just as he resolved to recognise the Solh government, he had received "a most categorical and, he hinted, violent communication from the Algiers Committee, ordering him to state that the present Lebanese Government was illegal and that the National Committee reserved all its rights". From what Catroux said, Spears gained the impression "that had he been so minded, he could, on the strength of this communication, have attempted to use force". Catroux gave "the most positive assurance that he would not use force in any form" and agreed that to do so, "would have the gravest consequences" and "in all likelihood [would] lead to a massacre".⁵⁷

Catroux also mentioned to Spears that he would "tone down" the communication as much as possible, before

⁵⁵ Casey to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7302/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁵⁶ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 24 November 1943, E7302/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁵⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, No 755, E7312/27/89, FO 371/35191; see also Spears, *op cit*, pp 275-76.

transmitting it to him. In fact, the words of the communiqué he finally presented corresponded almost word for word with the original telegram, but it may have suited Catroux to allow Spears to believe that this was the toned down version.⁵⁸ Catroux believed, erroneously, that this telegram had been sent with the Committee's approval and consent. He commented disappointedly that it was quite obvious to him that Massigli and his colleagues in Algiers "were very much in the dark as to the real situation here". Their refusal to compromise seemed to prove that they had no appreciation of the depth of feeling the democratic issue had aroused, and of the fact that "there was in the Lebanon an absolutely solid -- and thanks to Helleu -- completely intransigent public opinion to deal with".⁵⁹ Catroux did not discover until several days later, when Massigli wrote to him, explaining that "le télégramme que vous avez reçu dans la matinée du mardi 23 [Novembre], était ignoré de moi", that the Committee as a whole had no knowledge of the communication he had received.⁶⁰

This bombshell from Algiers seems to have presented Catroux with no moral dilemma: having previously stated that he was of a mind to proceed with the reinstatement of the government on his own initiative, he had also stated that he would not do so if expressly forbidden by the Committee. He therefore replied immediately:

Je ne puis évidemment prendre une autre position que celle du Comité et de l'Assemblée. Je renonce donc

⁵⁸ The communiqué referred firstly to Casey's aide-mémoire of 19 November and stated that as Catroux's mission to re-establish constitutional life in the Lebanon was being carried out "sous la menace britannique", unless that threat was withdrawn, his work would be halted. Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7312/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Massigli à Catroux, 25 November 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

au dessein que j'avais formé de rappeler Riad Solh. J'en aviserai cette après-midi Bechara el Khoury.⁶¹

In a later conversation with Spears, Catroux explained his failure to carry out his threat to reinstate the government by his unwillingness to expose publicly the complete disunity between himself and the Committee.⁶² His telegram to Algiers pointed out that France would be faced with a fait accompli as the government would simply reinstate itself and he had insufficient means to oppose it; besides which, to do so, "serait à l'heure présente, la plus lourde des erreurs". He promised however, that he would officially ignore the reinstated government.⁶³

At 3.00pm on 23 November, Catroux saw Khoury and informed him "que le Comité estimait que le retour au pouvoir de Riad Solh et de ses ministres n'était pas actuellement possible".⁶⁴ The President retorted defiantly that public opinion "n'accepterait pas actuellement le congédiement du cabinet Riad Solh", a fact which Catroux could hardly deny. He at least conceded that, in the interests of maintaining public order, he would not forcefully oppose the reinstallation of the ministers.⁶⁵ Later that afternoon, Bechara el Khoury and his government reoccupied their offices and Riad Solh appealed for a return to work. Spears reported that a formal parliamentary session

⁶¹ Catroux à Alger, 23 November 1943, No 497-98, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Written on this telegram are the words "Lu au Comité le 25 Novembre".

⁶² Spears to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, E7347/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁶³ Catroux à Alger, 23 Novembre 1943, No 1650, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁶⁴ Catroux à Alger, 23 Novembre 1943, No 500-501, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

could not take place due to the immense crowds swelling around the Parliament buildings.⁶⁶

vi) The British Ultimatum Withdrawn

Upon hearing that Massigli had carried the Committee on the issue of reinstatement, and also oblivious of the telegram which de Gaulle had despatched to Catroux, without the knowledge of the Committee, Macmillan delightedly dashed off a telegram containing the good news, and assuming now that British military intervention would not take place.⁶⁷ Retracing events, he eagerly emphasised that the decision to recall Helleu and to release the President and ministers had been freely made by the French Committee

before they had the text of the Casey aide-mémoire. The final point of reinstatement of the Ministers has also been achieved without recourse at this end ... to the threat of a time-limit.

Whilst he admitted that this might seem a minor achievement, he stressed that it had always been his aim to get the French to do Britain's bidding without "too great a sense of humiliation", and he believed that he had been largely successful. Though the pill the French had been obliged to swallow had been bitter, and had been rendered even less palatable by the knowledge that they shouldered the blame for the affair, Macmillan thought "the broad statesmanlike view" which the Committee had adopted, as well as the

⁶⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, No 756, E7307/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁶⁷ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7299/27/89, FO 371/35191.

influence undoubtedly exercised by the new men in the Consultative Assembly, represented a "considerable gain".⁶⁸

Reflecting on the situation again later that day, Macmillan observed that in fact, "the most immediate feature in the picture is a further defeat for de Gaulle". He reported that Massigli had commented that de Gaulle must surely be feeling the difference "between his almost dictatorial authority a few months ago and the present situation. The new members of the Cabinet are much more independently minded than the old and the new Assembly is confronting de Gaulle, who has no Parliamentary experience, with a new problem".⁶⁹

However sympathetic Foreign Office officials might have felt to Macmillan, who was doing his utmost to stress the satisfactory outcome of the crisis and how excellently the French had behaved, at this stage in the crisis, they were able to exert little influence on events in the Lebanon, since all initiative had effectively passed to the Middle East. At noon on 23 November, the Prime Minister had placed himself in full charge of the matter. From his attitude to de Gaulle and his previous interventions in the affair, it might have been expected that once this happened, a hard-line policy towards the French would ensue. This certainly seemed a very strong possibility when at 9.30am on 23 November, Churchill telephoned Casey to complain about "the wishy-washy telegrams" he was receiving from London. (The telegram to which Churchill referred was probably that sent by Eden on 22 November, offering the Cabinet's advice that it would be "a false step" to declare British martial law purely over the issue of reinstatement). Casey had not seen

⁶⁸ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7310/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁶⁹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, No 2470, E7319/27/89, FO 371/35192.

the telegram in question, but thought it best to see the Prime Minister personally. Accompanied by General Wilson, he saw Churchill and described the situation to him "in objective terms", with the result that a fairly conciliatory reply was despatched to Attlee.⁷⁰

Casey later sent Spears a secret and personal copy of Churchill's response to his deputy and the Cabinet. It stated that after the release of the imprisoned ministers by the French the day before, it now seemed "very likely" not only that the ministers would resume their functions at some point later that day, but also that there would be a session of the Lebanese Parliament. It continued:

If the French wisely abstain from violent interference either towards members of the Government and Parliament or against the populace, we shall in fact have obtained satisfaction for the greater part of our request. In these circumstances, it is not proposed to march in and establish martial law from 10.00am tomorrow morning. Our declaration of martial law will remain in suspense. At any moment however, the French, by firing on crowd, or by some other imprudence, may incite a renewal of crisis in a dangerous form, in which case of course, the troops will have to move in, as we cannot allow widespread disorder and bloodshed to happen.⁷¹

Churchill therefore did exactly as the Cabinet had suggested, despite his initially hostile reception to their proposals. He did however, send Macmillan the same telegram with the additional warning that "French anxieties about expiration of ultimatum should not be relieved in any way".⁷²

On receipt of news of Churchill's decision not to impose martial law, Spears requested permission to so inform

⁷⁰ Casey, *op cit*, pp 146-47.

⁷¹ Casey to Spears, 23 November 1943, FO 226/245.

⁷² *ibid*.

Catroux, who would be bound to ask him what the position was. Casey sought Churchill's advice about a suggestion from Spears that he should inform Catroux that it was not proposed to impose martial law for the moment, but that such action might subsequently be necessitated by the security situation.⁷³ Churchill, despite the fact that in the meantime he had learned from Algiers that the Committee had decided to acquiesce in the reinstatement of the ministers, approved this strategy. However, he did observe that now "Britain might even turn the balance slightly the other way, by seeing that the Lebanese Ministers played their part properly now that they had been reinstated".⁷⁴

Having troubled to ascertain exactly what he should tell Catroux about the suspension of martial law, Spears proceeded to ignore his instructions. Minutes prior to his meeting with Catroux at 9.00pm that evening, he too received Macmillan's news that the Committee had now decided to agree to Catroux's plan to reinstate the entire Lebanese government. He decided however, "to tell Catroux only that the Committee had given way ...". Justifying his decision, Spears announced:

I think it much better to leave the French everywhere under the impression that there had been no question of further postponement on our part and that martial law would have been applied immediately had they not accepted our terms.⁷⁵

Casey thought it only logical to advise the French that the threat of martial law no longer applied, with the proviso that it of course always remained open to Britain to declare martial law, if she deemed the security situation warranted.

⁷³ Casey to Churchill, 23 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁷⁴ Note dated 23 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁷⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, No 757, E7322/27/89, FO371/35192.

He informed Churchill that he had instructed Spears and Macmillan to so inform the French⁷⁶, though both representatives thought that it went without saying that Britain reserved the right to impose martial law at any time in the future if the situation required.⁷⁷

Poor Catroux, who had received no word from Algiers must have been extremely relieved, if a little confused, to hear that the Committee had given way. At 00.45am on 24 November, he despatched a telegram to Massigli which he ordered be given absolute priority. In it, he described how he had seen a telegram from Macmillan, "aux termes duquel le Comité aurait approuvé mon initiative". The second part of the telegram makes it fairly plain that he had received the first and even the second of Massigli's telegrams, despatched in haste after the Committee meeting on 23 November but had been confused by their references, for he commented:

J'interprète dans ce sens votre télégramme dont la rédaction me paraît sybilline; j'en aviserai Béchara el Khoury dès demain matin.⁷⁸

Hence on 24 November, Catroux wrote another letter to Khoury requesting that he consider as null and void his letter of the previous day, as the Committee had now accepted his advice about reinstating Riad Solh and his Cabinet. Catroux expressed his happiness at having brought a grave crisis, which he had personally deplored, to a just

⁷⁶ Casey to Churchill, 24 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁷⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, E7378/27/89; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, E7327/27/89; both in FO 371/35192.

⁷⁸ Catroux à Alger, 24 Novembre 1943, No 502, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

and reparatory end.⁷⁹ He and Chataigneau subsequently called on the President and Prime Minister to seal French recognition of the government. He informed Algiers that amicable toasts and greetings had been exchanged with the Lebanese. The town of Beirut was entirely back to normal and the population was satisfied. The only fly in the ointment, he observed, was the attitude of the French community: "Par contre, nos compatriotes n'approuvent point dans leur ensemble ma décision".⁸⁰

vii) Eden's Directive on the Levant

With the arrival in Egypt of Eden, Cadogan and Macmillan on 24 November, the centre of policy formulation switched even more markedly to the Middle East. Casey in particular was quick to take advantage of the presence in Cairo of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to set forth his views on the Levant situation and how it might best be tackled. In a lengthy note to Churchill, he stated that the situation as it stood on 24 November was satisfactory, but forecast that the future held difficulties and dangers. In his estimation, the Lebanese were likely to be intransigent: they would have the bit between their teeth and would be firmly against a treaty. They would probably ignore the French but, realising that their ordeal was not yet over, would at least listen to the British. The French, by contrast, would be desperate to conclude a treaty in order to salvage what they could from the wreck of their position in the Levant, though he felt that they would be disposed to accept a treaty with less meat on it than they would hitherto have considered.

⁷⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, No 761, E7347/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁸⁰ Catroux à Alger, 25 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Casey predicted that the Syrians and the Lebanese would co-operate closely in defying the French, who would be doing all in their power to lessen the blow to their prestige and to cushion North Africa from any knock-on effects. In such circumstances, Casey prescribed the remedial action he thought necessary. He believed that the situation should be allowed to calm down and that the Lebanese should be advised not to seek to implement the constitutional amendment act of 8 November, but rather to treat it as "a gesture of principle". Britain should not insist upon playing the honest-broker in the negotiations but rather should allow the French to realise for themselves that a conference with British involvement probably represented "the only way they can save face and save something out of the wreck of their position in the Levant". Britain should leave both sides well alone and "wait a little", though she should actively try to calm the Lebanese down, for, as he pointed out,

we have something important at stake. It does not suit our book to have engagements torn up. We have our position in Egypt and Iraq to consider. If these Middle Eastern people see one of their number (and the least of them) successfully defying the authority of a (one-time) great power -- we may have the Egyptians and the Iraqis taking note of the lesson.⁸¹

Equally determined to make a contribution and to try and fashion what he considered an appropriate policy, was Macmillan, who almost immediately upon arrival in Cairo, had been summoned to meet Churchill. The Prime Minister had listened "with unusual patience" to the story of the Lebanese affair as seen from Algiers. He seemed "impressed", Macmillan recalled, by the argument

⁸¹ Casey to Churchill, 24 November 1943, PREM 3/421. Churchill circled Casey's sentence about waiting a little and wrote "I agree". Minute by Churchill, 26 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

that de Gaulle had been diverted from extreme courses by his own people and that this method was much more effective than British and American pressure -- especially if openly used -- which merely played into de Gaulle's hands and enabled him to appeal successfully to French pride and sensitiveness.⁸²

Macmillan certainly availed himself of every opportunity to press his views about the Lebanese affair during his time in Cairo. After his meeting with Churchill, he met Cadogan at 10.00pm at the British Embassy for a talk "on current French affairs -- more especially the Levant crisis".⁸³ His diary records a luncheon on 25 November with Churchill, at which Eden was present, during which he had "some interesting talk about French and Near East, and some sharp tiffs".⁸⁴ Late in the afternoon on 25 November, he met with Casey for talks "particularly on Lebanon and Syria".⁸⁵ On 26 November at 7.00pm he had a talk with General Wilson who gave "a very interesting account of the situation in the Lebanon ... He [Wilson] thought Spears's account exaggerated and went so far as to say that as long as Casey and Spears were in charge, nothing would ever be solved. The French hatred for Spears was unbelievable".⁸⁶

The actual task of hammering out a policy which took account of all these considerations and view-points fell to Eden. Macmillan records that at a meeting on 26 November to finalise matters, he had "a bit of a struggle" with the Foreign Secretary, though the latter was "very helpful". The policy, which eventually gained Churchill's concurrence, was

⁸² Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 24 November 1943, p 302.

⁸³ *ibid*, p 303.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, Entry for 25 November 1943, p 304.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p 305.

⁸⁶ *ibid*, Entry for 26 November 1943, p 306.

embodied in a telegram from Eden to the Foreign Office, and owed something to the influence of both Macmillan and Casey. It spoke of the intransigent and difficult attitude the Syrians and Lebanese would inevitably adopt towards the French. Britain might be able to break any deadlock which arose and "to help the French save something out of the wreck of their position in the Levant States". Due to British insistence on elections in the first place and the prominence of her subsequent rôle in the recent crisis, it was felt that she would be able to exert a little more influence.

Britain's objective, Eden outlined, was for France to achieve a position in the Levant broadly corresponding to her own in Iraq. It was not in British interests that the Levant States "should by unilateral action succeed in breaking all political ties with France". If French authority was flouted in the Levant, there might well be harmful repercussions both for the prosecution of the war in North Africa, and upon Britain's own interests in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere. It was proposed that the actual question of a treaty would be better broached at the end of hostilities, when a formal liquidation of the mandate would be possible and France would be in a position to conclude a treaty. In the meantime, a *modus vivendi* was required which would ideally encompass the terms of a projected treaty. It was suggested that perhaps a draft treaty might be drawn up and ratified when circumstances permitted. Macmillan's point that British insistence on participation in the *modus vivendi* negotiations would embarrass the more moderate contingent on the Committee was accepted. Britain would not therefore force her good offices on the French; instead, she would wait in the wings until she could be of assistance. As far as the Lebanese were concerned, Britain should, through General Spears, counsel moderation on them. They should be brought to recognise what they owed Britain for her support and they should be

encouraged to regard their action in unilaterally amending the constitution "as a gesture of principle, balancing the assertion of principle on the French side" and not to force the issue by passing further constitutional amendments pending negotiations. High level discussions with the French would be given further consideration on Eden's return.⁸⁷ If the Levant situation should deteriorate in any way and thereby endanger military security, it was always open, as a last resort, to declare martial law, provided the security position imperatively demanded it.⁸⁸

Both the Foreign Office and Casey copied Eden's directive to Beirut, reminding Spears that it was to be taken as His Majesty's Government's policy and was to be acted upon wherever possible "within the limits of what is practicable".⁸⁹ Macmillan, who had played a large rôle in shaping the directive, adjudged it "very reasonable", and saw it as forging a middle way between the French and the Levant people. As he interpreted it, Britain was to make clear to all and sundry that she had no desire to see French interests in the Levant overthrown. As part of this strategy, the Syrians and the Lebanese (and especially the latter), would have to be deflated, and it should certainly be made plain to them that they could not rely on Britain to eject the French, but only to ensure that they received a fair deal. The French similarly would have to be told that their only hope lay in a liberal and progressive policy, without which their Near East interests would inevitably "go under in the end". The major reservation which Macmillan entertained about the successful execution of the policy

⁸⁷ Eden and Churchill left Cairo on 27 November for the Teheran Conference which was due to commence on 28 November.

⁸⁸ Eden to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, FROZEN No 163, PREM 3/421.

⁸⁹ Foreign Office to Beirut, 27 November 1943, E7319/27/89, FO 371/35192; Casey to Beirut, 28 November 1943, PREM 3/421.

centred entirely on "whether Louis Spears can or will address himself to the uncongenial task of "deflating" the Lebanese". He believed that the rôle of popular hero had rather gone to Spears's head and wondered sarcastically whether "he was ever so cheered and applauded in Carlisle".⁹⁰ The Eastern Department was beset by similar worries: as long as Spears remained, difficulties were inevitable. The fact that he was *persona non grata* with the French only made the situation ten times harder for all concerned.⁹¹ Worst of all, Peterson lamented, was that he could simply not be trusted: now that the Lebanese were released and reinstated, it was his duty to try and make them a little less obstinate towards the French, "even at the cost of a little of his fictitious popularity", which so far, he showed no sign of doing.⁹²

⁹⁰ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 26 November 1943, pp 305-6. Spears was Member of Parliament for Carlisle.

⁹¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 24 November 1943, E7328/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁹² Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 25 November 1943, E7328/27/89, FO 371/35192. In a separate minute, Peterson again expressed his fear that Britain would get nowhere until Spears was replaced. His criticism continued: "I saw him in the cinema the other day, getting out of his car and walking around, waving to the Beirut crowd. A more professional diplomat would have known enough to stay in the background during the row". Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 3 December 1943, E7486/27/89, FO 371/35193.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE AFTERMATH

i) Participation Or Abstention

With the release and eventual reinstatement of the Lebanese ministers, the immediate crisis in the Lebanon was resolved. Spears, always keen to fight his corner, was already anticipating further trouble over the negotiations for a *modus vivendi* and immediately set about preparing to do battle again. He began by attempting to persuade the Foreign Office of the need to establish certain ground rules which he considered an essential prerequisite for the success of any future negotiations. He had already gathered the strong impression from his conversations with Catroux that the French intended to use the 1936 Treaty as a basis for discussions with Syria and the Lebanon; this, he knew, would never be acceptable to the Levant people.¹ Similarly, he believed a conference based in Beirut would be doomed to failure and might well exasperate the Lebanese into taking some really provocative action. Instead, he argued that a conference on British soil, perhaps Cyprus, was vital. At the Foreign Office, Mack expressed considerable doubt about the wisdom of a British venue. He believed it "would only lead to another crisis and Britain would be on a bad wicket".²

Spears further warned that it was absolutely essential for Britain and the United States to restate their attitude towards the mandate "in the most unambiguous terms" for

¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7256/27/89, FO 371/35191.

² Spears to Foreign Office, 22 November 1943, E7256/27/89, FO 371/35191; Minute by W. H. B. Mack, 24/25 November 1943, E7238/27/89, FO 371/35192.

negotiations to be possible between the French Committee and the Levant States. He remonstrated with the Foreign Office:

This crisis might never have arisen had not our own equivocal attitude led the French to assume that they had our support in backing a mandatory position which was incompatible with their pledges and ours to the States, and which was totally unacceptable to the latter.³

He claimed in a lengthy despatch several days later that the Syrians and Lebanese had always believed that the original French proclamations of independence constituted a promise to end the mandatory regime as soon as the Allied invasion was complete, and had offered their co-operation to the Allies on that basis. He had closely analysed those proclamations and failed to see how anyone could dispute "that it was the clear duty of the French to treat the mandate as a dead letter in practice from [1941] onwards and in advance of the negotiation of treaties". If that argument was conceded, then it followed logically "that from the same date, the two states became free agents as regards the conclusion of such treaties". However much Britain wished to see France enjoy a position in the Levant similar to her own in Iraq, that desire was not shared by the Levant peoples themselves; moreover, Britain's desire for something certainly did not confer on her the right to insist on its fulfilment.⁴

Spears also criticised the Foreign Office for seemingly condoning the French intention to withhold various rights to use as bargaining counters to strengthen their position in subsequent treaty negotiations; such behaviour, he claimed,

³ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, E7377/27/89, FO 371/35192. A copy of this telegram in FO 226/245 reads "asserting" and not "backing a mandatory position".

⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, E7712/27/89, FO 371/35195.

was "wholly incompatible with the principles on which mandates are granted". He believed that the French might succeed in negotiating a *modus vivendi* provided they retained only their reserved rights, (i.e. those reserved by Catroux in his proclamation of independence); furthermore, no matter how distasteful this might seem, he believed that they would have to accept British assistance, for without it, they would find it "extremely difficult", if not impossible, to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Levant States. British prestige with the Lebanese stood "very high" at present: whilst there was nothing, within reason, that they would not do for the British, "there is nothing that they would do for the French on a basis of purely bilateral negotiation".⁵

Yet just as Spears attempted to convince the Foreign Office that the only hope of progress in the Levant lay in British participation in the negotiations between France and the States, Macmillan was attempting to do the opposite. Reflecting on events in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, he observed that the affair had been handled "with very reasonable success, since we have got what we wanted without making things too difficult for the French Committee".⁶ He recognised that this had been made possible largely due to the consummate skill and diplomacy of his French colleague and co-conspirator, Massigli, whom he greatly admired. According to Macmillan however, Massigli had been "terribly disheartened" by the whole business in the Levant, agreeing privately that Britain was "in the right". His chief aim now, he had professed, was to restore Franco-British friendship to its old basis, and he had appealed for Macmillan's assistance in this. In return for all his efforts over the past weeks, he had made "an earnest

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ H. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 24 November 1943, p 301.

appeal" that Britain now do her bit and abandon her proposal to participate in the *modus vivendi* negotiations between France and the Levant States; he argued that it was preferable that the interested parties dealt directly with one another, without intermediaries and explained that to secure Britain's abstention from the negotiations would be "very helpful" to him. As a *quid pro quo*, Massigli had suggested high level, informal discussions in London, Algiers or Cairo, "to reach a clear Franco-British understanding ... as to the whole future of the Near East".⁷ His suggestion was entirely sincere since a few days later he wrote to Catroux:

De plus en plus, je suis convaincu qu'une ample explication franco-britannique sur les questions du Moyen Orient et du monde arabe sera, à bref délai, indispensable ... J'aimerais être sûr que vous êtes d'accord...⁸

Massigli's proposals were accorded a mixed reception in London. His latter suggestion seemed ideal to Hankey, who minuted:

It would be a great advantage if we could profit by the present dispute ... to endeavour to reach a proper understanding with the French, who, it may be supposed, must now be beginning to realise the necessity for making an advance in the direction of Lebanese independence.

However, Hankey was doubtful about the idea of Britain abstaining from the *modus vivendi* negotiations. The Lebanese were in a difficult frame of mind and the French intransigent; he was convinced that bilateral negotiations would quickly break down and another crisis might well

⁷ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7319/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁸ Massigli à Catroux, 25 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

result. He believed that what the French really wanted was to avoid having Spears at any conference, a desire with which he could only sympathise and which, he commented,

any sane person must regard ... as reasonable, because it is common knowledge that Sir E. Spears does not want an agreement between the French and the Lebanese and, personal attitudes and personal feelings being what they are, it would be pure ineptitude on our part to insist on his presence at the discussions if we really want an agreement.⁹

What Hankey failed to appreciate was the fact that the French were opposed to British participation in the *modus vivendi* negotiations *per se*, regardless of the identity of the representative, though Spears obviously topped the league of British undesirables for the French. Hoping therefore to accommodate the French by excluding Spears from the negotiations, but ensuring British participation, Hankey proposed inviting Massigli and Catroux to London to join in a little subterfuge. If they could be persuaded to accept British participation in *modus vivendi* negotiations in the Middle East, then Spears would be recalled to London for consultations just as the negotiations were due to commence; Hamilton, assisted either by Lascelles or Furlonge, could attend on Britain's behalf.¹⁰ It is most unlikely, had this plan ever been put into operation that Spears would have stood for being outmanoeuvred in this manner, but the fact that Hankey even contemplated such a trick is proof of the desperate lengths to which the Foreign Office was prepared to go to remove their *enfant terrible* from the Levant, even temporarily.

⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 25 November 1943, E7319/27/89, FO 371/35192.

¹⁰ *ibid.* J. A. Hamilton had been Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut until early 1943 but was now acting as Arab adviser to the Minister of State; D. W. Lascelles and G. W. Furlonge were First Secretary and Consul respectively at Beirut.

The considerable extent of Hankey's worries about Spears's ability to wreck the *modus vivendi* negotiations is confirmed by French sources. Viénot reported a conversation between one of his staff and Hankey, during which the latter had tried to convince his French counterpart that the Foreign Office had no desire to provoke the Committee's suspicions or to upset Anglo-French relations, and was perfectly willing to stand aside from negotiations between France and the Levant States. Hankey had still insisted that most of his colleagues nonetheless believed that in view of Lebanese intransigence, British arbitration and conciliation would probably be salutary. The Frenchman had himself countered that

quelque soit aujourd'hui la sincérité des intentions du Général Spears, il y a, à son égard, un préjugé psychologique qui rendait son intervention impossible.

Viénot had furthermore expressed grave doubts about the efficacy of counsels of moderation to the Lebanese from a man who had actively fostered their unrest for several months. He recorded that Hankey had been forced to agree and had in fact recognised that "si des conseils de modération devaient être donnés aux libanais, ce ne pourrait être que

par une personnalité britannique en qui nous puissions avoir confiance".¹¹

In truth, Hankey almost certainly believed that Britain was "at the parting of the waves"; either an agreement would be brought about between the French and the Lebanese or another dispute would occur, which might unsettle the entire Middle East. Furthermore, he worried that if a dispute did occur, Britain would be forced to take over Lebanon and possibly Syria too, to ensure the maintenance of order, thereby imposing a grave strain on her relations with the French. Given this possibility, he argued that,

if importance is really attached to carrying out the policy of keeping the French in the Lebanon, we must seriously set about arranging an agreement between them and the Lebanese as soon as possible.¹²

ii) The War-Path Resumed

Foreign Office worries about the instability of the Levant situation were only confirmed as disturbing telegrams continued to arrive from Spears. Several described

¹¹ Viénot à Alger, 2 Décembre 1943, No 1563-66, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006. Viénot stressed to Massigli that he had been informed by someone who had just returned from the Levant that the departure of Spears (and also that of Furlonge) from the Levant was "indispensable". Otherwise, it was maintained, the Syrians and Lebanese would refer to him at every step of the negotiations and in effect, the French would be reduced to negotiating with Spears himself. Viénot à Massigli, 21 Décembre 1943, No 332, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000. Two days later, he took up the matter of Spears with Cadogan and informed him "qu'aucun règlement franco-libanais ne serait possible tant que ce dernier [Spears] serait sur place et qu'en ce cas quels que fussent les termes de ses instructions, l'homme restait ce qu'il était, avec son tempérament et ses rancunes". Viénot à Alger, 23 Décembre 1943, No 2048, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1243.

¹² Minutes by R. M. A. Hankey, 25 November 1943, E7307/27/89, FO 371/35191 and E7319/27/89, FO 371/35192.

Parliamentary sessions in Damascus, the main feature of which appeared to be inflammatory and intransigent speeches from the government and the deputies, which all seemed to indicate that the Syrians were set to follow the Lebanese example and repudiate the French mandate.¹³ Furthermore, the Lebanese were insisting that their Reform Bill of 8th November was still valid¹⁴, and Spears, despite Foreign Office instructions that the application of the Reform Bill was a matter for the *modus vivendi* negotiations, was urging Catroux to abrogate Helleu's decree which declared it null and void. There seemed little doubt that unless negotiation could be initiated between the Levant States and the French, a crisis would almost certainly flare up again.

The horizon was not brightened by the still smouldering resentment Spears evidently felt at his exclusion from the initial stages of the recent Cairo conversations on the Lebanon, given that Macmillan had been present. Spears directed much of his wrath towards the policy formulated at those discussions, which Eden's directive had encapsulated. He recorded bitterly that it was apparent either that he had failed to make clear "the strength of Syrian and Lebanese determination to avoid the conclusion of treaties with France at any stage", or alternatively, that this had been appreciated but considered unimportant. Once again, in a lengthy, two-part telegram, Spears attempted to acquaint the Foreign Office with the fundamentals of the Lebanese case. He argued that the Lebanese had always considered the

¹³ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, E7473/27/89 and Spears to Foreign Office, 28 November 1943, E7486/27/89; both in FO 371/35193; Spears to Foreign Office, 4 December 1943, E7633/27/89, FO 371/35194; Spears to Foreign Office, 10 December 1943, E8103/27/89, FO 371/35196.

¹⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7532/27/89, FO 371/35193; Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7594/27/89, FO 371/35194.

mandate as abolished, at least morally if not technically. They acknowledged that during the war, France exercised certain rights, but were adamant that afterwards, France was morally obliged to terminate the mandate, leaving them free to decide the terms, if any, of their future relationship with her. Spears considered this position "unassailable"; moreover, he believed that other governments, to whom the Lebanese would appeal, would view the case on its intrinsic merits and would incline to a similar view. Britain's judgment however, was always clouded by her need to protect her own position in Egypt and Iraq.

He maintained that the Levant States had never intended to negotiate treaties with the French and recent events had only hardened these convictions. As for Eden's proposal that they should initial draft treaties as a prelude to the formal conclusion of treaties, Spears maintained that this would be tantamount to the Levant States putting their heads "at least half way through the noose". Whilst appreciating Britain's role during the crisis, the Lebanese also believed that it would have been dishonourable for Britain to have behaved any differently or to have done any less. The States were convinced that if they had been left to their own devices during the crisis, they could have eradicated French rule once and for all; consequently, they saw no reason to allow anyone to dictate to them now. They would contemplate negotiations for a *modus vivendi*, only provided a reasonable definition of the limitations on their sovereignty as required by the Allied war effort was drawn up and endorsed by Britain.¹⁵

To further illustrate his case, Spears described the fruitless conversations that Catroux had already had with the Syrians and Lebanese. The Syrians had argued that they

¹⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7564/27/89, FO 371/35194.

would only negotiate with the French on a basis of complete equality; they recognised neither France's mandatory authority nor the right of the French Committee to conclude a treaty and had insisted upon the immediate transfer of all the attributes of sovereignty they presently lacked.¹⁶ Catroux had met with equal intransigence from the Lebanese, who had similarly rejected out of hand the idea of negotiating any treaty with the French.¹⁷

Members of the Eastern Department, who had largely agreed with Eden's directive and given it their full support, were irritated by Spears' observations, which as ever, did not seem "to take the larger factors of policy into account". Sir Orme Sargent believed that Spears had finally overplayed his hand, while Sir Maurice Peterson thought it was now obvious that Spears was unwilling to pay lip service any longer to the Foreign Office contention that Britain had no desire to eliminate France from the Levant. He pointed out that from the very start of the recent crisis, Spears had failed to use his influence to check Lebanese provocation of the French, and had even denied the fact that they had been provocative. His relations with the French had been such that "it was useless to expect them to take him into their confidence".¹⁸ As Hankey later observed:

The whole trouble is, [that] Sir E. Spears is determined to get the French completely out of the Levant States regardless of our conception in London of British interests or the Secretary of State's and the Prime Minister's instructions. It is becoming

¹⁶ See Catroux à Alger, 26 Novembre 1943, No 520-9, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575, for an account of Catroux's meeting with representatives of the Syrian Government.

¹⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7555/27/89, FO 371/35194.

¹⁸ Minutes by R. M. A. Hankey, 11 December 1943, Sir Orme Sargent, 4 December, and Sir M. Peterson, 4 December; all in E7564/27/89, FO 371/35194.

futile to send [him] instructions and he will certainly wreck the *modus vivendi* negotiations unless we recall him. This is my considered advice.¹⁹

Yet with the persistence of lemmings, the Eastern Department despatched a series of telegrams to Spears, which attempted once more to explain the premises on which British policy was based, and which he was to regard "as in the nature of instructions".²⁰ Britain recognised that the Levant mandate had been vested in the French State but was now exercised by the French Committee of National Liberation. In 1941, she had endorsed the Committee's promise to embark upon a course leading to the termination of the mandate, provided the French retained certain rights and powers essential for the prosecution of the war. However closely Catroux's proclamations were scrutinised and whatever they said about Levant independence, it was pointed out reprovingly that they also clearly stated that the independence and sovereignty of the Levant States should be consecrated by treaties of alliance with France, pending which the States were to enjoy substantial independence. It was granted that the Committee had been unjustifiably slow in dismantling the mandate. Britain however, saw no inconsistency between the continued existence of the mandate or the future existence of a treaty of alliance and the enjoyment by the Levant States of considerable sovereignty and independence.

It was claimed that in deference to the States' susceptibilities, Britain had always dissuaded the French from flaunting their mandatory authority, but Spears was reminded that British rights in the Levant derived from the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements concluded with the French,

¹⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 3 December 1943, E7564/27/89, FO 371/35194.

²⁰ Foreign Office to Spears, 12 January 1944, E7712/27/89, FO 371/35195.

who in turn derived their rights from the mandate. The mandate therefore remained the foundation of the French position in the Levant and hence, of Britain's own position there. To avoid a renewal of the crisis, the parties had to be brought to reach an agreement to last the war. Britain could not afford to let either of the States take unilateral action which might disturb the peace and create another crisis:

Were this precedent to be established in the Lebanon, it might well prejudice [Britain's] own position in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

Spears was therefore instructed to use his own influence with the Lebanese to ensure that constitutional progress was made in agreement with the French. He was reminded that it was essential that they did not refuse to negotiate altogether with the French, and that it might be helpful to point out to them that their complete independence depended entirely on an eventual Allied victory.²¹

In addition to his resentment at not having participated in the first stage of the Cairo conversations, Spears had been incensed by what he considered to be Macmillan's unwarranted tributes to the attitude of the National Committee and especially to the evolution of de Gaulle throughout the Lebanese crisis.²² During the first few days of December, he had dashed off several telegrams to London pointing out that numerous factors, including Helleu's press statement on 13 November asserting that de Gaulle was in

²¹ Foreign Office to Spears, 14 December 1943, E7486/27/89, FO 371/35193; Foreign Office to Spears, 23 December 1943, E7594/27/89 and Minute by W. E. Beckett, 26 November 1943, E7601/27/89, both in FO 371/35194; Foreign Office to Spears, 12 January 1944, E7712/27/89, FO 371/35195.

²² Spears to Foreign Office, 1 December 1943, E7583/27/89, FO 371/35194.

full agreement with the measures he had taken, and de Gaulle's attitude throughout, indicated that the General "almost certainly" gave Helleu instructions before the latter left Algiers on 6 November, to "use force" against the Lebanese if they proceeded with their Constitutional Reform Act. Spears conceded at least that it was unclear "to what extent the Committee individually or collectively knew and approved beforehand of what was afoot". What was clear, he maintained, "is that they publicly backed Helleu's action until the very last moment, when under pressure, and in face of Catroux's reports, they gave way".²³

Furthermore, Spears had informed London that in his opinion, Macmillan had had the wool well and truly pulled over his eyes by Massigli. Spears did not deny that Massigli was obviously concerned about Anglo-French relations, but believed that it was impossible for him not to have had prior knowledge of certain communications made to Catroux, which he had never mentioned to Macmillan. Spears referred in particular to instructions sent to Catroux on 22 November, which French sources now reveal to have emanated from de Gaulle personally. Massigli certainly had no knowledge of these instructions and again, French sources contain his own letter to Catroux, explaining that he only gleaned knowledge of the instructions from a subsequent reference to them in a telegram from Beirut.

Spears was equally uncharitable about Catroux. He observed that his evolution from his first conversation with Casey in Cairo on 15 November, to his final conversation in Beirut on 26 November, made "an interesting study". Spears accused the Committee and Catroux of still thinking in terms of "face-saving" and Catroux of showing "no indication of realising the need for a speedy solution or of meeting our

²³ *ibid.*

demands until the day after he received Casey's aide-mémoire" [i.e. 20 November]²⁴.

In a further telegram, he announced that it was "perfectly obvious that his [Catroux's] and the National Committee's eventual acceptance of our demands was due solely to our subsequent ultimatum and that nothing less would have sufficed to restore the *status quo*".²⁵ Spears was determined that no-one should be fooled "by current French propaganda lines "that but for the brutal British ultimatum, a satisfactory solution would have been reached much sooner"." He hoped that means would quickly be found "to scotch this mischievous falsehood at a high level".²⁶

There was indeed recognition within the Foreign Office that Britain would "not have got satisfaction out of the French if we had not been extremely firm with them..."²⁷ Spears's claim, however, was not entirely just: though Catroux might have maintained an obstinate front in discussions with Spears, he had early on realised the depth of public feeling and the need for a speedy solution and had stressed both these factors to Algiers. Although he had originally proposed a plan which involved releasing all the Ministers but reinstating only the President, he had also warned Algiers of the unlikelihood that such a plan would succeed and stressed that he saw no alternative to restoring the constitutional position as it was prior to Helleu's arrests.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 3 December 1943, E7615/27/89, FO 371/35194.

²⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 3 December 1943, E7615/27/89, FO 371/35194.

²⁷ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 6 December 1943, E7615/27/89, FO 371/35194.

The Eastern Department did its utmost to assure Spears that equal pressure was being put on the French to make them understand how urgent a settlement had become. The need for them to take a further step towards independence for the Levant States was now imperative:

While we do not want in the least to interfere directly, the last crisis has shown only too clearly that if the situation is allowed to drift, and above all, if the French take a legalistic stand on the theoretical existence of the Mandate and continue to refuse to make the concessions which are necessary to Arab nationalism, we are all of us going to find ourselves in Queer Street. Quite apart from our promises to the Levant peoples, we cannot afford to risk local disorders, due to reasonable popular discontents in Syria and the Lebanon, touching off Palestine at this juncture of the war (and incidentally at the outset of the Presidential campaign in America).²⁸

It was therefore decided that, if another crisis was to be avoided, the time had come "to push the French down the road which they must follow".²⁹ Instructions were accordingly despatched to Macmillan requesting that he stress to Massigli the urgent necessity of pressing on with discussions for a *modus vivendi* and for progress towards Lebanese independence: any difficulties the French caused now would certainly hinder progress and "inevitably lead to a state bordering on revolution". The instructions continued:

We do not wish to urge our good offices upon [Massigli] if he does not want them, but you should tell him that we are pressing the Levant States not to be unreasonable and you should leave him in no

²⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 30 November 1943, E7688/27/89, FO 371/35195.

²⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 30 November 1943, E7486/27/89, FO 371/35193.

doubt of our close interest, both moral and strategic, in an early settlement of this question.³⁰

In fact, Macmillan had already had an encouraging conversation about the Levant, though with Catroux, the day after the latter's return to Algiers. The Frenchman had been "rather tired and depressed", and had complained bitterly about the humiliation of the British ultimatum. He had reasserted his conviction that Helleu had acted "without any precise instructions"; he had however, admitted that Helleu had behaved with "extraordinary folly", alleging that he had "probably misinterpreted a general expression of support which he had received from General de Gaulle". The latter, he confided, had "much calmed down" and his mood had definitely changed from the truculence and obstinacy which his telegrams early in the crisis had revealed. Catroux confirmed Macmillan's belief that de Gaulle had been heavily influenced by the attitude of the Consultative Assembly, which was "definitely pro-British" and most resolutely opposed to any rupture in Franco-British relations.

Still more promisingly, Catroux had informed Macmillan that he intended to ask the Committee for an entirely free hand to deal with the Levant States, without which he would refuse to return there. He wanted to try and start direct negotiations immediately upon his return and spoke of "a series of individual arrangements ... to be brought together under a preamble as a single document which would be a provisional treaty". He stated additionally that he thought an agreement was possible, but, despite reassurances from Macmillan that this was not the policy of His Majesty's Government, voiced fears that if the States thought they could rely on British support, their intransigence would only increase and confound his plans. Thus both Catroux and the Foreign Office shared the same awful vision of Spears

³⁰ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 4 December 1943, E7486/27/89, FO 371/35193.

working in league with the States to sabotage French efforts to reach an agreement. Undoubtedly spurred on by this grim prospect, Catroux was prompted to intimate that he was prepared to contemplate a change in the status of the French representative to the rank of ambassador; he quickly stipulated however, that this would of course require "an equal change in the character of the Spears Mission".

Despite the Frenchman's attitude that if the Committee was required to make certain sacrifices, then he expected Britain to make at least equal sacrifices, Macmillan was convinced that Catroux recognised that the problem had to be settled "in the spirit of the times". He observed that Catroux seemed to place a great deal of hope in the new Committee and Consultative Assembly for a more progressive policy than had been evident hitherto, and expressed his conviction that he would "make a great effort to reach a settlement". Macmillan ended his report with a plea that British influence should be similarly exerted to help Catroux in his task.³¹

This news from Macmillan, which seemed to confirm that Catroux at least was moving in the right direction, thereby justifying the faith the Foreign Office had placed in him, encouraged the Eastern Department. It was thought that the Levant States would probably agree to Catroux's idea of separate agreements which corresponded generally to Britain's own idea. Sir Maurice Peterson was despondent however, and minuted ruefully "We shall never get anywhere until General Spears is replaced".³² More rashly, Hankey recorded optimistically that he thought he could detect "the beginnings of hope of an agreement"; he too, quickly

³¹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 1 December 1943, E7582/27/89, FO 371/35194.

³² Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 3 December 1943, E7486/27/89, FO 371/35193.

corrected himself, remembering that Catroux had stipulated that "the only hope of ... succeeding is that British influence is not used, behind the scenes or otherwise, to prevent an understanding being reached. We have, I am sorry to say", Hankey observed, "absolutely no guarantee on this point".³³

iii) Cairo Conversations

As the Teheran Conference drew to a close on 1 December, the Sextant Conference resumed in Cairo on 4 December, and provided an excellent opportunity for further high-level discussions on the Levant situation, and for attempting once more to bring Spears to book. Macmillan, who had departed Cairo whilst "the Emperors" were temporarily away in Teheran, returned on 4 December, not without some trepidation. He realised that he might well be regarded as having made trouble over the Lebanese affair, and knowing full well the extent of Churchill's loyalty to old friends such as Spears (sometimes excessive loyalty, Macmillan thought), he was uncertain about his future.³⁴ Macmillan's fears were not borne out however, as a conversation in the early hours of 5 December with both Roosevelt and with Churchill revealed; he found the President "still very critical of de Gaulle and the French", whereas after a subsequent private conversation on France, he recorded that

³³ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 3 December 1943, E7582/27/89, FO 371/35194.

³⁴ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 27 November 1943, p 307. Macmillan believed that the Mediterranean command, Algiers and Cairo, would be united under one commander and reasoned that if there was to be only one commander, there would be only one Resident Minister. He was kept guessing however, as to "whether Casey or Macmillan will be liquidated". See War Diaries, Entry for 5 December 1943, p 319.

Churchill "still opposes in argument but accepts in reality a great part of my views".³⁵

Macmillan was also relieved to discover that at a meeting with Casey at noon that day on the Lebanon, the Minister Resident appeared to be taking "a more moderate view".³⁶ He was not too optimistic however, for though he recognised Casey was "intelligent", "absolutely honest, patriotic and devoted", he also considered him "weak" and inexperienced, which meant that he was "completely in Spears's pocket".³⁷ Macmillan believed that Spears had "forced his policy too far and too unscrupulously"; he had failed to realise that it was possible to be firm with the French without being rude to them.³⁸ Casey's present moderation Macmillan attributed entirely to the absence of Spears.

Indeed, when Spears himself reached Cairo, Macmillan noted at a meeting at noon on 6 December that he was "in great fighting form".³⁹ At a much larger meeting the following day⁴⁰, Spears was slightly less vociferous, though he made his opinions known. From the very outset, Eden made it plain that regarding the problem of the Levant States, one of his primary concerns was to ensure that the Levant

³⁵ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 5 December 1943, p 318.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 25 November 1943, p 305.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 6 December 1943, p 319.

⁴⁰ The meeting took place at the British Embassy at 3.30pm and was attended by Eden, Casey, Macmillan, Killearn, Spears, Cadogan, Sir William Croft, Morton, Makins and Lascelles. See Memorandum of meeting, 7 December 1943, FO 660/41.

governments did not unilaterally terminate the existing mandatory régime, thereby setting a precedent which might sooner or later be followed by other countries in the Middle East; Lampson made the point that this might easily have awkward repercussions for Britain in Palestine and even possibly in Egypt.

In the course of further discussion, Eden made plain his desire to "save French face". It was pointed out that as the mandatory régime could not be altered during the war, what Britain ideally required was a negotiated agreement between France and the Levant States, pending a more general settlement at the end of hostilities. Cadogan observed that to achieve this end, Britain "might have to put a little pressure on the Lebanese". Spears explained that from what he had understood, it was Catroux's intention to settle the various points at issue with the Levant States one by one and to bind together all the agreements under one preamble. He advised that great discretion would be required in suggesting to the Lebanese that they should concede to the French any point to which they attached real importance. In particular, if the preamble were to include any reference to the pre-eminent position of France, the Lebanese would refuse to have anything to do with it. He was anyway afraid that the Lebanese would have nothing to do with the French.⁴¹

These observations from Spears allowed Eden to make his own position crystal clear. He stated quite pointedly that the Lebanese "must not get the impression that anything they did would enjoy [British] support". Britain should use her influence with the Lebanese "to help the French. He wished to adopt an impartial attitude but he was afraid that the Lebanese view of impartiality was that [Britain] should support them against the French". He again repeated that "he

⁴¹ Memorandum of meeting at British Embassy, Cairo, 7 December 1943, 3.30pm. FO 660/41.

wished to help the French and to save French face as much as possible".⁴² From Eden's point of view, it was Lampson who made the crucial point: the Ambassador

presumed [British] policy still was to act in the Levant with an eye to the effect in Metropolitan France. In other words we must subordinate what seemed to be our best policy from the local angle to fit in with higher policy which dictated we must not humble the French too much.⁴³

From his account in Fulfilment of a Mission, Spears also grasped what Eden was trying his utmost to get across, but his comments make it plain that he thought very little of such a policy. He states that Eden

was obviously anxious that nothing which happened in the Levant should make our task in France itself more difficult. This was indeed the Foreign Office policy in a nutshell. De Gaulle was an awful nuisance, of course, but behind that as the backdrop, you could see that these officials from London thought of themselves relaxing with the French, living in their beautiful country, enjoying its excellent cuisine, its pleasant and easily-reached capital.⁴⁴

From this jaundiced and ungracious diatribe, it seems that Spears viewed Foreign Office policy towards France as little more than an insurance policy for a ticket to the good life once the war was over.

It is quite plain that the emphasis of the meeting had been that a people under mandate "should not be permitted to

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Trefor Evans (Ed), The Killearn Diaries, 1934-1946, Entry for 6 December 1943, p 270. Killearn mistakenly dates the meeting as taking place on 6 December; both Spears and Macmillan date the meeting as 7 December, which is born out by the official record.

⁴⁴ Spears, Fulfilment of a Mission, pp 280-82.

terminate the mandatory arrangements without appropriate agreement with the mandatory power".⁴⁵ Both Lampson and Macmillan left the meeting with the clear impression that the Lebanese would have to tone down their behaviour. Lampson recorded that the general feeling was that the Lebanese would now have to put "a little water in their wine", and that Britain would have to ensure "that they didn't take the bit too much between their teeth and run amuck". He commented that Spears "seemed to think he would be able to get things fairly straight and prevent a real rumpus, in which I hope he is right but suspect that he is being over-optimistic".⁴⁶ From his own point of view, Macmillan had found the meeting "quite satisfactory". He considered that "the final decision -- which was to damp down the Lebanese a bit and induce them to reach an arrangement which would secure to the French a position rather like ours in Iraq -- was the right one". What concerned him most however, was his considerable doubt about Spears's ability to carry out the decision "in the spirit (or even in the letter) unless he gets a very straight talk from Winston", which he admitted he was trying to arrange.⁴⁷

Churchill did see Spears on 9 December but the meeting was to prove something of a mixed blessing. Spears recalled that Churchill was "very friendly and even affectionate throughout the interview"; he told him that he had "done very well in extremely difficult circumstances ... had shown restraint and judgement and had found a solution on democratic lines". The Prime Minister had stressed that Spears should remain in the Levant to carry out his difficult task. He had however, warned Spears of "the danger

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ T. Evans, (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 6 December 1943, p 270.

⁴⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 7 December 1943, pp 320-21.

inherent in the position in the Levant which might raise issues of positive danger to ourselves in other parts of the world. What people might learn to do against the French in the Levant might well be turned to account against us later. We should discourage the throwing of stones since we had greenhouses of our own -- acres and acres of them ..."⁴⁸ Spears, for his part, promised that he would "keep things ticking over until the end of the war", though it remained to be seen which part of the interview he was to take to heart.⁴⁹

iv) Taking The British To Task

Though Massigli was anxious to see Franco-British relations quickly restored to normal, as were most of his colleagues, there nonetheless existed amongst many French a strong determination that the British should be made to realise how shabby their recent treatment of them had been. Beirut was informed that it was intended to present Britain with a note about her attitude over the Lebanese affair and was asked to provide Algiers with "les faits précis qui peuvent être reprochés aux autorités britanniques".⁵⁰ Meanwhile, until the case for the prosecution was compiled, Viénot, in numerous conversations with members of British officialdom, let it be known that the "brutality and precipitancy" of Britain's behaviour had occasioned bitter disappointment amongst the French.

He had already reproached the British on several occasions over the attitude of the press and especially Reuters during the Lebanese crisis. Particularly great

⁴⁸ Spears-Churchill Interview, 9 December 1943, Casey's villa, Mena, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Alger à Beyrouth, 29 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006.

irritation however, had been caused by a press statement issued by Spears on 22 November in which he had stated that he believed that Catroux was contemplating a solution to the crisis which corresponded closely to that which the British government herself considered necessary (i.e. release and reinstatement). He had continued:

What remains to be seen, is whether General de Gaulle and the National Committee will come to the same realisation quickly enough.⁵¹

Viénot had immediately protested vigorously to Sir Orme Sargent about the statement, which he claimed was incorrect and which would render "plus difficile encore la solution de la crise". He argued that throughout Spears had "abused his position in order to work against the French and this was a striking case of unwarranted interference on his part". Orme Sargent replied by stressing Britain's responsibility for maintaining order in what was a battle zone and drew attention to the failure of either the Committee or Catroux to take early remedial action; he did, however, promise to demand an explanation from Spears.⁵² The French in fact proceeded to present a formal protest to the British about the matter, pointing out how regrettable it was that Spears should have interfered so openly in what was a Franco-Lebanese dispute; his statement had constituted "a veritable act of pressure" and was certainly not calculated to facilitate either a solution of the crisis or a return to calm.⁵³

⁵¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7304/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁵² Viénot à Alger, 23 Novembre 1943, No 1376-7, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005; Minute by Sir Orme Sargent, 23 November 1943, E7408/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁵³ Makins to Foreign Office, 28 November 1943, E7487/27/89, FO 371/35193.

Spears's statement, which drew an untimely distinction between the views of Général Catroux and de Gaulle, had aroused similar indignation amongst many British, who had criticised it as being impolitic. Patrick Reilly, on Macmillan's staff in Algiers, thought that the Committee had "much justification for their protest".⁵⁴ In London, a Parliamentary Question was tabled for 2 December, asking whether the statement had been made with the Secretary of State's approval.⁵⁵ In his defence, Spears had claimed that not only had Casey approved the statement, but it had also been read in part over the telephone to Catroux prior to its issuance. For fear of drawing attention to the episode and causing any further embarrassment to Anglo-French relations, the Question was subsequently withdrawn, at the Foreign Office's request.⁵⁶

At the meeting on 23rd November with Sir Orme Sargent, Viénot had not confined his complaints to the issue of Spears's press statement, but had seized the opportunity to draw attention to "la gravité des procédés employés par le gouvernement britannique dans l'affaire du Liban et avant tout sur "l'ultimatum" ". He informed Algiers subsequently that he was convinced that his representation had had some impact: he had developed his arguments forcefully and moreover he was known to be dedicated to the cause of good Franco-British relations. Orme Sargent "n'a défendu qu'assez mollement l'attitude prise par le gouvernement britannique" and what was more, he had gained the strong impression

⁵⁴ Minute by P. Reilly, 27 November 1943, FO 660/40.

⁵⁵ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 30 November 1943, E7487/27/89, FO 371/35193; Parliamentary Question by Major Lloyd for 2 December, E7543/27/89, FO 371/35194.

⁵⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7304/27/89, FO 371 35191; Spears to Foreign Office, 29 November 1943, E7508/27/89, FO 371/35193; Foreign Office minute, 7 January 1944, E7543/27/89, FO 371/35194.

que l'emploi vis-à-vis de nous, de procédés aussi brutaux, a été inspiré plutôt par M. Churchill que par le Foreign Office.⁵⁷

In attempting to analyse the British reaction to the Lebanese crisis for Algiers, Viénot pin-pointed a whole variety of factors which had probably contributed to its severity. He explained that Britain was particularly aware of the volatility of the Middle East and was correspondingly sensitive about any slight Arab reaction. He thought nonetheless that there had been a definite tendency to exploit the crisis as an opportunity for Britain to try and increase her prestige at France's expense. Viénot was certain that the British government had been under some pressure from the military to expedite matters as quickly as possible and he knew that the imminence of the two major Allied conferences in Cairo and Teheran would have provided further impetus.

Another vital factor contributing to the British reaction, Viénot believed, was the doubt existing in British minds that Helleu had acted without instructions: the British had been worried all along that they were perhaps being faced with "un coup de tête" du Comité et du Général de Gaulle". He had been questioned insistently on this issue; Orme Sargent in particular had expressed regret that the Committee had not disavowed Helleu at the very outset, which "aurait tout arrangé et évité tout incident". This inquisition clearly signified to Viénot that the British government "s'était trompé sur l'origine de la crise". He believed that Orme Sargent himself deplored the fact that

⁵⁷ Viénot à Alger, 24 Novembre 1943, No 1393, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005; Minute by Sir Orme Sargent, 23 November 1943, E7408/27/89, FO 371/35192. (An edited copy of Vienot's report is printed in de Gaulle, L'Unité 1942-44, pp 602-603).

this misunderstanding had led to "une conduite si brutale et précipitée".⁵⁸

From what he had gleaned in conversations, Viénot was also convinced that two things in particular had created the worst possible impression on the British: one was the Committee's refusal in Algiers to respond to Macmillan's démarches early in the crisis, and the other was Catroux's first conversation with Casey in Cairo:

D'une part, ils [les Britanniques] ont eu le sentiment que nous voulions systématiquement "minimiser" et "localiser" l'incident, le tenir pour négligeable, et d'autre part que nous les menacions et de faire appel contre eux à l'opinion intérieure française et à l'opinion internationale. Au moment où nous avons les plus fortes raisons de tenir les Britanniques pour des alliés peu loyaux sur le terrain du Levant, ceux-ci nous ont accusé de vouloir nous montrer nous-mêmes peu fidèles et peu reconnaissants sur le terrain de la politique générale.⁵⁹

Viénot subsequently laid even heavier stress on the rôle which Catroux's conversation with Casey in Cairo had played in escalating the crisis. In a separate note to Massigli written "en grande hâte", he disclosed precise details

sur l'origine du fameux "ultimatum" au sujet des affaires libanaises; et c'est dans une large mesure Catroux qui en est responsable. La conversation qu'il a eue avec Casey ... a fait une impression déplorable.

According to Viénot's information, Catroux had apparently created the impression that the French were completely unwilling to listen to reason; Casey had consequently despatched a somewhat alarmist telegram to London as a

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

result of which he had been instructed to present Catroux with the ultimatum:

C'est un geste de peur d'un part, d'exaspération d'autre part. On n'en est d'ailleurs pas très fier aujourd'hui et on s'en rend compte qu'on a manqué de sang-froid".⁶⁰

Another important factor in explaining the British attitude, Viénot believed, had been the personal prejudice which Churchill and large sections of the British public harboured towards de Gaulle. Many influential people had come to regard de Gaulle as an enemy of Britain, and, believing him to be personally involved in orchestrating the Lebanese incident, saw no reason to help him. Lastly, Viénot was convinced that the British government and again, particularly Churchill, had yet to understand the full significance of the recent changes in the Committee; they had failed to appreciate sufficiently its representative nature and "governmental" character now it was restructured. Yet whatever excuses Viénot had discovered to account for the British attitude, he was forced to conclude that "En résumé, les Anglais se sont montrés brutaux, hâtifs et peu clairvoyants...".⁶¹

In addition to all Viénot's representations, the French did eventually compose a note of protest to the British concerning the crisis in Franco-British relations provoked by the Lebanese affair. It criticised the methods which Britain had not hesitated to contemplate, which were "inadmissible" between Allies and the execution of which would have had the gravest consequences. The note took issue with Britain's plea that the deteriorating situation in the

⁶⁰ Viénot à Massigli, 27 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁶¹ Viénot à Alger, 24 Novembre 1943, No 1393, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Levant had forced her to act as she had. It pointed out that the French command had sufficient forces at its disposal to restore order, had it been disturbed. The note observed that any disruption which had occurred most unfortunately owed its origin to the spread of tendentious and inaccurate reports from British-controlled radio stations and press agencies. Moreover, Spears's action in publicly taking sides against Helleu "n'a pas peu contribué à jeter le trouble dans les esprits". Attention was drawn to the contradiction between the solemn declarations of principle uttered by Churchill and Eden and these more recent events. The letter of protest ended however, in a more conciliatory vein, by suggesting the need for frank explanations to create an entirely new atmosphere and to dissipate the present uneasiness.⁶²

The note was presented to Macmillan on the evening of 1st December, yet for all its severity, Macmillan's account of its delivery indicates that, as far as he and Massigli were concerned, the note was merely a matter of formality to be taken with a large grain of salt:

It was six typewritten pages. I said, "Tell me, I am not a diplomat, what do I do with this? Must I read it?" "No", said Massigli, "you need not read it. You must send it, though, to your Government". "Fine", I said, "I will. Will you have a drink?"⁶³

The episode is proudly related by Macmillan; he felt that Massigli at least had always understood that he had tried to help him, and the "easy manner" in which the matter was dispensed with was "a sign of confidence and good

⁶² Algiers to Foreign Office, 2 December 1943, E7928/27/89, FO 371/35195; Résumé of French note sent to Viénot, 4 December 1943, No 284, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000. (PREM 3/421 contains an English translation of the note).

⁶³ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 1 December 1943, p 312.

fellowship".⁶⁴ In forwarding a copy of the note to London, Algiers pointed out that Massigli had said "that the only really important thing in it was the last sentence ... Mr. Macmillan gathered that the rest ... need not be taken too seriously".⁶⁵ Casey, when he learned of the note, found himself unable to take such a relaxed view and hoped that Britain would not accept "without adequate reply this deliberate slap in the face by the French Committee".⁶⁶ Dundas commented sensibly:

If we wish to improve our relations with the French, there seems little point in slapping back.

On Cadogan's instructions, the French note, along with the earlier protest about Spears's statement, remained unanswered.⁶⁷

v) The British Make Amends

Yet if the French were determined to heap complaints and accusations on the British, there were many British who were equally determined to turn the other cheek. Viénot remarked that, despite his plain speaking, Sir Orme Sargent (and Sir William Strang who was also present) had paid sincere attention to his comments. More importantly, he observed:

Ils ont manifesté le vif désir de voir se liquider et s'effacer l'incident, et les relations franco-britanniques reprendre leurs cours normal: celui d'une alliance que des rivalités locales au Levant

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Algiers to Foreign Office, 2 December 1943, PREM 3/421.

⁶⁶ Casey to Foreign Office, 4 December 1943, E7634/27/89, FO 371/35194.

⁶⁷ Minutes by C. A. F. Dundas, 7 December 1943, and Sir A. Cadogan, 13 December 1943, E7634/27/89, FO 371/35194.

ne sauraient affecter gravement et qui demeure au premier plan des préoccupations fondamentales de l'Angleterre.

Moreover, Viénot had high hopes that the excessive reactions of British press and opinion at the height of the crisis would eventually redound to France's advantage. He thought that he had already detected signs of such a change:

Beaucoup d'hommes reconnaissent "qu'on est allé trop loin". Un gêne se manifeste. On peut espérer que, demain, ce sera un regret, sinon un remords.

Viénot however, was determined to capitalise on this display of remorse from the British and to extract some profit for France's suffering. He announced to Algiers:

Je m'efforcerai d'en tirer quelque bénéfice pour notre politique: les obstacles peuvent, en certain cas, être utilisés comme tremplins.⁶⁸

Over the next few days, Viénot showered Algiers with reports demonstrating the obvious eagerness of many British to mend their fences with the French. On 26 November, he claimed to have seen the first indications in the press of the backlash he had anticipated and thought it quite possible that France might shortly reap the benefit of this development. Sir Orme Sargent took a leading rôle in the Foreign Office campaign to mollify the French over the Lebanese incident, informing Viénot in a separate encounter on 26th November "combien on était heureux que l'affaire soit réglée et ne vienne plus encombrer les relations franco-britanniques".⁶⁹ Again on 30 November, Dejean reported

⁶⁸ Viénot à Alger, 24 Novembre 1943, No 1393, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁶⁹ Viénot à Alger, 26 Novembre 1943, No 1444, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

that a colleague, prior to departing for Algiers, had spoken with Sir Orme Sargent. The latter had declared that:

l'affaire libanaise n'était qu'un incident qui ne saurait affecter d'une forme durable les rapports franco-britanniques.⁷⁰

He had apparently expressed himself "en termes élogieux au sujet du Comité d'Alger", commenting that "Au yeux du gouvernement britannique, le Comité est le véritable gouvernement français".⁷¹ This remarkable desire of the British to atone for their crimes and to practise "une politique d'apaisement" only confirmed Vienot's belief that "on est secrètement gêné de la brutalité des moyens qu'on a employé vis-à-vis de nous".⁷²

Nor in the task of conciliating the French was Sir Orme Sargent the sole campaigner: Viénot had a lengthy conversation with Attlee on 26 November, when the Deputy Prime Minister did his best to smooth his old friend's ruffled feathers. Viénot had frankly admitted Helleu's mistakes but had complained of the rôle played by a variety of British officials "et plus spécialement par le Général Spears"; he alleged that "the initial step taken by the Lebanese ... was due to a conviction that they could count on British support". Attlee had denied that there was any ground for such an allegation. His own experience had shown that

both Britain and France in their dealings with Asiatic peoples were apt to be hurt at the lack of gratitude for past help ... and the national tendency was to ascribe to the influences of another Power what was really due to the rising tide of

⁷⁰ Dejean à Alger, 30 Novembre 1943, No 400, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Viénot à Alger, 26 Novembre 1943, No 1444, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

national feeling and impatience of European tutelage.

Viénot had additionally mentioned his suspicions that the Lebanese incident had been used as an opportunity for a display of hostility towards the Committee and even the French people themselves. Attlee however "s'est excusé de la violence de la presse libérale et socialiste anglaise en l'attribuant à une attitude traditionnelle adoptée en matière coloniale par les partis de gauche". He had explained that the Labour movement "was always suspicious of governments run by Generals" and claimed that now that the Committee had disavowed Helleu, it would find its position strengthened in the realms of democratic opinion. Viénot had also criticised the shortness of time which Britain had allowed the French to resolve the crisis, but Attlee countered that the French had seriously underestimated the gravity of the local situation, and that military necessity had forced Britain to insist on a speedy settlement of the affair.⁷³

The French were also able to find comfort in public criticism from certain prominent British figures, of the government's conduct throughout the Lebanese crisis. Most notable were the rebukes administered by Harold Nicolson, the outspoken champion of the French. In the House of Commons on 14 and 15 December, Nicolson had confessed that he failed to understand why, when it was declared British policy to restore France to her former position of independence and prestige, the government seemed in all its actions, to be following a contrary policy. Whilst he conceded that the government was perfectly right to insist on the release of the Lebanese government, he argued that the matter might have been handled more tactfully. Britain

⁷³ Viénot à Alger, 29 Novembre 1943, No 1525-28, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005; Record by C. R. Attlee of conversation with Viénot, 26 November 1943, E7688/27/89, FO 371/35195.

would do well to remember that in Syria and Lebanon, France had behind her centuries of tradition and moreover, that there was hardly a Frenchman who was not convinced that Britain's primary aim was to evict France from the Levant. These interventions on behalf of France were gratefully acknowledged by Viénot.⁷⁴

Viénot had declared that he would do his best to extract some benefit for France from Britain's display of remorse. Discussing the Lebanese affair with Richard Law⁷⁵, he set about doing just that. He began by expressing his fear that though locally the crisis might be over, it was far from resolved on the more general plane of Franco-British relations. Viénot attempted to explain how much offence Casey's brutal ultimatum had caused and how unnecessary it had been. From the very outset, he claimed, the French Committee had intended to settle the crisis "dans un esprit d'équité et de compréhension qui aurait donné pleine satisfaction à tous les intéressés". Law, Viénot recorded, had sought to justify the British precipitancy by alleging that neither the Committee nor Catroux seemed to realise sufficiently the gravity of the affair and the need for an urgent settlement. It was those very considerations which had prompted Casey's démarche, which had been decided upon only reluctantly and with regret. Law claimed that he was not ashamed of Britain's behaviour though he confessed to have been unhappy about it. Viénot stressed how necessary it was "de dissiper l'atmosphère fâcheuse qui régnait depuis l'ouverture de la crise" and then quickly offered a suggestion as to how this might best be done: he

⁷⁴ See Viénot à Alger, 16 Décembre 1943, No 182; Viénot à Massigli, 16 Décembre 1943, No 319; Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1243; Foreign Office to Algiers, 16 December 1943, E7949/27/89, FO 371/35196.

⁷⁵ Richard K. Law: Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Foreign Office 1941-43; appointed Minister of State late September 1943.

reminded Law that the Committee was still awaiting a response from Britain to her request for inclusion in the military operations destined to open a second front.⁷⁶ Time was pressing and in the absence of a decision in principle, there was a real risk that the second front would be opened without the participation of the three divisions the Committee was offering:

L'intérêt britannique s'accordait avec notre légitime demande. La présence de troupes françaises aux côtés des alliés donnerait son maximum de retentissement psychologique au débarquement. Le grand mouvement d'enthousiasme populaire qui permettrait d'établir les relations franco-britanniques sur une base durable avec le concours ardent de l'opinion publique, s'en trouverait renforcé.⁷⁷

It is quite evident what Viénot was about. He hoped to trade on Britain's embarrassment over her rough treatment of France to secure a positive response to issues on which the Committee was at issue with the Allies.

⁷⁶ A definite commitment to launch Operations Overlord and Anvil (the cross-Channel invasion of France and a subsidiary diversionary invasion of Southern France) had been taken at the Teheran Conference and the Free French were most anxious to secure Allied agreement to their participation in the operation to liberate France.

⁷⁷ Viénot à Alger, 27 Novembre 1943, No 1492, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REFORMATION AND REASSESSMENT

i) Clearing Out The Augean Stable

The British were obviously keen to see Catroux commence negotiations as soon as possible with the Levant States, though they had few illusions about the enormous difficulties he would face. For Catroux himself, who was primarily concerned with salvaging as much as he could of France's prestige and position in the Levant, negotiations with the Syrians and Lebanese may well have presented a less daunting prospect than the more immediate task of dealing with the bitterly hostile and firmly entrenched French administration and civilian community in the Levant. Catroux knew that he could not afford to shirk his responsibilities and embarked immediately on a "purge" of those officials most directly involved in the recent crisis. Almost on arrival in Beirut, he had advised Algiers that Helleu, Baelen and Boegner would have to go and Massigli had endorsed this advice. Helleu had proved less than co-operative, though his two staff were more accommodating; amongst others whose services were dispensed with were Gautier¹, the head of Sûreté, and Capitaine Moret², both of whom had been closely involved with the arrests of 11

¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 25 November 1943, E7402/27/89, FO 371/35192. Spears later reported that Gautier had been appointed to the "very important post of Préfet of Oran". His informant had remarked, "with some justification", he noted, that it was impossible to believe that de Gaulle and the Committee disapproved of what had happened in the Lebanon when Gautier was rewarded thus. See Spears to Foreign Office, 17 December 1943, E8100/27/89, FO 371/35196.

² Beyrouth à Alger, 24 Novembre 1943, No 504, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1573.

November; similarly, M. David, the délégué in Beirut, was to be replaced, as was M. Rozek, an adviser on Eastern affairs.³

Spears commended Catroux's "most laudable beginnings at clearing out the Augean stable of the Délégation", but nonetheless feared, especially from the tone of recent articles in the French press⁴, that "the Bourbons were still in control".⁵ Though Catroux did in fact promise to put a stop to the violently anti-British polemics which featured regularly in French newspapers⁶, other signs indicated that he faced considerable opposition from within the French community. Urged by Spears to abrogate all Helleu's decrees of 10th November, Catroux had privately agreed with the wisdom of this advice. All the decrees were in fact annulled, with the exception of Article One, which nullified the Lebanese Constitutional Reform Bill, and the preamble which asserted that fresh elections would be necessary.⁷ When Spears tried to persuade Catroux to abrogate the remaining sections, on the grounds that their continued existence was likely to provoke the Lebanese Chamber⁸, the Frenchman confessed that, having recently convened a meeting of all French officials and officers in Beirut, "the temper and attitude was so ugly and opposition to the policy he had

³ Note d'un bon informateur concernant la situation au Liban, 6 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Vichy Levant, Vol 30.

⁴ For example, "La Syrie" had recently contained what Spears considered to be "a most impertinent attack on British intervention in the crisis". Spears to Foreign Office, 25 November 1943, E7405/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, E7445/27/89, FO 371/35192.

⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 November 1943, E7305/27/89, FO 371/35191.

⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 November 1943, E7347/27/89, FO 371/35192.

followed so strong, that he did not dare ... to carry out this step". Spears continued:

The attitude of a great many Frenchmen here is quite unbelievable. It can only be described as that of a slave merchant to an escaped slave.⁹

There were even persistent rumours, he reported, that certain elements among the French were planning a putsch against the Lebanese; in an attempt to foil any such attempt, the Lebanese government had all been sleeping under one roof under a heavy gendarmerie guard.¹⁰

The resistance which Helleu had offered to his summons to Algiers for consultation, and especially his personal appeals to de Gaulle, had been another indicator of the nature and extent of opposition which Catroux faced. Helleu had refused to accept his recall to Algiers unless confirmed by General de Gaulle to whom he had appealed personally. Massigli had been obliged to write to him, expressing surprise that he had not yet responded to the Committee's request and reminding him that he was administratively responsible to the Commissariat aux Affaires Étrangères.¹¹ Massigli had also written to both Catroux and Chataigneau, revealing that he had been "extrêmement peiné de l'état anarchique que révèle le système des télégrammes personnels".¹² There had been several other occasions during

⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, E7445/27/89, FO 371/35193.

¹⁰ *ibid.* P. Reilly, on Macmillan's staff in Algiers, thought that the allegation about a possible putsch seemed "hardly credible", but admitted "it does look as if there may well be further trouble". See Minute by P. Reilly, 28 November 1943, FO 660/40.

¹¹ Massigli à Helleu, 27 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹² Massigli à Catroux et Chataigneau, 25 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

the recent crisis when both incoming and outgoing telegrams had come to light, the existence of which had been unknown to both Massigli and the majority of the Committee; justifiably annoyed, Massigli decided to try and put a stop to the whole system of personal telegrams which had so undermined his authority.¹³

Nonetheless, Helleu was still managing to communicate directly with de Gaulle by telegram as late as 26 November. Possibly hoping to cause trouble for Catroux and to save some of his own skin, Helleu notified de Gaulle of the unsettling effect Catroux's measures were having:

L'émotion provoqué dans tout le pays par les mesures prises par le Général Catroux est immense. Un discours prononcé par lui à Damas, devant les sommités politiques, militaires et relations de la colonie française a reçu un accueil glacial. Indépendamment des considérations de politique général dont je ne suis pas juge, je souhaiterais que le Comité ... ne se prononce définitivement sur les mesures contredites par le Général Catroux avant que j'ai pu être moi-même entendu. Je crois savoir que le Général Catroux quitte le Levant dimanche. Moi-même, je ne pourrai pas être avant mercredi à Alger où j'arriverai avec un fort important dossier.¹⁴

In fact, Helleu left Beirut the very next day, still protesting his "innocence".¹⁵ Speaking to an American journalist whilst passing through Cairo, he insisted that he had acted only in conformity with instructions from the Algiers Committee. To reinforce his argument he had pointed

¹³ Massigli à Catroux et Chataigneau, 25 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

¹⁴ Helleu à de Gaulle, 26 Novembre 1943, No 1686, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁵ Beyrouth à Alger, 29 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

to his long experience in the diplomatic world, acquired over thirty eight years of service.¹⁶

ii) A Psychoanalysis Of The Cabinet Politique

If Massigli had not already realised the extent of the task Catroux faced in the Levant, it was admirably brought home to him by one G. Bonoure, who offered him his own eye-witness observations. Bonoure imagined that Massigli and his colleagues in Algiers must be wondering and failing to understand how the events in the Lebanon had come about. From his insight, Bonoure offered to "faire la psychoanalyse du Cabinet Politique de Beyrouth" and to explain

comment un acte si pareil, si contraire à nos traditions, à nos moeurs, à tout ce qu'on attend de nous dans le monde, a pu être conçu et exécuté ... comment il se peut se faire que des diplomates aient résolu un jour de passer la parôle aux flics et aux mitraillettes.¹⁷

Bonoure alleged that after the resounding election defeat, the governing clique within the Cabinet Politique, filled with spite, resentment and self-reproach, had been forced to stake everything on one last throw of the dice. They had felt compelled to precipitate a violent crisis to divert attention from their own failures. Inspired by the Neroistic principle of "Du moins nous finirons en beauté", the protagonists had conceived of the coup as

un expédient aventureux pour tenter de sauver une partie perdue, ou du moins achever la faillite en gloire ... un de ces défis à la fortune où l'on

¹⁶ Note, 11 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Vichy Levant, Vol 30.

¹⁷ G. Bonoure à Massigli, 27 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

hasarde tout en pensant que l'éclat du geste compensera la ruine.

One of the group had even likened the French action to a card game, in which the imposition of Eddé was seen as the trump card. Bonoure continued his diagnosis:

Les dirigeants de notre politique au Levant savaient qu'ainsi, ils escamoteraient la responsabilité qu'ils avaient assumées sur le plan local. L'affaire cesserait d'être une affaire libanaise qui avait fait éclater leur incapacité à tous les yeux. Elle passait sur le plan international. Elle devenait une affaire anglo-française où ils apparaissaient comme les champions valeureux de nos intérêts impériaux, où ils bénéficiaient de la révolte du sentiment national français soulevé contre l'alliée déloyale et perfide. Par cette substitution, ils se sauvaient eux-mêmes. Au lieu d'être des brouillons et des débiles, ils devenaient les héros.¹⁸

Bonoure claimed that since his return to the Levant in August, he had noticed that it was plain to everyone that France was courting disaster. His Syrian and Lebanese friends, Moslem and Christian alike, had come to him daily, out of genuine concern, to ask if the French had really lost their heads. In fact, Bonoure stated, there was no longer any head to lose: throughout the intensely busy pre-election period and even during the elections themselves, Helleu had remained ensconced in his mountain residence, while his subordinates, right down to provincial advisers, schemed and politicked.¹⁹ Bonoure claimed that in twenty years of the mandate, even at its worst moments, he had never witnessed

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Lady Spears observed in her personal account of the Lebanese crisis, that Helleu "would disappear for days, the gossips said with a supply of whisky bottles, leaving Boegner and Baelen in charge of the Grand Sérail ... it wasn't long before Boegner held everything French, including his miserable chief, in his scrawny, prehensile fanatically anti-British hands". Mary Borden, Journey Down A Blind Alley, p 213.

"le spectacle d'une pareille décomposition". The French had been simultaneously hateful and ridiculous, but what he found was most difficult to come to terms with was to now watch those responsible for the crisis "enveloppés dans les plis du drapeau ... se rengorger en prétendant que dans cette affaire, ils ont été les seuls vrais patriotes".²⁰

Bonoure argued that however much one tried to blame the wicked British, it was "puéril d'accuser un rival dont les desseins, jamais changés, sont connus depuis vingt ans, qui dépose de la force matérielle et à qui notre carence imbécile remet tous les atouts de la partie". From the very outset, France had played into England's hands by deciding upon force:

Nous avons achevé nous-mêmes magnifiquement le succès que son travail, sa continuité des vues, son effort persévérant, lui avaient assuré aux élections. L'Angleterre avait ici le prestige de la force matérielle; nous lui avons ajouté le prestige de la force morale. Spears doit bien rire.²¹

Catroux's job had been extraordinarily difficult, Bonoure stressed. The public response to the arrests had been unprecedented -- unanimous, passionate and even violent. Beirut had never seen the like of such demonstrations before. The country had been on the verge of insurrection:

Tu penses bien que le dernier cireur de bottes connaît notre faiblesse et sait que nous avons trois bataillons seulement pour soutenir notre politique nazie. Catroux, dans le rétablissement qu'il a fait, nous donne le Levant une seconde fois.

²⁰ G. Bonoure à Massigli, 27 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

²¹ *ibid.*

Bonoure emphasised that France must now undertake "une politique de reconstruction véritable, hardie et déterminée", and put an end once and for all to the period of disorder and confusion which presently held sway. He recalled a quote from Sainte Beuve: "Les hommes manquaient encore aux choses et il est souvent infligé aux sociétés en détresse de les désirer longtemps". Utilising the dictum, he concluded: "Les choses du Levant manquent des hommes: ne nous les laisse pas désirer trop longtemps".²²

iii) New Blood Required

The call for a thorough reshuffle and renewal of Levant personnel in the Levant was one which was being made to Algiers with increasing frequency and insistency. Echoing Bonoure's appeal, Count Stanislas Ostrorog, newly arrived from Algiers, considered that the current French authorities were "frappées de léthargie" and required a complete shake-up, if they were going to engage in the struggle "contre la marée anglaise qui risque de tout submerger". He advised the elimination of certain officials and their replacement, above all, by "des fonctionnaires efficients ... [qui] connaissent l'art de plaire".²³

Catroux agreed completely with both Bonoure and Ostrorog about the need to settle the Levant personnel problem urgently and was himself making strong recommendations to the Committee on that very matter. He saw the need to settle the post of Délégué Général as a first priority. To stabilise the Levant situation, he considered a man of prestige and authority was required, who must be, above all else, politically astute. In the present climate, there

²² *ibid.*

²³ Extraits d'une lettre personnelle de S. Ostrorog, 8 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006.

could be no recrudescence of the petty struggles and conflicts which had besmirched relations between Helleu and Général de Lavalade. Catroux thought the post should be entrusted to a military general, one who possessed the relevant attributes, and who could combine the military command with the political authority. He proposed Général Beynet for the job, as a man "qui possède de l'autorité et qui, dans ses séjours dans ce pays-ci, a connu les gens et les choses". He additionally suggested that the Délégué Général be assisted by a Délégué Adjoint, a rôle which he considered Chataigneau would fill admirably.²⁴

Alternatively, if this suggestion did not commend itself, Catroux thought that a civilian notable might do, provided he was a skilled negotiator and politician. Though Massigli was his first choice, Catroux recognised his present indispensability, and instead, proposed Viénot, who had an excellent reputation in the Levant²⁵; as a civilian, he should be assisted by a loyal military commander of quality, perhaps Général St. Didier. Catroux thought that both Général de Lavalade and Général Monclar should go, the former because he had offended the civilian authorities and the latter not only because of his quarrels with the British in Lattakia, which still rankled, but also and primarily "[parce] qu'il est resté l'homme dès début du mandat". After offering suggestions for various other posts²⁶, Catroux

²⁴ Catroux à Alger, 27 Novembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005. Catroux had originally thought that Chataigneau might replace Helleu, but changed his mind, realising that he did not possess the correct psychology and outlook required by the new situation. Général de Tassigny was considered but rejected as he was not familiar with the Levant and had never handled political problems.

²⁵ Viénot, as Deputy Foreign Minister to the Blum government, had played a major rôle in negotiating the 1936 treaties with the Levant States.

²⁶ Catroux suggested that Binoche should head the Sûreté Générale and that Boujard ought to be Secrétaire Générale, while Ostrorog ought to remain in Damascus.

additionally requested the despatch of five or six hand-picked young officers or diplomats, whose specific brief would be to reestablish and renew contacts with the Levantines, an aspect of policy which had hitherto, he observed, been "entièrement abandonné aux britanniques". Most importantly, the new Délégué Générale should realise

que l'indépendance est devenue une réalité, que les susceptibilités sont vives et qu'il n'est plus possible d'agir sur les gouvernements par intervention directe, et qu'il faut s'imposer à eux par le talent et la persuasion.²⁷

Though Catroux had obviously done his best to rid the Levant of all those most directly responsible for the coup d'état, the task of filling their posts with untarnished, forward-thinking personnel of the type he desired, could not be completed overnight. Meanwhile, the prospect of Catroux's imminent departure forced Spears to admit that he was nervous about what would happen in his absence, as Chataigneau had "little authority" and de Lavalade was "an old woman".²⁸ Catroux too informed Algiers that the Lebanese government and numerous French and Lebanese individuals had all begged him to remain in the Levant several weeks longer, alleging that the firm re-establishment of public order and good relations between the two countries depended purely on his presence and personal standing; he had received similar pleas from Damascus and confessed that he shared the fears. Although torn by conflicting responsibilities, Catroux decided that it was his duty to return and to inform the Committee in Algiers without delay of "la situation

²⁷ Catroux à Alger, 27 Novembre 1943, No 533-9, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

²⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 November 1943, E7445/27/89, FO 371/35193.

affligeante où le coup du 10 novembre nous a fait descendre et de laquelle il faut sortir avec le minimum de dommages".²⁹

Before leaving the Middle East on 30 November³⁰, Catroux had conversations with the two Levant governments. Both had stressed their continued refusal to recognise the French Committee as entitled to conclude a treaty and demanded the transfer to themselves within the shortest possible time of all the attributes of sovereignty. Faced with such intransigence, Catroux had informed them that he was prepared to drop the idea of a treaty until the end of the war and would negotiate a number of separate agreements with the States which might then be bound together by some preamble conceding the French a position in the Levant.³¹

Catroux additionally informed Algiers that he had convened meetings of all French officials and officers in Damascus and Beirut "afin d'apaiser le ressentiment ou de dissiper l'état de marasme". He had explained recent events to them as well as "les raisons qui ont motivé le règlement de l'affaire". He continued:

Je les ai invités à garder leur sang-froid et leur courage et à conserver la conviction que nous surmonterions cette épreuve. J'ai lieu de croire que j'ai été compris.³²

²⁹ Catroux à Alger, 28 Novembre 1943, No 541-2, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

³⁰ Casey to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7523/27/89, FO 371/35193.

³¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7555/27/89, FO 371/35194.

³² Catroux à Alger, 28 Novembre 1943, No 543, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

Spears, who had attempted to monitor these gatherings, was on the whole impressed with Catroux's performance; he felt the Frenchman had done his best to impress on his compatriots the realities of the situation. That Catroux had been reported as accusing Britain of inflicting "a second Fashoda" on the French Spears was prepared to forgive, as he realised that Catroux was probably afraid of losing his authority over his men unless he took an anti-British line. More importantly Catroux had stressed the need for the French to cultivate a new attitude towards the Syrians and Lebanese; he warned his conseillers in particular to remember always that they were servants to and not masters of the governments to which they were accredited.³³ The Eastern Department welcomed these reports. Catroux seemed to be taking a sensible line and his attitude towards his officials was deemed "salutary, whatever he may have said about Great Britain". "We must help Catroux", minuted Hankey, "He is our only hope in this mess".³⁴

iv) Transferring The Blame

The weeks after the crisis were difficult for those French who had survived Catroux's "épuration". Just as Catroux, on arrival in the Levant, had distanced himself from Helleu and his cronies, there were others who felt the need to dissociate themselves from the acts of the disgraced Délégué Général. Most notable amongst these were Général Chadebec de Lavalade and Général Bapst, who circulated a note on 2 December to all French officers, exonerating themselves and by implication, the Army, from any part in the arrest of the Lebanese government. They claimed that

³³ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 November 1943, E7556/27/89, FO 371/35194.

³⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 3 December 1943, E7556/27/89, FO 371/35194.

ill-intentioned individuals were seeking to compromise the Army, by imputing to it a share of responsibility for the crisis. The note denied that they personally had had prior knowledge of Helleu's plans; it explained that on the evening of 10 November, they had merely been informed that the military review scheduled to take place the following day, would not take place, that demonstrations were expected and that certain military precautions ought to be taken in case of trouble, and finally that arrests would occur. De Lavalade's note continued:

Les noms des personnes à arrêter ne me furent pas précisés. Dans mon esprit et tels que les faits m'avaient été présentés, ces arrestations éventuelles devaient être la conséquence et non la cause des manifestations. C'est entre 5h et 6h, le 11e [Novembre], que le Général Humblot et moi-même fûmes informés que le Président et les Ministres avaient été arrêtés. C'est entre 8h30 et 9h que j'appris la dissolution de la Chambre et le choix de M. Eddé. Les dés étant jetés, notre devoir était clair: faire bloc, sans récriminer, derrière le Représentant de la France.³⁵

Thus the Army absolved itself of any responsibility in the planning of the arrests and carefully avoided exposing itself to accusations of disloyalty: once the arrests had been made, it was claimed, there had been no option but to fall in behind Helleu and maintain solidarity.

Civilian members of the French establishment demonstrated an equally marked tendency in lengthy post-mortems to abstain from any criticism of the French administration of which they were part; they strove instead to play down the extent of the crisis and to play up the rôle of the British, at whose feet the blame for everything was laid. Chataigneau sent Massigli several such reports:

³⁵ Note par Général Chadebec de Lavalade et Général Bapst, 2 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000. Also contained in SHAT, 4H/308/3.

one, an eighteen page document on the unfolding of events during the crisis, sought particularly to minimise the scale of the troubles. It claimed that the strike had been partial and that the demonstrations in Beirut had initially been strictly localised, until the closure of the American University on 13 November swelled the ranks of the demonstrators. Apart from Tripoli and one or two other areas, the entire country had been undisturbed, contrary to the impression which Reuters had sought to convey. Chataigneau was positive that, had the British ultimatum not been met, Britain would have taken control in the Levant:

l'autorité militaire britannique aurait proclamé l'état de siège et pris en main le contrôle de l'administration du pays. Tout un personnel d'officiers venus de toutes le Proche Orient, de Libye, de l'Afrique Orientale, était à pied d'oeuvre pour se substituer aux conseillers français dans les administrations libanaises.³⁶

There was no denying, Chataigneau stated, that the French position in the Lebanon "a subi une atteinte au cours des récents événements".³⁷ In contrast, he pointed out in a separate report that the British were enjoying a swell in prestige:

L'appui publique donné par eux au Gouvernement Riad Solh, les encouragements qu'à tous les échelons ils ont prodigués au mouvement de résistance contre les mesures de forces prises par M. Helleu, et enfin, le succès de ce mouvement, consacrent leur puissance aux yeux d'une opinion que les manifestations de la force impressionnent.³⁸

³⁶ Chataigneau à Massigli, 9 Decembre 1943, No 357, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Chataigneau à Massigli, 9 Decembre 1943, No 355, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

Chataigneau assiduously provided Algiers with a catalogue of incidents which he maintained incriminated the British. To illustrate how the British were continuing to attempt to usurp the French authorities in their relations with the Levant States, he cited their continued efforts to become involved in the distribution of paper.³⁹ He insisted that British offers of financial assistance for irrigation work near Tyre and in the Southern Bekaa region provided "une preuve nouvelle des dispositions de la mission Spears à se substituer à cette délégation..."⁴⁰ Criticism was also levelled at General Holmes who, under orders from General Spears, had threatened to take over the distribution of general supplies in Beirut, when it was discovered, after a visit to General de Lavalade on 14 November, that no satisfactory arrangements had been made to feed the population of Beirut during the strike.⁴¹ These attempts "tendaient donc à substituer, sans raison valable, des agents britanniques à des agents français et à laisser croire à la population que la 9e Armée pourvoyait à ses besoins".⁴²

³⁹ Beyrouth à Alger, 14 Decembre 1943, No 582-83, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1023. Paper supplies had proved an endless source of antagonism between the French and the British. Britain actually supplied the paper and then decided on the quantities to be allocated to the French and to the Levant states. The actual distribution to the Levant States was undertaken by the French. The French usually complained about the quantity allocated, and the Committee in Algiers had approached the Soviet Union as an alternative source. See Garreau(Moscou) à Beyrouth, 6 Decembre 1943, No 481, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁴⁰ Chataigneau à Massigli, 10 Decembre 1943, No 604-5, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

⁴¹ Notes by Army Commander on Military Security Situation, November 1943, WO 201/982.

⁴² Chataigneau à Massigli, 9 Decembre 1943, No 357, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

Another report brimming with accusations against the British was one filed by Colonel Oliva Roget, the Délégué at Damascus, on the origins of the Lebanese crisis and its repercussions in Syria. According to Oliva Roget, Britain's behaviour in Syria and Lebanon had to be viewed against the much wider back-drop of her imperial designs. He alleged that Britain was seeking to create a barrier against American competition in the Middle Eastern oil fields and against Russian expansion into the Eastern Mediterranean. The barrier she hoped to erect was Arab Union, "et la mise à l'écart de la France faciliterait ... l'opération". If the British scheme did not necessarily involve the complete eviction of the French from the Levant, it certainly required that France did not retain a position in the Levant superior to Britain's own. Britain had cunningly recognised the need, therefore, to attack France in the Lebanon, the stronghold of her position in the Middle East: whereas she had hardly intervened in the Syrian elections, it had been a different story in the Lebanon, where she had openly entered the fray and with considerable success. Indeed, it was the election of an Anglophile, pan-Arab and militant chamber, the report maintained, which had paved the way for the crisis:

L'erreur cruciale de la Délégation Générale n'est pas l'incident du 11e novembre. C'est d'avoir perdu des élections que nous pouvions gagner.

Despite concentrating their main efforts on the Lebanon, the British had not ignored Syria completely: they had attempted unsuccessfully to incite the Syrian population to provoke trouble over events in the Lebanon. More success had been achieved however, with members of the Syrian Parliament, whose fiery speeches Oliva Roget was certain had been inspired by British bribes.⁴³ He insisted however, that

⁴³ Chataigneau had similarly reported that it seemed incontrovertible that the speech of one Syrian deputy, Fakri Bey, was the result of a British bribe in the region of

it was only when Lebanese success seemed sure that the Syrians, "littéralement assailli par les Anglo-Saxons", had jumped on the band-wagon and begun their own assault on the French.

Oliva Roget went on to cite numerous specific examples of grave British discourtesies towards the French and their attempts to incite the Syrians during the Lebanese crisis. He complained about Major R. A. Beaumont⁴⁴, who had encouraged the Syrian deputies to vote a motion of solidarity with the Lebanese, and had advised students to listen to radio broadcasts which had been emitting "des injures à la France" and "de véritables appels à l'émeute". Colonel Brenan⁴⁵ had been in Damascus over three weeks before even attempting to pay a courtesy visit to Oliva Roget himself; Colonel Summerhayes at Aleppo⁴⁶ had hinted that he was to restrict relations with the French "au seules nécessités du service"; similarly, Lt. Col. Ditchburn⁴⁷ had refused to dine with Colonel des Essars, and seemed unable to set a future date on which he would be free to do so. Various other reports had reached Oliva Roget causing him to believe that even officers of the Ninth Army had been instructed to intervene openly in local affairs, with the result that on 26 November, uniformed British soldiers had been sighted amongst demonstrators.⁴⁸ Two other British

£5,000.

⁴⁴ Major R. A. Beaumont: Vice Consul, Damascus.

⁴⁵ Colonel Brenan: Political Officer, Damascus.

⁴⁶ Colonel C. H. Summerhayes: Consul, Aleppo.

⁴⁷ Lt. Col. Ditchburn: Political Liaison Officer, Lattakia.

⁴⁸ The Spears Mission vehemently denied this accusation, explaining that the man sighted had been a local individual, discharged from the British Army. See correspondence in FO 226/241.

agents, Stirling⁴⁹ and Altounian⁵⁰, had stayed in Damascus during the troubles, but, Oliva Roget commented, "il est difficile de juger l'action de ces deux officiers ... Ils se sont montrés très prudents". Furthermore, the Ninth Army had offered protection to the dissident government at Bchemoun and had even posted a permanent liaison vehicle there, to alert the Army in case of French attack.⁵¹ Commenting on Oliva Roget's report, Chataigneau observed that:

Sur l'activité des anglo-saxons, le rapport abonde en informations précieuses. Il faudrait tout citer en ce qui concerne notamment le travail sournois de dissociation entrepris par la Mission Spears, ses intrigues, ses appels publics et confidentiels à l'émeute, ses insolences calculées à l'égard des autorités françaises. Le Colonel Oliva Roget ne semble pas avoir une impression meilleure de la 9e Armée anglaise. Du moins ont-ils été plus discrets.⁵²

v) Delenda Est Mission Spears

Given the deeply entrenched suspicion and residual resentment which the French community in the Levant felt towards Britain, which had only been heightened by the Lebanese crisis and Britain's rôle in it, it is hardly surprising that men such as Chataigneau and Oliva Roget should seek to denounce the British and to transfer blame to

⁴⁹ See Lt. Col. W. F. Stirling, *op cit*, pp 223-224. Stirling had been summoned from Deir ez Zor to act as General Holmes's personal liaison officer with the Syria government.

⁵⁰ See again Stirling, *op cit*, pp 217-218 on Altounian, a former doctor, now a British intelligence officer.

⁵¹ "La crise libanaise et ses répercussions politiques en Syrie", Colonel Oliva Roget, 18 Decembre 1943, No 548/SP, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006.

⁵² Chataigneau à Massigli, 21 December 1943, Guerre 1939-35, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

Spears and his Mission, from themselves and the French establishment to which they unquestionably belonged. Yet the same bitterness and hostility towards Spears was demonstrated by Frenchmen who had had no part in the crisis, who had arrived in the Levant only in its aftermath, who were therefore blameless and had no apparent reason to seek a scapegoat and to discredit the British, except perhaps as an expression of solidarity with their compatriots. One such a man was Ostrorog, who within a week of his arrival, was despatching reports on British interference in Levant affairs. Though he conceded that for the most part the French could not produce "des preuves catégoriques", he asserted vehemently

qu'étant donné ce qui se passe ici depuis deux ans, l'atmosphère générale et la conviction des individus ... il n'est pas possible aux Anglais de prétendre qu'ils restent neutres en Syrie et au Liban et qu'ils ne s'efforcent pas, par tous les moyens, d'y prendre une place privilégiée. Le fait même que le Général Spears ... est maintenu ici, et que malgré toutes nos préventions, justifiées ou injustifiées à son égard, on nous impose sa présence, montre de quelle manière les autorités britanniques prétendent mener leurs affaires. Je vous signale ces faits non dans un esprit d'indignation vaine, mais parce qu'ils expriment la réalité.⁵³

Writing to Massigli, Ostrorog persisted in inveighing against the pernicious influence of General Spears:

L'impression générale et dominante qui se dégage est que le Général Spears et Madame Spears mènent une campagne acharnée pour arriver à chasser la France des Etats du Levant. Auprès des libanais, ils ne font point mystère de leur désir et s'efforcent par tous les moyens d'élargir le fossé entre la France et le Liban. A cet effet, tous les moyens leur sont bons et la thèse générale qu'ils soutiennent est que

⁵³ Extraits d'une lettre personnelle de Stas. i.e. Stanislas Ostrorog, 8 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006.

la France a reçu des blessures trop mortelles pour pouvoir soutenir son rôle dans le Levant.⁵⁴

Ostrorog was well aware that his continual harping on the subject of Spears might seem obsessive to those in Algiers. In a separate letter, he wrote:

Au risque de passer pour un maniaque et la victime d'idées fixes, je dois revenir encore sur le cas Spears. Venu depuis quinze jours à peine et dans les sentiments que vous connaissez, je ne puis ... passer pour suspect ni subissant de manière excessive les influences locales.

But, he continued, information he had received from Gwynn at the American Legation⁵⁵ and from the Lebanese themselves was conclusive and unanimous:

Le Général et Lady Spears continuent de faire tout ce qu'ils peuvent pour ruiner notre situation. Il n'y a pas un fonctionnaire français dont ils n'attaquent l'attitude et la personnalité. Tout moyen leur est bon pour nous discréditer. Ne croyez pas que je m'échauffe. J'ai vu Spears tout au long. Nous n'avons parlé que monde et société parisienne -- car il est snob -- mes relations sont excellentes avec les Anglais et les Américains et vous pouvez être assuré que tout sera fait pour détendre ici la situation. Mais je répète que rien de solide ne pourra être fait aussi longtemps que l'Angleterre n'aura pas changé son représentative: delenda est mission Spears.⁵⁶

However impassioned his plea, Ostrorog was largely preaching to the converted. The Committee had long since recognised the need for the removal of Spears before

⁵⁴ Ostrorog à Massigli, 14 Décembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁵⁵ William Gwynn: United States Consul, Damascus.

⁵⁶ Extrait d'une lettre reçue de Beyrouth du Comte Ostrorog à M. de Gouringaud, sans date, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006.

relations between Britain and France in the Levant deteriorated any further. The Committee felt, with a certain degree of justification, that it had done its bit by removing Helleu, Boegner, Baelen and others primarily responsible for the Lebanese crisis. Indeed, that there had been "a great French house-cleaning", had been recognised by the British.⁵⁷ The French, however, evidently believed that the British would set their own house in order and had placed far too much hope in Macmillan's confident assertions that Spears would shortly be given his marching orders.⁵⁸ This hope was kept alive by rumours from Cairo that "un remaniement important aurait lieu sous peu dans l'organisation politique et militaire britannique du Moyen Orient".⁵⁹ It was believed that this would be one of the results of Churchill's prolonged visit to the area, and this seemed confirmed as Viénot had already informed Algiers on 21 December, that the nomination of Casey for the Governorship of Bengal was certain.⁶⁰ But the reshuffle which Churchill had overseen whilst in Cairo, removed Casey but left Spears untouched.

The considerable concern of the French over Spears was matched only by that displayed within the Foreign Office. Members of the Eastern Department realised only too well

⁵⁷ Borden, *op cit*, p 227; Holmes to Wilson, 3 December 1943, 9A/9/ADC, WO 201/984.

⁵⁸ Note, 2 Decembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1006. The note referred to a conversation between Massigli and Macmillan on 23 November, at which Macmillan had insisted on the desire of the British Government "d'effacer au plus tôt, les traces regrettables que l'incident libanais pourrait laisser dans les rapports franco-britanniques". Massigli had replied that if this was the case, then the recall of Spears was imperative, and Macmillan had not demurred.

⁵⁹ De Benoist à Alger, 22 Decembre 1943, No 386, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1241.

⁶⁰ Viénot à Alger, 21 December 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1593.

that they possessed little or no influence in the matter of Spears's removal. Early in December, Hankey minuted that whilst the Foreign Office saw "no objection ... to the abolition of the Spears Mission", it required the French to make "the necessary advances".⁶¹ Less than a week later however, Hankey had decided to throw caution to the wind and to take the matter in hand himself. He minuted to Sir A. Cadogan on 9 December:

At the risk of speaking out of turn, I wish to make a serious and most urgent plea for the removal of Sir E. Spears from the Levant States. There is no doubt at all that his continuance there is a real danger to British interests. While [he] has correctly estimated the need for a progressive policy towards Arab Nationalism, I submit that we can no longer afford to keep in Beirut a person who is *persona non grata* with the French. As has recently been seen, the French are capable of almost any folly there, and we should not accept a state of affairs in which we have no influence at all over the French authorities. If they create another incident like the last when the Palestine question becomes more acute, (as it certainly will), we may well find ourselves faced with a situation of real danger in all Arabic speaking parts of the Middle East at once. At the lowest reckoning, it would require many divisions of troops to cope with it.⁶²

Hankey went on to describe Spears as oozing and disseminating hatred of the French; he failed conspicuously to carry out Eden's instructions and notoriously pursued his own policy. Hankey was convinced that Britain's strategic interests, along with her obligations to the Arab states and to the new France, could never be met unless she could somehow effect an agreement between the French and the Levant States, a task which Spears could never fulfil. He realised that Spears enjoyed "the special support of the

⁶¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 3 December 1943, E7582/27/89, FO 371/35194.

⁶² Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 9 December 1943, FO 954/15.

Prime Minister", and that his removal was therefore "a matter of some delicacy".⁶³ If he was to be extracted from Beirut, it would have to be to a post of at least equal importance and standing: Hankey suggested the Governorship of Bengal or Hong Kong, the High Commissionership of Australia or South Africa, or even a junior Ministerial appointment. He felt that should Eden urge a change in Beirut, he would have support from "several other Ministers ... [and] in particular from the Chancellor of the Exchequer".⁶⁴

Hankey's appeal was heartily endorsed by his colleagues. R. L. Speaight put his name to the plea and expressed the opinion that his colleague, W. H. B. Mack, who was ill, would also agree; C. W. Baxter and Sir M. Peterson both expressed their entire approval.⁶⁵ Even Sir A. Cadogan admitted that he did not think that anyone would contest the soundness of Hankey's views. He added however, that "the difficulty remains that we have to convince the Prime Minister of the necessity of making a change...". He saw the only hope as an attempt to persuade Churchill that

wherever the fault may lie, the feeling between Sir E. Spears and the French is, and is likely to remain, such that we cannot hope for good Anglo-French collaboration in this critical theatre. That is the fact which has to be faced. The French removed Helleu on our demand: if we could make a change of Minister, we might make a fresh start.⁶⁶

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.* The Chancellor of the Exchequer had been greatly annoyed by Spears' obstructions over the Anglo-French Financial agreement.

⁶⁵ Minutes by C. W. Baxter, R. L. Speaight and Sir M. Peterson, 9, 10 and 13 December 1943, respectively, FO 954/15.

⁶⁶ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 13 December 1943, FO 954/15.

Eden saw these minutes on 17 December. Whilst appreciating the strength of feeling about Spears amongst his staff, he could do little in the absence of Churchill, who had fallen seriously ill on 11 December en route from Cairo, and had taken refuge in Roosevelt's villa near Carthage.⁶⁷ Hankey meanwhile busied himself in despatching letters to numerous individuals, asking for assistance in finding a suitable alternative post for Spears. "I do feel", he minuted, "that unless we do something about it, we'll never get rid of "our old man of the sea" ".⁶⁸ He complained to Sir M. Peterson that "This business of getting rid of Spears is hanging fire. It will only go if we create an opportunity".⁶⁹ Unfortunately for Hankey, the opportunities he created, (he had further suggested the possibilities of Governor of Gibraltar or Ceylon, or the post of Resident Minister, West Africa), came to naught. When prodded by Cadogan, Eden insisted that he had taken the matter up with the Prime Minister on his return, "but got no change out of him".⁷⁰ In fact, Churchill had sent Spears a telegram on New Year's Day, informing him that he had "done very well".⁷¹ Under such circumstances, the Foreign Office would be obliged to wait many more months before they were rid of the constant thorn in their side.

⁶⁷ The Prime Minister remained at Carthage until 27 December 1943, whereupon he flew to Marrakesh for a period of convalescence. He did not return to London until 18 January 1944. See M. Gilbert, *op cit*, pp 604-607, pp 620-626.

⁶⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, undated, FO 954/15.

⁶⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 14 December 1943, FO 954/15.

⁷⁰ Foreign Office minute, undated, FO 954/15.

⁷¹ Churchill to Spears, 1 January 1944, FO 954/15.

vi) The Bright Horizon

The dénouement of the Lebanese crisis left senior French officials in the Levant pondering France's predicament. What stands out in the reports, reviews and assessments subsequently filed to Algiers, is the continual optimism and the constant pains always to highlight the silver lining of the dark clouds which now threatened the French position in the Levant. In the short period during which he was left in charge, Chataigneau never succumbed to defeatism in his reports to Algiers. It was perfectly normal, he noted, that for a while the Lebanese President and his Ministers should be fêted as heroes and martyrs, and that because of the British ultimatum, British prestige should soar. Whilst admitting that these factors were not especially propitious for the maintenance of French influence, he emphasised other factors which "jouent dans le sens d'une reprise de nos positions perdues".⁷²

Chataigneau believed that as a direct result of the crisis, British ambitions were now exposed for all to see. He drew great comfort from this and believed that the French could capitalise on this. He was convinced that "en dépit d'une poussée intense de nationalisme agressif, le sentiment pro-français est loin d'être mort". To support his claim, Chataigneau recounted a recent experience in a cinema, when the dual appearance of the Kings of England and Egypt in a newsreel aroused no response from the audience, whereas a few moments later, General de Gaulle's image was enthusiastically acclaimed. Other reports had reached him that in certain areas, people were tearing down the new Lebanese flag and replacing it with the tricolour. "Ces

⁷² Chataigneau à Massigli, 29 Novembre 1943, No 337, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

réactions", he declared, "émanent des chrétiens qui commencent à comprendre que, grâce à la faiblesse du Président Bechara el Khoury et la poussée panarabe, les musulmans sont en voie d'instaurer leur dictature...".⁷³

The awakening of the Christian community to the dangers of pan-Arabism and to the inevitable threat of the resurgence of confessional strife was a direct result of the recent crisis, and Chataigneau realised France might easily exploit this new concern to shore up her own position in the Levant. His reports tended to lay a heavy emphasis on the increasing anxiety becoming manifest among Christians: the enthusiasm and excitement which had accompanied the release of the ministers had begun to die down and was giving way to "un certain recueillement mêlé d'inquiétude à l'endroit de l'avenir". Principally the Christians of Mount Lebanon, who had traditionally looked to France for protection, had begun to reflect upon the consequences for themselves of any further weakening in France's position:

Il est manifeste que, pour les meilleurs d'entre eux, comme par la masse elle-même, le souci de l'indépendance s'accompagne du souhait plus au moins avoué, du maintien de l'amitié efficiente de la France.⁷⁴

Ostrorog too demonstrated much the same determination to turn France's present misfortunes to her eventual advantage. He had observed in his conversations with Syrian politicians and personalities that France was no longer feared in the Levant; while this he deemed, implied a certain loss of prestige, it also opened up "de nouvelles possibilités

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Chataigneau à Massigli, 9 December 1943, No 355, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

d'entente".⁷⁵ Ostrorog saw a definite opening for France to re-establish her position by playing upon the fears beginning to assail the Syrians about the degree of influence which Britain was attempting to exert over them. From a talk he had had with Saadullah Jabri, Ostrorog reckoned that he could

sans inconvénient, éveiller certains inquiétudes qui d'ailleurs existent à l'état latent, et provoquer chez les Syriens, de salutaires réflexions sur les dangers éventuels d'un tête-à-tête avec l'Angleterre.⁷⁶

According to Ostrorog, Jabri had apparently admitted that he hoped to reach an entente with France to withstand British ambitions. In a separate conversation, Fares Khoury allegedly stated that the difficulties which the French had faced during recent months had been "l'oeuvre des Anglais", and had commented that any settlement between France and Syria was therefore entirely dependent on a Franco-British entente. Ostrorog himself concluded that Syrian leaders were seriously worried by British intentions and felt unable to withstand the pressure being put upon them; they were thus "désireux de trouver chez nous une compréhension suffisante pour arriver sans violence à un ajustement des relations franco-syriennes qui réserve l'avenir en n'excluant pas la France du Levant".⁷⁷

Whatever encouraging signs were perceived for a continued French rôle in the Levant, there were still many pitfalls to be avoided. Chataigneau warned in particular against complacency, and sent Algiers an article from the local press which had not, he insisted, been inspired by the

⁷⁵ Ostrorog à Massigli, 8 Decembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

French authorities. It indicated clearly that Franco-Lebanese friendship would survive all vicissitudes, "à condition toutefois que la France sâche définitivement renoncer à ses tentations d'impérialisme". The soundness of this advice Chataigneau heartily endorsed:

J'estime que c'est dans cette voie que doit s'exercer notre action. Nous devons montrer aux Libanais le vrai visage de la France, exalter ses vertus traditionnelles de libéralisme, ne pas laisser croire un seul instant que ceux de la Résistance pourraient lutter et mourir pour asservir d'autres peuples. Rien ne saurait être mieux accueilli par tant de Libanais, qui hier encore acclamaient la France et peuvent très bien se tourner à nouveau vers elle, pour peu que se précisent les menaces des Britanniques et surtout les dangers d'un impérialisme arabe d'inspiration irakienne ou égyptienne".⁷⁸

Chataigneau believed that France still possessed the means to encourage and even to speed up the evolution in Christian thinking he had detected: he boasted that he himself had just undertaken a reorganisation of French propaganda services, "qui rend près du tiers des périodiques arabes du Liban largement accessibles d'ores et déjà, à notre influence et doit permettre, à brève échéance, d'atteindre une fraction encore plus importante de la presse libanaise".⁷⁹ Chataigneau evidently saw no inconsistency in advocating in one paragraph of a report that France should extol her traditional liberalism to the Lebanese, and in the next, boasting of how he had secured the wherewithal to better influence large sections of the Lebanese press.

In another telegram, Chataigneau argued that in the past, many French, civilian and military, had opposed the slightest hint of a liberal policy, seeking thereby to

⁷⁸ Chataigneau à Massigli, 29 Novembre 1943, No 337, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

ensure that France continued to enjoy her mandatory privileges. In reality, this had only weakened her position:

Pareille politique, si elle était reprise, aurait aujourd'hui des conséquences plus graves encore. Du fait de la présence des Anglais et de la volonté qui apparaît chez eux de saisir toute occasion favorable pour substituer leur autorité à la notre, le jeu qui consisterait à opposer secrètement des obstacles aux administrations locales, favoriserait directement la réalisation des ambitions britanniques. Quels que soient les services dont il s'agit, nous devons donc nous efforcer, en préparant leur abandon aux Etats, de surmonter tout dépit et toute mauvaise humeur et chercher, au contraire, à donner aux Syriens comme aux Libanais, les moyens d'assurer la marche normale de ces services lorsqu'ils en auront pris la responsabilité.⁸⁰

Chataigneau was not the only voice advocating that France should mend her ways in the Levant if she hoped to maintain her position there. In London, Viénot had been giving the matter considerable thought and telegraphed Massigli that one of the arguments most often invoked against France "avait été [l'] insuffisance de notre administration au Levant". The view widely held in interested circles was that the system of French administration which had succeeded in Africa, had failed miserably in Indochina and the Levant. He believed that recent events in the Lebanon had exposed the French administration to international criticism and provided the Allies with a golden opportunity to interfere. He warned that the Allies might now suggest that French conduct should be underwritten by international guarantees:

Le moment pourrait donc être venu pour nous de reconsidérer les principes de notre politique coloniale qui devraient s'orienter vers une association plus étroite des populations indigènes à l'administration et des concessions plus larges au "self-government". Une déclaration publique aurait

⁸⁰ Chataigneau à Massigli, 14 Decembre 1943, No 368, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1009.

un effet considérable et esquisserait une certaine confiance dans la rénovation de notre esprit libérale.

Only by seizing the initiative herself did Viénot believe that France could avoid outside pressure to reform and only thus could she herself derive "le bénéfice morale" from that reform.⁸¹

vii) A Blueprint for the Future

The French Committee in Algiers, meanwhile, did seem to be taking on board the advice being thrust upon it. Determination to tackle Levant problems was signalled by the appointment of a three man Commission of Enquiry to investigate and report its findings.⁸² Furthermore, on 3 December, a press statement was issued, approving the measures Catroux had already taken in the Levant and announcing that he would return shortly to effect a settlement.⁸³ Massigli subsequently confirmed to Macmillan that the Committee had been much impressed by Catroux's exposé on the Levant, that de Gaulle had made no trouble, and that Catroux had been invested with full powers to deal with the situation there.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Viénot à Alger, 7 Decembre 1943, No 1692-96, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592.

⁸² Alger à Beyrouth, 7 Decembre 1943, No 494, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1592. The three men were: André Hauriou, formerly of the University of Toulouse, now attached to the Commissariat aux Affaires Étrangères, M. Astier, attached to the Commissariat aux Affaires Économiques, and Pierre Lapie, attached to the Commissariat d'Education Nationale.

⁸³ Algiers to Foreign Office, 3 December 1943, E7599/27/89, FO 371/35194.

⁸⁴ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 4 December 1943, E7647/27/89, FO 371/35194.

Catroux had originally planned to leave for the Levant on 7 December, but postponed his departure.⁸⁵ He was undoubtedly the instrumental force, whilst at Algiers, in the production of a document, dated 8 December, entitled "Instructions Concernant la Politique à Suivre au Levant", as much of its content is based on his observations. This document was intended to become the blueprint for French policy in the Levant in the months to come, and as such, merits a detailed examination. It claimed that the central aim of French policy in the Levant since 1941 had been

d'obtenir, qu'avant la fin des hostilités, l'hypothèque qu'y possède la France, fût sanctionné par des traités d'amitié et d'alliance qui seraient conclus avec la Syrie et le Liban.⁸⁶

Even when, on behalf of the Committee, Catroux had declared the two countries independent, he had stipulated that independence would only become effective after the conclusion of such treaties; numerous approaches to the States, however, for discussions to implement either the 1936 treaties, or for the negotiation of completely new treaties, seemed always to have been rejected. The States had refused to recognise French rights and lately had even begun to harbour some hostility towards the French; they did now agree to the need to regulate their relations with France, at least provisionally, for the duration of the war, but would only negotiate on a basis of complete equality and insisted that any *modus vivendi* be reached by a series of separate accords rather than by a more general over-all agreement; additionally, they were demanding the immediate

⁸⁵ Algiers to Foreign Office, 4 December 1943, E7631/27/89, FO 371/35194; Algiers to Foreign Office, 7 December 1943, E7719/27/89, FO 371/35195.

⁸⁶ "Instructions Concernant la Politique à Suivre au Levant", 8 December 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000 et 1006.

transfer to themselves of certain powers which France presently controlled.

The document stated that while the Committee had a strict obligation not to surrender any French rights in the Levant except by virtue of an international agreement, it could not forcefully ensure that these rights were respected, nor impose the conclusion of treaties upon the States. Though intending to fulfil their promise of leading Syria and the Lebanon to real independence, the Committee was equally resolved

à sauvegarder, en dépit des difficultés du moment, et par les moyens adaptés à la situation présente, l'essentiel de la position de la France au Levant.⁸⁷

It went on to outline the Committee's intended policy given the present circumstances. It had been decided that, with certain exceptions, responsibility for the Intérêts Communs should be transferred to the States. Services of an essentially mandatory character would remain attached to the Délégation Générale, as would the Office des Changes "en raison des nécessités de la guerre économique". The Service d'Information et Radiodiffusion, "essentiel à notre propagande", would also be retained, as would all the findings of the Service Géologique, "notamment pour les recherches des gîtes pétrolifères". Though the Committee was ready, in principle, to transfer responsibility for certain aspects of security to the States -- rights of passage, frontier and Bedouin control -- an agreement was required which would take into account the responsibility of the French military command in these matters, whilst hostilities lasted. As far as the Committee was concerned, the States would become responsible for the maintenance of internal order, and a certain number of Troupes Spéciales would be

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

placed at their disposal, though the total transfer of these forces could not be envisaged during the war.

It was advocated that these concessions be strongly recommended to the States, as bearing witness to "[le] bon vouloir du Comité ainsi que de son désir de manifester à la Syrie et au Liban, sa ferme volonté de favoriser, conformément à ses promesses, leur accession à une indépendance réelle". However, it should also be carefully stressed that the Committee's friendly attitude did not signify that France had in any way modified her juridical view of her relations with Syria and the Lebanon or their independence. In that respect, France's position remained unaltered from Catroux's proclamations of 27 September and 26 November, 1941. She still hoped to define her relations with the Levant States by means of a treaty, and was prepared to negotiate a provisional settlement to last the duration of the war, whether in the form of a general overall agreement or a series of specific agreements.

The document continued:

Telle est, pour l'immédiat, la politique que le Comité a jugé nécessaire d'adopter au lendemain de la crise franco-libanaise. Imposée par les circonstances, elle aboutit non pas en droit mais en fait, à rendre inopérants ce qui nous restait des prérogatives du mandat, ainsi que les réserves incluses dans les déclarations d'indépendance. Elle nous permet par contre, de nous maintenir au Levant. Et c'est là le facteur que nous devons exploiter pour essayer d'y rétablir la situation de la France.

Here indeed, was the crux of the matter. The defeat which the Lebanese crisis had represented for French policy was quickly forgotten; the concessions to the States which France was being forced to make, were viewed as a necessary evil, as something in the nature of a tactical retreat, from which France could regroup her forces to try and recapture Syria and the Lebanon.

The difficulties and obstacles France would face in this renewed assault on the Levant were evidently not considered insurmountable. The document concedes that once the States achieved real independence, it would be difficult to exert any political influence over them. But it went on to assert that even if direct intervention in the internal affairs of the States became impossible, the Délégation Générale and individual délégués appointed to each State, could still fall back on what personal influence they might be able to wield. Moreover, France still retained "répartis sur le territoire, de nombreux moyens d'action, directe ou indirecte, et dont le maintien en place concrétisera la persistance de la présence de la France". In future, the Committee expected the entire fabric of the French community in the Levant to reinforce and protect France's position: technical advisers and bureaucrats who still retained posts in the central administration of the States, magistrates, provincial advisers and even officers in the Services Spéciaux "que nous transformerons, s'il le faut, suivant le précédent britannique, en officiers politiques ou de la Sécurité militaire". The list continued, mentioning as other sources of influence "l'Armée française ... les entreprises françaises d'intérêt public ... l'important appoint des oeuvres laïques ou confessionnelles d'assistance et surtout d'enseignement qui par leur caractère désintéressé, demeurent un instrument primordial d'influence et d'action". It was up to the Délégué Général to encourage these elements, to guide their conduct and to direct them towards the same goal "qui est d'affirmer que la France demeure [au Levant] et de lui attirer considération et amitié".

The entire French community in the Levant and not just the personnel of the Délégation Générale should be instructed that it was their bounden duty to cultivate friendly relations with the Syrians and Lebanese, "de leur témoigner des égards auxquels ils sont si sensibles, et

d'abandonner une attitude de hauteur distante si peu justifiée ou de critique dédaigneuse qui si souvent les a blessés". The French community must thoroughly appreciate that the Levant people were now imbued with a growing national spirit and a real attachment to their independence; moreover, they realised and intended to capitalise on the fact, that France of 1943 was not that of 1918, not only because of France's defeat, "mais surtout parce que trop de Français se sont montrés, par leur égoïsme, leur fautes d'éducation et leur médiocrité, trop inférieurs à l'image qu'on faisait d'eux".

Top posts in the Levant should be filled with "des hommes de choix et de bon aloi qui sachent s'imposer et qui aient le goût de voir et de savoir". French enterprises would have to get rid of their exploitative image and demonstrate that their activities were for the good of Syria and Lebanon. The favour which the French system of education enjoyed had not been affected by her political and military decline, as the numbers of students returning to French educational establishments testified. Full scope was therefore to be given to French cultural establishments and a French University should be created in the Levant.⁸⁸ In this field, where France's true strength lay, the outlook was wide open and bright.

The strategy, then, was to hold on and endure by as many of the means outlined as possible. The possibility always existed that, whilst this slow work of reclamation ensued, external or internal developments might provide France with opportunities "de rentrer en scène". France's most immediate difficulties had been created by the weakness of her own position, by the cohesion of Syrian and Lebanese

⁸⁸ For further details about the possible creation of a French University in the Levant and other educational projects which the Committee proposed, see Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1029.

nationalism, and by "le jeu destructeur de la politique britannique. L'héritage d'un mandat imprudent et les erreurs des hommes ont fait le reste". The Committee believed in the resurrection of France and moreover that "cette résurrection aura son prolongement au Levant". The Lebanese, whom France had so inopportunately united against herself, would once again dissolve into a morass of confessional and clan-related antagonisms, and the Christians would face the prospect of absorption by Islam. The Syrians too would watch the rebirth of particularism and face external assaults on their frontiers. The solidarity which both countries presently displayed would soon melt away when they began playing the constitutional game for real. Once the need for an arbiter and protector began to make itself apparent, "L'heure de la France pourra à nouveau sonner".

There remained the problem of Britain. Despite Foreign Office assurances, British policy

a visé à nous déloger de nos positions au Levant et a exploité à cette fin, l'argument puissant de l'indépendance. Elle y est en ce moment parvenue avec notre imprudent concours. Notre divorce avec le Liban marque le succès de l'effort des britanniques qui, pour la réussite de leur projet arabe, ne pouvaient tolérer que le Liban demeurait isolé de l'ensemble sur la façade Méditerranéenne.

Nonetheless, the French were not despondent; even if the British succeeded in usurping France, they could hardly afford to welcome total independence for Syria and Lebanon, for they knew only too well that any concession made to these two States would provoke demands for similar concessions from Iraq and Egypt, not to mention Palestine and Transjordan. There was still a possibility therefore, that France's policy might be harmonised with that of Britain, and eventually France might secure "les traités dont nous avons fait notre but et qui nous échappent en ce moment".

The final paragraph of the document neatly summarised what should now become the golden rules of French policy in the Levant:

Attendre, demeurer sur place, nous adapter aux conditions du moment, éviter les erreurs psychologiques du passé, reconstruire notre crédit moral sur son fondement libéral et intellectuel. Réserver nos droits strictement, rechercher une entente avec la Grande Bretagne, tels sont les linéaments de la politique de conservation et de reprise que nous devons tenter au Levant.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ "Instructions Concernant la Politique à Suivre au Levant", 8 December 194, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000 et 1006.

EPILOGUE

En route from Cairo on 9 December, Eden and Cadogan paid an unscheduled visit to Algiers; at a meeting that day with Massigli, Eden took the opportunity to tell the French that the British government was now "prepared to put some pressure upon the Lebanese and Syrian governments to make reasonable agreements with the French".¹ When he received a report of the meeting, Spears was quick to interpose, expressing the hope that this declaration would not make the French more intransigent and that what was meant by "reasonable agreements" was "a short-term arrangement only, not one which commits the States now to a definition of their postwar relations with France".² He pointed out that whilst for the moment, Chataigneau was proving most co-operative, the whole atmosphere would change if Catroux returned "in an unyielding mood". A suggestion by Massigli for talks in London about the Levant had worried Spears, who suspected that the French aimed at disposing of the Levant question without reference either to the Syrians or Lebanese; this would be quite unacceptable and, he warned, "Sykes-Picot has not been forgotten here".³

Nonetheless, to the great surprise and pleasure of the Foreign Office, Spears saw the leaders of both the Syrian and Lebanese governments and informed them that Britain expected them to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the French in a conciliatory spirit; this they professed they were willing to do, now that Catroux had effectively shelved the

¹ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 10 December 1943, E7772/27/89, FO 371/35195.

² Spears to Foreign Office, 13 December 1943, E7831/27/89, FO 371/35195.

³ *ibid.*

treaty question.⁴ Furthermore, Catroux had returned to the Levant on 16 December and in a "most friendly and satisfactory talk" on 18 December, Spears was surprised to find the Frenchman's views and intentions "entirely reasonable".⁵ On 22 December, in what was acknowledged to be a major step forward, Catroux signed a tripartite agreement with the Syrians and Lebanese which provided for the transfer of full responsibility for the Intérêts Communs to the Levant governments from 1 January 1944, and other powers by specific agreements to be concluded in the near future.⁶ The agreement was enthusiastically welcomed by the States and by Spears, who commented: "Thus is closed, in an eminently satisfactory manner, the dangerous crisis of last month".⁷

That these agreements, as has been claimed, marked the "effective beginning of Syrian and Lebanese independence"⁸ is substantially correct. Yet despite the appearance of an all-round satisfactory arrangement, this was very far from the case. Many problems remained unresolved and the Levant States were to battle for real independence for three more bitter years. The war was to end, Churchill and de Gaulle were to disappear from the political scene and protests were to be made to the United Nations before the last Allied troops were to evacuate Syria and Lebanon in August 1946. Moreover, the Levant was to continue to dog and upset Anglo-

⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 December 1943, E7945/27/89, FO 371/35195.

⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 18 December 1943, E7959/27/89, FO 371/35196.

⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 December 1943, E8054/27/89, and E8067/27/89, both in FO 371/35196; Catroux à Alger, 22 Décembre 1943, No 669, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1000.

⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 December 1943, E8054/27/89, FO 371/35196.

⁸ Kirk, *op cit*, p 285.

French relations throughout that period and, some would argue, even until 1967, when de Gaulle, as President of France, belatedly sought to extract revenge for what he deemed the British betrayal of France in the Levant and vetoed Britain's second application for membership of the European Economic Community.⁹

Initial developments late in 1943 and early 1944 seemed to indicate that the French had perhaps turned over a new leaf. The Foreign Office had been pleased to witness the removal of many of the less desirable French elements in the Levant and had hoped to reciprocate, perhaps by the removal of Spears¹⁰. The grave misgivings of the Foreign Office about Spears's conduct were given added reinforcement when on 21 February 1944, Duff Cooper, now installed in Algiers as British representative to the CFLN, wrote to Churchill and expressed his grave concern that Spears had become "definitely, if not violently, francophobe" and represented "a fatal impediment to improved Anglo-French relations".¹¹ Though unwilling to contemplate his removal, Churchill was sufficiently perturbed to warn Spears in a letter about his "pro-native and anti-French" tendencies and the fact that he had become "bitterly anti-French". He observed that de Gaulle had become increasingly "encadré" and had recently sustained several defeats at the hands of the Committee. Relations with de Gaulle and the National Committee were on the whole improving and he reasserted that Britain had no wish to destroy French influence in Syria and Lebanon. Trying to temper Spears's attitudes he trotted out the maxim

⁹ See Gaunson, *op cit*, p 181; also Mansur, Great Britain and the Birth of Syrian and Lebanese Independence, International Studies, Vol 16, No 2, April-June 1977, p 273.

¹⁰ During late 1943 and early 1944, the Foreign Office had been deluged with complaints from the French about the activities of General and Lady Spears. See E157/20/88, E183/20/88 and E341/20/88, all in FO 371/40110.

¹¹ Duff Cooper, *op cit*, pp 322-323.

"Surtout, pas trop de zèle".¹² Churchill despatched a curt response to Duff Cooper and to Eden who had tried to capitalise on the situation, informing both that he had no wish to remove Spears.¹³

As 1944 progressed, the new Délégué, Général Beynet proceeded to quietly transfer most of the legislative and administrative functions of government to the Levant States, including responsibility for censorship, internal security and Bedouin control, thereby further cementing their independence. It was clear however, that the French were merely doing what they had to and biding their time until such time as France was restored, when they might ^{reassert themselves} ~~reassert themselves~~. They were determined not to make any concessions with regard to the use of the French language; moreover, problems quickly surfaced over the local troops in the Levant, both the local gendarmerie and the Troupes Spéciales.

The French had refused to surrender control of the 25,000 Troupes Spéciales at their disposal and were convinced that a campaign by the local governments to secure their transfer early in 1944 had been initiated by Spears.¹⁴ The Levant States had intended these troops to form the nucleus of their future armies; though willing to leave them at the disposal of the Allied command for the duration of the war, they wished, as a matter of prestige, to secure their formal transfer as soon as possible. The French however, viewed the Troupes Spéciales as their principal remaining bargaining counter and remained adamant that they could not be transferred except as part of a treaty settlement. The Levant States would not admit any connection

¹² Churchill to Spears, 10 March 1944, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

¹³ Duff Cooper, *op cit*, p 323; Woodward, *op cit*, p 294.

¹⁴ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 26 January 1944, E612/217/89, FO 371/40310.

between the two issues and negotiations on these subjects quickly foundered early in 1944.

Whilst to a certain extent the Foreign Office sympathised with the French desire to retain a bargaining counter, French good faith was called more openly into question over their refusal to supply the gendarmerie, (responsibility for which had been transferred to the local governments), with the necessary arms and equipment to successfully carry out its duties. Various disturbances in the early months of 1944 had amply revealed the complete inability of the gendarmerie to cope against the lawless and well-armed bands which operated in certain regions, yet the French continued to palm the Syrians and Lebanese off with offers of insufficient and obsolete equipment at extortionate prices. Spears suspected that French reluctance to arm the gendarmerie was inspired primarily by their desire to maintain a hold over the country.¹⁵

In desperation, the Levant governments turned to the British and soon a major row developed with the French. The Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay were in the process of establishing an Anglo-French Committee to examine the gendarmerie matter in a spirit of friendly consultation and co-operation. Meanwhile, the British military authorities, who fully recognised the need for the gendarmerie to be adequately equipped, authorised Spears to inform the Syrians and the Lebanese that Britain would supply them with the arms and equipment they required; despite his awareness of the negotiations afoot in London, Spears duly informed the

¹⁵ A frustrated Spears angrily pointed out to the Foreign Office that it must now be clear that the French had no more intention of honouring the agreements of 22 December than of implementing their original promise of independence, nor any desire to ensure that the local governments could effectively discharge their responsibility for maintaining internal security. Spears to Foreign Office, 23 June 1944, E3718/217/89, FO 371/40312.

local governments and during July, the British authorities in the Middle East handed over considerable quantities of supplies and equipment to the gendarmeries.

The French complained to the Foreign Office on 17 July and Massigli made a strong protest to Duff Cooper, who found himself in the unfortunate position of being unable to defend the British action. Spears had quite patently ignored the instructions with which he had been issued. Massigli made a further personal appeal to Eden through Duff Cooper, questioning whether British government policy or a more personal policy was being carried out in the Levant. Duff Cooper added his own comment that "things can only go from bad to worse in the Levant so long as Spears remains there".

Spears's insubordination and his general handling of matters in the Levant had now reached such a stage that Eden was able to successfully press for his recall to London for consultation.¹⁶ Initial resistance from Spears¹⁷, on the basis that his presence was vital in the Levant in view of the tense situation which prevailed there, was overruled and on 24 July, he obeyed and flew to London. Once in the capital, he sought to impress upon Eden his fears that the French Committee was thinking of "put the clock back by violent means" in the Levant.¹⁸

Eden however, was sceptical; he doubted that any future French government would seek to recover by force what it had already given away, or that the French would have either the time or the inclination for "escapades in the Eastern

¹⁶ Eden to Churchill, 5 July 1944, E4006/217/G89, FO 371/40313.

¹⁷ Eden to Spears, 19 July 1944; Spears to Eden, 21 July 1944, E4368/217/89, FO 371/40314.

¹⁸ Spears to Eden, 15 August 1944, E5237/23/89, FO 371/40302.

Mediterranean". Eden claimed that he read the situation which had developed since last November differently from Spears and replied: "To my mind, the resounding defeat which the French sustained vis-à-vis the local governments at that time, tilted the balance somewhat unduly against them. And, whilst we must continue to urge the French to make gradual progress, it is perhaps even more necessary to exercise some restraint on the two States lest they should be tempted to think that all is now over bar the shouting and that there is no need for them to make some constructive and permanent effort to regularise their future relations with the French".¹⁹

At a series of high-level discussions on the Levant on 23 and 24 August in London²⁰, Spears was given further evidence of the way the wind was now blowing. The Spears Mission was the object of a bitter French attack as a result of which the British agreed to do what they could to reduce the multiplicity and strength of British organisations in the Levant. Furthermore, the British undertook to consider making some new declaration at a suitable moment stating that they would welcome an agreement between the French and the Levant States to conclude treaties to determine their future relations.²¹ Spears informed Eden by letter that the meetings with the French had done nothing to allay his apprehensions concerning French inability to learn the lessons of the past in their dealings with the Levant States; he went on to explain his conviction concerning the "extraordinary depth of feeling" against a treaty amongst

¹⁹ Eden to Spears, 25 August 1944, E5237/23/89, FO 371/40302.

²⁰ These discussions had been urged by Massigli as he believed that "the Levant was the danger spot in Anglo-French relations". Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 5 July 1944, E4122/217/89, FO 371/40313.

²¹ See E5185/23/89 and E5144/23/89, FO 371/40302, for records of the proceedings of these meetings.

the Syrians and Lebanese and that nothing in present circumstances would induce the Levant States to sign a treaty with the French.²²

At a subsequent meeting between the two men on 1 September, the Levant situation was discussed more fully. Eden stressed his belief that the position between the Levant States and France should be "properly regularised ... by a treaty or some other analogous arrangement". Eden hoped that Spears would work to this end and in no way encourage the Syrians or Lebanese to flout French authority. Though with little enthusiasm, Spears eventually replied that he would try to bring this about. He spoke of the dangers to Britain of the French position in Syria and suggested that Eden might consider a British treaty with the Levant States to counterbalance the French one, an idea which Eden firmly rejected. Spears was additionally issued with a formal directive which stated that he was to work for the establishment of a practical *modus vivendi* that would pave the way for the eventual conclusion of treaties between the States and the French.²³

In addition to this attempt to force Spears to work for a treaty, over recent months the Foreign Office had been conspiring against him; several of his most loyal staff had been transferred and in his absence, G. Mackereth, described by Spears as "the planted consul", had been instructed to report any evidence that Spears had been pursuing an anti-French policy.²⁴ Work was additionally being carried out on how the Spears Mission might be reduced in size with a view

²² Spears to Eden, 28 August 1944, E5278/23/89, FO 371 40302.

²³ Minute by Eden, 1 September 1944; Directive to Spears, 1 September 1944, E5415/5178/89, FO 371/40347.

²⁴ Spears, *op cit*, pp 294-295. See Beirut to Foreign Office, 27 July 1943, E4806/23/89, FO 371/40302.

to its eventual liquidation.²⁵ Moreover, Eden had kept up the pressure on Churchill to consider the removal of Spears.

Throughout July and August, as the liberation of France progressed and the prospect of the establishment of a provisional French government loomed, Eden had stressed to Churchill the wisdom of making new arrangements in the Levant. The Prime Minister had finally succumbed and a compromise had been reached between the two men whereby Spears was permitted to return to the Levant though for a limited period only. When informed of this arrangement, Spears immediately appealed to Churchill for an assurance that he might remain in the Levant until at least the end of the war with Germany. He was informed by Churchill on 5 September that he had not kept his francophobia "within reasonable bounds" and that as the Prime Minister had had great difficulty in securing his return at all, he should not expect his tenure to last much beyond the end of the year.²⁶

With a time-limit imposed on his mission, Spears returned to the Levant and promptly saw various representatives of the Syrian government. He informed them that Britain attached great importance to the fact that they should finalise their relations with France by the conclusion of a treaty. He met, as he had predicted, with complete opposition from the Syrians and accusations of British betrayal.²⁷ The Syrians maintained their intransigence in subsequent discussions with the French; they sought to enlist the support of the United States and petitioned Churchill and Eden. The Foreign Office were

²⁵ See E5239/5178/89, FO 371/40347.

²⁶ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 302-303; Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 155-156.

²⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 September 1943, E5681/23/89, FO 371/40302.

considerably annoyed with Spears's heavy-handed approach and suspected that he had deliberately set out to create a local crisis to prove that he was right and the Foreign Office wrong. Rather than bringing trouble to a head when Arab unity discussions were imminent, he was instructed not to press the matter further.²⁸

In a letter to the Syrians on 1 October, Eden tried to explain that Britain considered that a treaty with France was necessary to terminate the mandate finally.²⁹ Churchill however, was eager to moderate the rather pro-French line which British policy now seemed to be following. He had previously minuted to Eden that Britain had never committed herself to striving to secure France a privileged place in the Levant, and that to continue try to achieve a special position for the French would lead Britain into the greatest difficulties with the Arab world.³⁰ He subsequently observed that Eden's letter to the Syrians did not make clear the essential point that whilst Britain freely admitted a predominant position for France, it was up to France to actually procure that position for herself, by negotiations with the Syrians. He summed up his attitude thus: "We are no obstacle but we are not obligated to pull their barrow up the hill for them".³¹ Eden defended himself by pointing out that given Spears's well-known bias, it was undesirable to emphasise that point too strongly, and he was sure that the

²⁸ Foreign Office to Spears, 20 September 1944, E5681/23/89, FO 371/40302; E6103/23/G89, FO 371/40304.

²⁹ Foreign Office to Beirut, 1 October 1944, E5855/23/89, FO 371/40303.

³⁰ Minute by Churchill, 27 September 1944, E5855/23/89, FO 371/40303.

³¹ Minute by Churchill, 2 October 1944, E5855/23/89, FO 371/40303; see also Moyne to Foreign Office, 26 September 1944, E5898/23/89, FO 371/40304.

French had no illusions as to the extent of British support for their position.³²

Eden was certain that Spears had been instrumental in provoking and encouraging Syrian intransigence and seized upon the opportunity once again to demand his removal; Churchill continued to staunchly defend him by pointing out that he could play a vital rôle in averting another crisis and refused to recall him. Spears was warned that he should do all he could to ensure that none of the parties "upset the apple-cart" and that he should cease to press for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales for the moment; Churchill also sent him an appeal to ensure that the Levant States did not precipitate another crisis.³³

Reports about the worrying situation in the Levant continued to reach the Foreign Office and conversations which Eden had with Lord Moyne in Cairo in mid October confirmed that the situation in the Levant was "a stubborn one and full of menace".³⁴ The Syrians and Lebanese had increased their pressure for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales and were threatening to resort to violence. The French were still obstinately refusing to consider the matter except as part of treaty negotiations and had made repeated requests to the British Commander-in-Chief for permission to reinforce their troops in the Levant; furthermore, Beynet had stated that as certain resolutions of the Preparatory Committee for the Arab Congress had precluded the possibility of a treaty between France and the

³² Eden to Churchill, 6 October 1944, E5855/27/89, FO 371/40303.

³³ Foreign Office to Spears, 2 October 1944; Churchill to Spears, 3 October 1944, E5900/23/89, FO 371/40304.

³⁴ Eden to Cadogan, 11 October 1944, E6370/217/89, FO 371/40318.

Lebanon, Catroux's declaration of independence was invalidated.³⁵

By the end of October however, Spears reported despite repeated French pleas for a treaty, the Syrians had never wavered in their refusal, nor in constantly reiterating the demand for the immediate transfer of the Troupes Spéciales; Beynet had informed him that "about as much progress had been made as if they had been riding a merry-go-round".³⁶ The Foreign Office could only conclude: "We really are sitting on a volcano [in the Levant] unless we bring about an agreement. The present situation cannot last".³⁷

Whilst tension reigned in the Levant, Churchill and Eden visited Paris in November for Armistice Day; de Gaulle's administration had recently been recognised as the provisional government of France by both the United States and Britain, and they met with a rapturous reception. After the more public official duties, private talks ensued in which the spirit of good-will continued to reign supreme and "not an unpleasant word [was] said, although nearly every subject, including Syria, was covered".³⁸ Churchill restated that Britain had no ambitions to usurp France in Syria and Lebanon and de Gaulle confirmed that he adhered to his promise of independence to the two States, though he qualified the word independence and explained that he meant by this the sort of independence Britain had established in Iraq and Egypt and did not mean that France would resign her dominating influence. Bidault, de Gaulle's new Foreign Minister, stated that what France wanted was to remain in

³⁵ See E6552/217/89, FO 371/40318.

³⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 31 October 1944, E6708/23/89, FO 371/40305.

³⁷ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 2 November 1944, E6652/217/89, FO 371/40318.

³⁸ Duff Cooper, *op cit*, p 341.

the Levant "with such advantages as the treaties may grant us" and observed that the persistent Anglo-French quarrel on the matter was "like a thorn which must be extracted in the interests of our relations".³⁹

A further conversation between Eden and Bidault the following day was only slightly less cordial. Bidault reiterated that France intended to keep her promises to the Levant States though she would not surrender any rights to which she was entitled. Eden said he thought there were "no essential differences between the British and French points of view", and that at the present stage, "it was merely a question of procedure". Eden suggested a compromise over the transfer of the *Troupes Spéciales* whereby the French would agree to transfer a percentage now and the rest at some later stage. Bidault initially balked at this idea; he argued that any concession now would merely provoke further claims and mentioned that any transfer of *Troupes* would necessitate the despatch of an equivalent number of reinforcements to the Levant. Eden pointed out that the dispute had ranged now for some six months and the demands of the States would not diminish with the passage of time; he strongly deprecated the idea of despatching reinforcements. The conversation proceeded no further, though the French did agree to take up and discuss Eden's compromise suggestion.⁴⁰

In the interests of preserving the atmosphere of goodwill and co-operation which prevailed, the Paris talks had failed to address any of the real problems at stake in the

³⁹ Record of informal discussion at the Ministère de la Guerre, 3.00pm, 11 November 1944, E7627/217/G89, FO 371/40318; see also Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 377-382.

⁴⁰ Record of conversation between Bidault, Massigli, Chauvel and Eden, Duff Cooper and Cadogan, 12 November 1944, FO 371/40318. Duff Cooper recorded that all went well in these conversations until the question of the Levant which "defied solution". Duff Cooper, *op cit*, p 341.

Levant. From the Foreign Office's point of view, however, the talks had one major satisfactory outcome: shortly after their return from Paris, Eden succeeded at last in persuading Churchill to invite Spears to resign. The resignation and the appointment of Terence Shone in Spears's place was announced on 5 December, along with a statement to the effect that no change in the policy of His Majesty's Government was contemplated.⁴¹ The feeling at the Foreign Office was that as under Spears, British influence had never been brought into play to promote a treaty settlement between the Levant States and the French, "we still don't know what we can do if we try patiently".⁴²

The departure of Spears, however, brought no miracle cure for the Levant and the problems which had been swept under the carpet during the Paris talks quickly resurfaced. The Foreign Office came under fire both from the British Middle East authorities and from Spears on his return to London. Both denounced the lack of coherence in British policy towards the Middle East and condemned the attempt, by simultaneously supporting the Arabs, the Zionists and the French, to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds.⁴³ In the Levant meanwhile, the Syrians in December had abolished the teaching of French in primary schools and relegated French to the same place as English in secondary schools.⁴⁴ The French had docked a light cruiser at Beirut

⁴¹ Text of communiqué issued 5 December 1944, E7473/5178/89; Spears to Churchill, 30 November 1944, E7600/5178/89; both in FO 371/40347.

⁴² Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 10 December 1944, E7501/23/89, FO 371/40307.

⁴³ Killearn to Foreign Office, 24 December 1944, E7876/27/89, FO 371/40307; reports of speech by Spears to Royal Empire Society, 17 January 1945, in Times and Daily Express, 18 January 1945; article by Spears in Sunday Express, 28 January 1945, cited by Gaunson, *op cit*, p 164.

⁴⁴ See Kirk, *op cit*, p 289; Longrigg, *op cit*, p 346.

and proceeded to despatch twenty tanks to Damascus, ostensibly due to accomodation difficulties.⁴⁵

Once again, the Levant situation seemed full of threatening possibilities and Shone's telegrams provided scant room for comfort. On taking up his post, Shone had been optimistically informed by Eden that provided France pursued a policy in accordance with their obligations and promises, French and British interests were "not fundamentally opposed". Yet in the face of Syrian and Lebanese intransigence, which thwarted French aims and ambitions, British and French interests quickly came into conflict and posed Britain with the eternal dilemma of whether to honour her promises to the Arabs or those to the French. Shone reported that he had found the Syrian and Lebanese attitudes towards treaties with France to be "even harder" than he had imagined and foresaw "a pretty sticky time before long". He saw no hope of persuading the Syrians to enter into a treaty with the French without entirely forfeiting British influence⁴⁶

Indeed, the prospects for the New Year did not look good: in late January a series of anti-French demonstrations erupted in Damascus and other Syrian towns, in the midst of which, Bidault announced that France was absolutely determined to preserve her pre-eminent position in the Levant and to maintain order there. The Levant governments retorted that bringing out French troops only served to increase the tension and that it was they who were responsible for the maintenance of order.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Beirut to Foreign Office, 24 December 1944, E7874/23/89, FO 371/40307.

⁴⁶ Shone to Foreign Office, 30 December 1944, E8/8/89; Shone to Foreign Office, 8 January 1945, E207/8/89; both in FO 371/45556.

⁴⁷ Kirk, *op cit*, pp 290-291.

A warning from the British that they could countenance no action likely to create a threat to security was backed up by a concerted diplomatic effort to bring the two sides together. A request was made for American assistance in which the State Department acquiesced. The Syrians were warned that Britain could not support their continued intransigence towards the idea of a treaty; the situation could not remain static and they would have to face up to realities. Early in February, they were persuaded to approach Beynet for French desiderata. Simultaneously, Duff Cooper was instructed to advise the French to behave with the utmost moderation and tact.⁴⁸

Even Churchill and Eden tried their hand with the Syrians when, en route from Yalta, they met Shukri Quwatli at Cairo.⁴⁹ Assurances were offered that Britain had no intention of replacing the French in the Levant; Churchill warned however, that whilst the French must recognise Syrian independence, the Syrians must not "throw the French out altogether". He went on to emphasise that the Syrians must give "something reasonable" and "a position of some sort" to the French. The Syrians were urged to begin negotiations and settle the question "without serious quarrels" and moreover, whilst British troops were in the Levant to strengthen their hand.⁵⁰ In a speech to the Commons on his return, Churchill

⁴⁸ Shone to Foreign Office, 4 February 1944; Foreign Office to Paris, 6 February 1944; both in E821/8/89, FO 371/45558.

⁴⁹ De Gaulle did not participate in the Yalta conference; his exclusion however, which seemed to imply that France was no longer regarded as a Great Power, made him particularly paranoid about the policy decided upon there and he was convinced that Churchill had contrived to persuade Stalin and Roosevelt to allow him a free hand in Syria and Lebanon.

⁵⁰ Record of Cairo conversations, 17 February 1945, E1415/8/89, FO 371/45560.

again stressed Britain's determination to respect the independence of the Levant States, and to use her best endeavours to preserve a special position there for France. Though expressing his belief that these aims were not incompatible, he sought to shift responsibility for their attainment from British shoulders however, by commenting that it was not for Britain alone to defend either Levant independence or French privilege; significantly, he pointed out that both Russia and the United States had recognised the independence of the Levant States whereas neither had recognised the special position of any other country there.

Though it was reported on 18 February that Beynet had been instructed to begin negotiations with the Levant States, on 24 February, Duff Cooper was obliged to ask Bidault why the French had still not communicated their terms to the Levant States though the reply he obtained was considered very unsatisfactory.⁵¹ Conversations in London with Bidault between 25 and 27 February proved no more successful. Bidault assured Eden that France desired a position in the Levant similar to Britain's own in Iraq and that Beynet had been instructed to sound the Syrians out about a treaty which would provide France with military and air bases, a pre-eminent position for her ambassador and educational and cultural safeguards amongst other things. Eden merely warned Bidault of the strength of opposition he was likely to face.

Despite the manifestly urgent need for some progress in the Levant, Beynet saw fit to return to Paris for further instructions early in March, announcing in Algiers en route that the Levant situation was "satisfaisante" and what

⁵¹ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 24 February 1945, E1340/8/89 and E1386/8/89; both in FO 371/45560.

difficulties existed were "solubles".⁵² In fact, the situation in the Levant was giving cause for considerable concern: a serious incident had occurred in the Alaouite region of Syria. The Syrian gendarmerie had been routed by the followers of a religious sheikh, Suleiman Murshid, and once again the vexed question of arms for the gendarmerie had been raised in an acute form.⁵³

On 28 March, Duff Cooper saw Bidault and warned him that he would shortly be obliged to speak to him about the Levant. In reply, Bidault said that he hoped very much that that would not be the case, that "a new chapter had opened ... that the difficulties were disappearing and ... [that] he himself was doing everything possible to improve relations". When pressed on the matter of the *Troupes Spéciales* and the gendarmerie, Bidault had advised Duff Cooper to speak with Beynet but "expressed confidence that all would be well". At a meeting the following day, when the subject was once again discussed, Bidault assured Duff Cooper that he and Beynet were doing everything in their power to bring about a satisfactory solution. He hinted however, that his difficulty "was of course with the Head of Government, whose resistance would inevitably be stiffened by any British intervention".⁵⁴ Cooper himself agreed that it would probably be harmful to see de Gaulle at the moment, who was much more likely to be reasonable if no pressure was brought to bear on him.⁵⁵

⁵² Algiers to Foreign Office, 16 March 1945, E1980/8/89, FO 371/45562.

⁵³ See Kirk, *op cit*, pp 292-293. There was some evidence that the French had supplied the rebels with arms. See Foreign Office to Paris, 30 March 1945, E2102/8/89, FO 371/45562.

⁵⁴ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 29 and 30 March 1945, E2102/8/89, FO 371/45562.

⁵⁵ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 31 March 1945, E2163/8/89, FO 371/45562.

Nonetheless, Duff Cooper did see de Gaulle on 5 April; both men agreed that Britain and France had "no conflicting interests in the Levant" and that it was a great pity that the area should form such "a bone of contention" between the two countries. When Duff Cooper pointed out that small questions like the arming of the gendarmerie and the Troupes Spéciales should be easily settled, de Gaulle replied that they would be easier to deal with if there was not such a large British military presence in the Levant. If the French were to give up their position now, it would look like "they were simply handing over to the British".⁵⁶ This was now to become the main French excuse for not handing over the Troupes Spéciales.

As everything waited in the Levant on Beynet's return, a slight détente was achieved. By late April however, Shone was obliged to report that fundamental positions had not radically altered: the French were determined to preserve as much of their present position as they could, whereas the States were as determined to concede no preference or privilege to France. Both States were confident that Britain would not permit the French to reinforce their troops in the Levant or to permit a repetition of the 1943 coup. Shone felt bound to observe that the local French were quite capable of the latter and stressed that if Britain did allow

⁵⁶ The British were reducing their military presence in the Levant, but were reluctant to let de Gaulle know exact figures as this would put ideas into his head about claiming the overall command of Allied troops. French suspicions had been fuelled by the building of permanent stone barracks in which to house their troops, and even the Foreign Office admitted that there were certain worrying signs that the British military authorities had become accustomed to their presence in the Levant States and were extremely reluctant to depart. See Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 5 April 1945, and various Foreign Office minutes, E2261/8/G89, FO 371/45562 and E3829/8/89G, FO 371/45570

French reinforcement, disillusionment in the States would be so great that there would almost certainly be trouble.⁵⁷

Towards the end of April however, it was learnt that the French did intend to reinforce their troops in the Levant, by despatching two French cruisers with three battalions of troops to coincide with Beynet's return. Duff Cooper saw representatives of the Quai d'Orsay and on 30 April de Gaulle himself, to protest that this action risked creating disturbances in the Levant and ruining the present favourable atmosphere for negotiations. De Gaulle however, referred to Britain's long-standing desire to replace the French in the Levant and stated that as long as Britain retained her forces there, he could not be asked to reduce his; as regards the relative prestige of Britain and France the matter was a serious one.⁵⁸ A letter from Duff Cooper to Eden on 4 May restated his conviction that de Gaulle "firmly and honestly believes that it is our aim to oust the French from the Levant and to take their place there".⁵⁹

In view of the critical situation, the Foreign Office implored the Prime Minister to intervene with de Gaulle.⁶⁰ Despite his reluctance to do so⁶¹, Churchill, after consultation with both the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff, sent a personal telegram to de Gaulle informing him that he was disturbed that the Levant question was still

⁵⁷ Shone to Foreign Office, 27 April 1945, E2706/8/89, FO 371/45563.

⁵⁸ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 30 April 1945, E2733/12/89, FO 371/45588.

⁵⁹ Duff Cooper to Eden, 4 May 1945, E3036/8/G89, FO 371/45563.

⁶⁰ Orme Sargent to Churchill, 1 May 1945, E2733/12/89, FO 371/45588.

⁶¹ Churchill thought a direct intervention by him would only lead to his receiving "some insulting answer". Minute by Churchill, 3 May 1945, E2733/12/89, FO 371/45588.

being regarded from the angle of Anglo-French rivalry. Churchill offered further reassurances about British intentions in the Levant and warned against poisoning the atmosphere just as negotiations were about to commence; furthermore, he offered to withdraw all British troops as soon as France and the Levant States had concluded a treaty.⁶²

De Gaulle replied on 6 May by cataloguing French interests in the Levant. He noted Churchill's offer to withdraw British troops, but pointed out that the situation in the Levant might already have been regulated were it not the belief of the Levant States governments that they could avoid any form of engagement with France by relying on the support of Britain, a belief which was only encouraged by the presence of British troops and agents. He announced that Beynet was due to return and commence negotiations and expressed the hope that Britain would refrain from intervention. He drew particular attention to the unfavourable impression which had already been created by the arrival in the Levant of a new British battalion from Palestine.⁶³

British efforts to prevent the arrival of French troops failed and on 7 May, a Senegalese battalion arrived at Beirut, though the local governments were assured that these troops were a relief battalion rather than reinforcements. As had been predicted, in the days following the arrival of French troops, a number of incidents and clashes occurred between the French and the Levantine populations. Further

⁶² Churchill to de Gaulle, 4 May 1945, E2733/12/89, FO 371/45588.

⁶³ De Gaulle to Churchill, 6 May 1945, E2925/12/G89, FO 371/45589. The movement of the British battalion had been necessary according to the British military authorities, though its timing was considered by the Foreign Office to have been most unfortunate.

French troops were expected and Shone commented: "The stage is therefore set. Once again the French have demonstrated their extraordinary inability to gauge the temper of the local populations and consequences of their own actions. All information ... suggests that when the arrival of reinforcements is made known, the French awakening will be as rude as it was in November 1943".⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Beynet had returned to the Levant and was followed several days later by the arrival of a further contingent of French troops. On 18 May, Beynet made known the French requirements which included educational and cultural conventions, economic concessions and a strategic understanding to provide the French with bases throughout the Levant as well as French retention of the *Troupes Spéciales* until at least the end of the war.⁶⁵ A day later however, on the grounds that the French proposals and the pressure to which they were being subjected were incompatible with their independence and sovereignty, the Syrians and Lebanese broke off negotiations.⁶⁶

Shone's complete disillusionment with British policy is evident from a despatch he sent to London on 18 May. He wrote that even if extensive troubles did not break out, he was convinced that "recent events have proved conclusively that our policy here which virtually amounts to assisting the French to secure a privileged position, simply will not work". Shone explained that neither the States nor the French had any real intention of seeking an agreement and both sides knew that their respective desiderata were "poles apart". The French hoped to achieve what they wanted "by

⁶⁴ Shone to Foreign Office, 13 May 1945, E3040/8/89, FO 371/45563.

⁶⁵ Kirk, *op cit*, p 295.

⁶⁶ Shone to Foreign Office, 22 May 1945, E3292/8/89, FO 371/45564.

delaying tactics and brandishing the big stick", whereas the States believed that even without Britain, they could command sufficient backing from world opinion to enable them to resist French demands. Both sides believed they had time on their side and were digging themselves in ever more firmly, whilst Britain's own position was steadily being weakened. Shone questioned whether it was so certain that Britain's present policy was the one best suited "to make us friends with the French. For the past three and a half years we have been told that the French "will never forget" this or that action on our part or that we must adopt some line of policy "so as not to estrange the French". Yet Shone believed that the French would happily forget things if it suited them to do so, and maintained, echoing Spears' own sentiments, that they would accept a British line of policy "if it is once made clear to them that we intend to adopt it and are prepared to use means open to us to support it". Shone condemned British policy as neither helping the French to get what they wanted nor gaining their goodwill; moreover, it was rapidly destroying British power to either help the Levant States or herself. The tightrope he had walked for almost five months was now "sagging dangerously". As both Britain and the United States were in agreement that de Gaulle's actions were "mischievous", Shone asked whether it was "really impossible for us to stop him, dependent on us as he is for so much?"⁶⁷

Despite Britain's best efforts to entreat both sides to refrain from provocation⁶⁸, the Levant situation deteriorated rapidly; on 19 May, anti-French demonstrations throughout

⁶⁷ Shone to Sir Ronald Campbell, 18 May 1945, E3179/8/G89, FO 371/45564.

⁶⁸ See Foreign Office to Paris, 25 May 1945, E3397/8/89; Foreign Office to Beirut, 25 May 1945, E3376/8/89; Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 26 May 1945, E3411/8/89; Shone to Foreign Office, 26 May 1945, E3419/8/89; all in FO 371/45565.

Syria quickly developed into riots and soon reached the stage of open conflict between French troops and local civilians in which many lives were lost. On 28 May, the Syrian Foreign Minister informed Shone that events had overtaken him and that he could no longer be held responsible for internal security.⁶⁹ In view of the Prime Minister's determination that Britain should not become involved, and his desire to concert his actions with those of the United States, it was decided in London to merely watch the situation very carefully and to take future decisions in the light of further developments.⁷⁰

On 29 May, the French under the command of Général Oliva-Roget subjected Damascus to two heavy bombardments; bitter fighting and further bombardments continued throughout the next two days.⁷¹ Shone and Grigg, the Minister Resident, now begged for British intervention to put a stop to the French actions and fears were expressed about possible Iraqi and Egyptian assistance to the Syrians. At a Cabinet meeting on 30 May, to discuss the situation, Churchill remained adamant that Britain should avoid shouldering alone the burden of restoring the situation and thought that American support should first be secured for whatever action she took. It was decided that, dependent on American approval, a telegram should be sent to de Gaulle informing him that the British, to prevent further bloodshed and in the interests of the security of the entire Middle East, had authorised their Commander-in-Chief to intervene.

⁶⁹ Shone to Foreign Office, 28 May 1945, E3436/8/89, FO371/45565.

⁷⁰ Foreign Office Minute by Sir R. Campbell, 28 May 1945, E3557/8/G89, FO 371/45566.

⁷¹ Beirut to Foreign Office, 29 May 1945, E3498/8/89; Beirut to Foreign Office, 30 May 1945, E3511/8/89 and E3533/8/89; all in FO 371/45566. On the actions and behaviour of Général Oliva-Roget in Damascus, see F. Kersaudy, Le Levant, in De Gaulle et la nation face aux problèmes de défense, 1945-1946, (Paris, 1983), pp 255-256.

In order to avoid a collision between French and British forces, de Gaulle was requested to order French troops to withdraw to their barracks. The telegram also reaffirmed Britain's intention to withdraw all her forces from the Levant upon the satisfactory conclusion of a treaty between the Levant States and France, and suggested tripartite discussions in London as soon as order was restored.⁷²

Whilst awaiting President Truman's assent, Massigli, (now French Ambassador to Britain) was seen by both Churchill and Eden late in the evening after the Cabinet meeting on 30 May and advised of British intentions; the Ambassador deplored the decision and urged that the greatest care be taken in stating these intentions in order to minimise the danger to Franco-British relations. Late that same evening, in view of reports received from Beynet the Levant to the effect that calm had been restored, Bidault telegraphed to Beynet instructing French troops to cease fire, though Général Oliva-Roget denied receiving this order until late on 31 May.⁷³ On the morning of 31 May, Sir R. Campbell saw Massigli and the latter once again emphasised the importance of the manner in which the communication was made to the French government. Massigli asked whether the instructions had been sent to the British Commander-in-Chief or whether the situation was still in suspense, pending Truman's reply. He was informed that the instructions might be put into effect at any moment.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, the British Cabinet, still unaware of the French order to cease fire, and in view of reports of

⁷² See E3552/8/89, FO 371/45566; Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, Wednesday, 30 May 1945, 6.30pm, CAB 65/53.

⁷³ See F. Kersaudy, Le Levant, in De Gaulle et la nation face aux problèmes de défense, p 259.

⁷⁴ Foreign Office Minute, 31 May 1945, E3677/8/89, FO 371/45568.

continued fighting in Damascus, had decided that, despite the lack of response from Truman, Britain should now intervene.⁷⁵ Telegrams were accordingly despatched to Beirut and to Paris and at 3.45pm, Eden made a statement to that effect in the House of Commons.⁷⁶ The critical situation which prevailed was not helped by the fact that the telegram to Paris arrived at 2.50 and, as de Gaulle was unavailable at that time, was transmitted to Palewski for communication to him without delay.⁷⁷ De Gaulle did not receive the telegram until three quarters of an hour after Eden's statement in the House and regarded the ultimatum as an intolerable humiliation particularly as he believed that Britain was already aware that he had given the order to cease fire. In fact, Massigli did not reach Eden with news of the cease fire until after the statement in the House and the order had been given to intervene.

It is alleged that de Gaulle, when he received news of the British decision to intervene, ordered Beynet to resist British forces, though Beynet refused to obey those orders foreseeing their dire consequences.⁷⁸ On 1 June, British forces assumed control in the Levant; order was quickly restored when French forces in Syria were withdrawn to their barracks and over the following weeks, along with French civilians, they were gradually evacuated to the relatively safe haven of the Lebanon. By mid-June this process was virtually complete.

Given the severity of the crisis, and its exacerbation by poor communications and misunderstandings, it was

⁷⁵ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, Thursday, 31 May 1945, 11.30am, CAB 65/53.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Paris to Foreign Office, 31 May 1945, E3679/8/89, FO 371/45568.

⁷⁸ Kirk, *op cit*, p 298.

inevitable that the recriminations which followed in its wake would be bitter. In a press interview on 2 June⁷⁹, de Gaulle launched a bitter attack on the British, which was "a mixture of falsehoods, half truths, suppressions of inconvenient facts and insinuations against Britain". He generally suggested that the trouble in the Levant was due entirely to the British; he spoke of the maintenance of 600,000 British troops throughout the Middle East and of the activities of numerous British agents in the Levant who had stirred up agitation against French interests. Moreover, in what was regarded as a face-saving device, de Gaulle now attempted to internationalise the dispute and emphasised his readiness for discussions on the entire situation in the Middle East.⁸⁰ In another press interview on 7 June in Paris, Général Oliva-Roget levelled some equally bitter charges against the British.⁸¹

On 4 June, Duff Cooper endured a "stormy interview" with de Gaulle. The latter "could not have been more stiff if he had been declaring war", though in Duff Cooper's estimation, he was "genuinely convinced that the whole incident [had] been arranged by the British so as to carry out their long-planned policy of driving the French out of the Levant in order to take their place". He warned Duff Cooper that although France was not in any position to open hostilities against Britain, France had been insulted and betrayed, a

⁷⁹ See Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 3 June 1945, E3710/8/89, FO 371/45568; Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 3 June 1945, E3711/8/89, FO 371/45569.

⁸⁰ Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 3 June 1945, E3712/8/89, FO 371/45569. Britain had no wish to see her own shortcomings in the Middle East the subject of an international conference and still less Russian participation in any such conference.

⁸¹ See Kirk, *op cit*, p 300.

fact which she could not forget.⁸² De Gaulle's bitterness even extended to cancelling a ceremony at which he had been due to confer war decorations on some British officers; at a subsequent review of French troops, he angrily ordered out of the procession the small contingent of ambulances run and financed by Lady Spears since the outbreak of war and dedicated to the care of the Free French.⁸³

De Gaulle was to be profoundly disappointed however, with the more general reaction in France to events in the Levant, which did nothing to reduce the popularity of the British: none of his own Ministers were remotely interested in a conflict with Britain over the Levant and this feeling was echoed in the press. De Gaulle's threat to denounce the *modus vivendi* which had been arranged between the French and British military authorities drew forth a counter-threat of resignation from Beynet.⁸⁴ In the Consultative Assembly on 20 June, a resolution in favour of a Franco-British alliance was unanimously passed.⁸⁵

It is nonetheless remarkable that less than a month after the death of Hitler and the German surrender at Rheims, the situation in the Levant had reduced Britain and France to a paper war. As well as marking a critical period in Anglo-French relations, the May crisis in Syria also "effectively marked the end of the French era in the Middle

⁸² Duff Cooper, *op cit*, p 354-355; Kersaudy, Le Levant in De Gaulle et la nation face aux problèmes de défense, p 260.

⁸³ Duff Cooper, *op cit*, p 355.

⁸⁴ Kersaudy, Le Levant, in De Gaulle et la nation face aux problèmes de défense, p 260.

⁸⁵ J. W. Young, Britain, France and the Unity of Europe, 1945-1951, (Leicester, 1984), pp 9-12.

East".⁸⁶ Henceforward, the British realised that to continue to talk of a special position for the French in the Levant was pointless and would do untold damage to her own standing in the Middle East and the sooner the better the French came to the same realisation. Prospects for a settlement of the situation improved with the imminence of the conference at Potsdam as wider issues came to dominate the thinking of all parties to the dispute. On 8 July, the French government announced that to accede to Syrian and Lebanese wishes to form national armies, it was taking steps to transfer the *Troupes Spéciales*⁸⁷ to their control. With this decision, the Levant situation passed from the critical list.⁸⁸

By now the Foreign Office was even more convinced that "a close Anglo-French alliance [was] very much in the interests of [Britain]" and they soon discovered that Ernest Bevin, the new Labour Foreign Secretary, was only too willing to lend his support to the policy. Bevin quickly realised however, that no progress in this direction could be achieved before the Levant issue was settled, but saw himself as ideally placed to bring about such a settlement, having no feelings of personal antagonism towards de Gaulle such as Churchill had developed.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Wm Roger Louis, The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism, (Oxford, 1984), p 170.

⁸⁷ Large numbers of the *Troupes Spéciales* had anyway deserted French command during the troubles in May and had placed themselves at the disposal of the local governments. Kirk, *op cit*, p 303.

⁸⁸ Kirk, *op cit*, p 303. A. W. de Porte, De Gaulle's Foreign Policy, 1944-1946, (Camb., Mass., 1968), pp 149-151.

⁸⁹ Sean Greenwood, Ernest Bevin, France and "Western Union": August 1945-February 1946, European History Quarterly, Vol 14, (1984), p 320-322.

Even despite these promising signs, the Levant issue was to occupy Anglo-French attention for many more months. The situation was not helped by de Gaulle's continued intransigence and his determination that France should retain something of her position in the Levant, in contrast with the more reasoned and flexible approach of Bidault, Massigli and Chauvel.⁹⁰ The last six months of 1945 witnessed a series of laborious negotiations dedicated to finding a resolution which would please everybody; on 13 December 1945, agreement was tentatively reached on a joint evacuation plan, though less than a month later, this was wrecked by de Gaulle.

Events were now to overtake the British and French. On 20 January, de Gaulle resigned and shortly afterwards Bevin and Bidault agreed to try and salvage the December agreement.⁹¹ By this time however, the Syrians and Lebanese, tired of constant rounds of negotiations which altered nothing, had announced their intention of bringing the issue of the presence of French and British troops on their territory before the United Nations. In February 1946, Britain and France suffered the joint humiliation of being reprimanded by the United Nations Security Council and were forced to expedite their evacuation.⁹² The final ignominious departure of British troops from the Levant took place in June 1946; the remnants of the French forces were close on their heels in August.⁹³ Thus the gaping wound which for so long had disabled the Anglo-French alliance was effectively cauterised.

⁹⁰ J. W. Young, Britain, France and the Unity of Europe, 1945-1951, pp 18-23.

⁹¹ *ibid*, pp 22-25.

⁹² Louis, *op cit*, p 171; de Porte, *op cit*, p 171.

⁹³ Sachar, *op cit*, p 330-331.

CONCLUSIONS

Of the innumerable problems which tried and tested the endurance of the Anglo-Free French alliance during the Second World War, the Levant was perhaps the most serious and the most constantly recurring. As Kersaudy has so picturesquely described, "the intricate combinations and repercussions of developments in the Levant were for ever merging in a sort of hideous witches' brew that simmered constantly and occasionally bubbled over. From this hideous cauldron sprang forth ninety per cent of the quarrels between de Gaulle and Churchill until the end of the war".¹ Yet in view of the legacy of mistrust and suspicion which both powers had inherited concerning their relationship in the Levant, it was small wonder that their partnership there was so troubled. The atmosphere of mutual rivalry and hostility which had built up over the centuries had long since gained a momentum all of its own and, to a certain extent, had stacked the cards against the success of any joint Anglo-French venture in the Levant.

The annals of history were filled to overflowing with precedents to which the two powers, and especially the French, could look to justify their continued distrust and suspicion. More importantly, the First World War was within the memory and even the experience of most of the protagonists during the Second World War. It was all too easy to compare the more formally titled McMahon-Hussein correspondence and the Sykes-Picot agreement with the British endorsement of Catroux's proclamation of Levant independence and her assurances to respect the pre-eminent and privileged position of France. A comparison between Allenby's victorious advance and the uneasy joint Anglo-French occupation of the Levant during 1918 and 1919 and Operation Exporter and the subsequent establishment of an

¹ Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 198.

Anglo-Free French condominium in Syria and Lebanon, was equally obvious. Similarly, the pejorative term "Lawrencian" all too readily sprang to French minds when describing the antics of Spears and his dedicated team of Arabophiles.

From 1940 onwards, Britain and the Free French as allies faced mortal danger from the Axis threat. There was every reason to hope and expect that historical precedents and traditional rivalries even in the Levant, might somehow have been transcended in the common fight against the common foe. Yet this did not happen. To adopt the line that as the course of Anglo-French relations in the Levant had never run smooth, a troubled relationship between Britain and the Free French there during the Second World War was a foregone conclusion, is to adopt too fatalistic and simplistic an approach. As the annals of history provide only part of the answer, one is left to seek other explanations elsewhere, starting perhaps, with the circumstances of the time.

The motive which inspired the joint Anglo-Free French invasion of the Levant, namely that of defending the area against Axis infiltration, was at least mutual to both Allies. Rudely awakened to the vulnerability of her position in the Middle East by the Rashid Ali coup and the subsequent Axis exploitation of the Vichy link in Syria and Lebanon, Britain had been forced to reappraise her policy of reliance on Vichy neutrality and to contemplate an invasion to protect her wide interests in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the decision was only reluctantly taken and activated purely by military expediency. Though the Free French were equally determined that the Levant should not fall victim to the Axis, their motives for invasion were more complex and more numerous. The Levant was regarded, next to North Africa, as one of the most prestigious parts of the French Empire and the Free French eagerly grasped the prospect of invasion as a golden opportunity to extend their influence and control. They also recognised the urgent need to protect the Levant

States from falling under the sway of Anglo-Saxon domination as circumstances seemed to threaten.

In their desperate circumstances, the Allies had espoused the idea of a proclamation of Levant independence to ease the path of their invading armies. Though realising the potential for trouble the idea contained, as a means of countervailing Axis appeal and securing the goodwill of the Arab population, the British had viewed the proclamation as militarily expedient. The French too had regarded the proclamation of independence as expedient, not only militarily by ensuring Arab quiescence and thereby assisting the progress of the armies, but also politically, by facilitating the establishment of their control. With only limited personnel and resources at their disposal, it was easier for the Free French to establish their authority over the Levant States in the guise of liberators rather than that of conquerors.

The extent of the commitment to the proclamation of independence between the two Allies was however, quite different and this quickly spelled trouble for their alliance. Once the British had endorsed the Free French proclamation of Levant independence, they were obliged to stand by it or else face renewed charges of perfidy and betrayal from the Arabs, not only in the Levant but throughout the Middle East. The British realised that their own position in the Middle East could stand or fall depending upon how their actions in the Levant were assessed. From the Arab point of view, the Free French had stolen a ride into the Levant with the British invasion forces; the British were seen as the paymasters of the French and therefore expected to exercise a considerable degree of control over them and their behaviour.

Given these Arab expectations, it was inevitable that as the war situation ebbed and flowed, so did British pressure on the Free French to uphold their promise of independence

to the Levant States. Notwithstanding the implications of the proclamation of independence for her own Middle Eastern empire, it should be remembered that it was always a good deal easier for Britain to don the cloak of liberalism and to occupy the higher moral ground when dealing with the independence of territories in which her own predominance was not at stake. Throughout the period of the Second World War, Britain, whilst steadfastly upholding the Free French pledge to the Levant States, was always quick to quash any suggestions that her own activities in the Middle East be subject to scrutiny and for example, moved swiftly to censor all references in the Egyptian press to Transjordanian claims for independence sparked off by the Lebanese crisis in November 1943.

Though the French too, had their fair share of broken promises to the Arabs, most notably the non-ratification of the 1936 treaties, they were less able to afford, and possibly less inclined, to be sensitive about such matters. After the humiliation of 1940, de Gaulle was fighting to re-establish France as a Great Power and to resurrect the French Empire; he had certainly not engaged in a fratricidal conflict to install the Free French in the Levant States only subsequently to relinquish control of those territories. De Gaulle never had any real intention of fulfilling Arab aspirations for unfettered independence as he realised that to do so would encourage a chain reaction, with far-reaching consequences for France's North African Empire. The Free French claimed to represent the real voice of France; to simply surrender the historic position of France in the Levant and to gain nothing in return was out of the question. De Gaulle had been subjected to vicious assaults from Vichy for his actions in the Levant, in which he had been depicted as nothing more than a British puppet, carelessly discarding parts of the French empire to be rapidly swallowed up by perfidious Albion; he knew too, that were he to cede an inch of French control in the Levant, he

would face similar attacks from elements within his own camp and do much to alienate sympathies with his cause.

Of all the factors which made de Gaulle determined to defend the position of France in the Levant, perhaps the most important was his fear that if the French relaxed their control, the British would immediately step into their shoes. Anthony Hartley has pointed out that one of the main themes of de Gaulle's Mémoires de Guerre is the idea that France's allies would always seek to take advantage of her weakness to further their own interests. De Gaulle was imbued with the idea that all nations, even those allied together in a common cause, were potential rivals.² Judging from her actions in the past, de Gaulle was convinced that Britain aimed to erode and finally eliminate French influence in the Levant and to replace it with her own, as part of a grand design to establish her hegemony throughout the Middle East. He seems to have remained impervious to the British government's countless promises and assurances that this was not the case; British behaviour during the armistice negotiations at St. Jeanne d'Acre and the activities of Spears in championing the independence of the States, only served to fuel his suspicions.

There were thus a number of problems inherent in the Anglo-Free French venture in the Levant which were likely to bedevil the future course of relations between the two powers. A further source of trouble quickly became apparent in the difficulties experienced in instituting a joint system of occupation, which the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements came to embody. In the anomalous situation which was created, overall military command was vested in the British, with their clear preponderance of troops³, and

² Anthony Hartley, *op cit*, p 7.

³ Given the relative British and Free French positions, and their disparate contributions both in the general war effort and in Operation Exporter, it is easily apparent why

territorial command in the Free French. Britain had no other aim in the Levant than to win the war and military considerations consequently dominated her thinking and her actions there, often at the expense of regard for French susceptibilities. The Free French, conscious of being so conspicuously outnumbered by their British allies, were forced into a very poor second place; they struggled constantly however, to reassert their own authority and that of France and sought to emphasise their own rôle whilst doing their utmost to minimise that of the British, often with disastrous consequences for Anglo-Free French relations.

These few basic problems alone, inherent at the very outset of the joint enterprise, were more than sufficient to upset the Anglo-Free French alliance in the Levant, without taking into account the numerous other problems which only gradually surfaced along the way. Hardly a year of the war was to go by without a serious crisis between the two powers in the Levant. Why 1943 has merited such special and detailed attention is that the particular circumstances of that year threw all these problems into relief.

1943 was the year which witnessed a collection of Allied military victories. In the early months of that year in the Russian arena, the Germans were driven from the Caucasus and defeated at Stalingrad. During the summer of 1942, the Allies had staunchly withstood Rommel's push towards Egypt; late 1942 had seen the successful launch of Operation Torch; these two events combined made possible the eventual elimination of all Axis forces from North Africa by the spring of 1943 and with this the clearance of the Axis

overall military command should have gone to the British. Nonetheless, the British became increasingly reluctant to even consider relinquishing control of that command and certainly in the latter stages of the war, sought to keep from de Gaulle the real numbers of their troops in the Levant in order to avoid the issue being raised.

threat from a vast section of the Mediterranean. Following on from these Mediterranean successes, Sicily was attacked by the Allies in July; only weeks later Mussolini fell, southern Italy was invaded and by 3 September, the Italian government had surrendered. For the first time in the war, the Allies felt there was hope that the Axis might be defeated.

As a direct result of these Allied victories, and especially Operation Torch, which was to light the way for the establishment of de Gaulle's movement on French territory, the position of the Free French had improved substantially. Most notably, 1943 was to prove a major milestone on de Gaulle's own route to power. At the beginning of the year, he was still counted as no more than the leader of a resistance movement, albeit a fairly significant one. Though the Free French controlled certain portions of the French Empire, the movement lacked the legal status of the Polish or the Belgian governments in exile and was almost entirely dependent on Britain for financial assistance. By the end of 1943 however, de Gaulle and his movement had a valuable base in Algiers, on French territory, from which to carry on the fight against the Axis and to work for the liberation of France. Moreover, by gradually overshadowing and finally outmanoeuvring Giraud, the main contender for his position, de Gaulle had established himself as the undisputed leader of the movement.

This most fortunate conglomeration of circumstances throughout the course of 1943 all augured so well for the future of de Gaulle's Free French movement. It therefore seems a strange irony that 1943 should also have witnessed the effective loss of the French position in the Levant. At the end of 1942, de Gaulle's rôle as guardian and protector of the French mission in the Levant was relatively unsullied and the French mandate remained intact. Yet by the end of

1943, Syria and the Lebanon had emerged as two independent, self-governing nations, the French position in the Levant was nothing more than perilous and the mandate was in tatters.

The responsibility for this can be ascribed in a certain degree to those very circumstances which had made 1943 augur so well for the Allies. By a policy of delay, obstruction and procrastination, the Free French during 1941 and 1942 had managed to hold off British pleas that the pledge of independence to the Levant States be honoured. They had even managed to weather the direct assaults launched on their position by General Spears and Casey. The Allied military successes in North and West Africa, however, removed from the French armoury the final weapon in their defence against this onslaught. They were no longer able to plead that the critical military situation which threatened the Middle East precluded the holding of elections in the Levant States. Rommel was on the retreat, but Spears, supported by the Foreign Office, was to launch a new offensive in the early months of 1943, which the French proved incapable of withstanding. Elections were announced in both Syria and Lebanon by late March; shortly afterwards, the campaigns were in full swing.

Another direct result of the Allied military successes was the establishment of the Free French in North Africa. The Levant States and Spears who had championed their cause, now watched the burgeoning position of de Gaulle's Free French movement and listened with considerable and increasing apprehension to the claim which it asserted more and more frequently of speaking for France. The increasing assertiveness of the Free French soon made itself manifest in all manner of ways in the Levant itself. In resisting the campaign launched by the Free French to extract a far-reaching treaty from them in return for their independence, the Levant States had relied on the dubious status of the

Free French movement as a primary defence. With the formation of the CFLN in early June 1943 and its subsequent recognition by Britain and the United States in August that year, that defence was rapidly becoming obsolete. It is evident therefore, that the States, assisted by Spears, decided that they must quicken the pace of their quest for independence whilst the going was good; otherwise, they feared that they would soon face an organisation which could legitimately claim to represent France and their grand opportunity would be lost.

One of the most serious and frequent complaints which the Free French had levelled against the British during the course of their partnership in the Levant, was their inability to reconcile the statements which the British government had repeatedly made that they had no interests in the Levant except to win the war, with the activities of British officials on the spot and especially those of Spears. 1943 was a year when this charge on the part of the Free French was levelled with considerable justification.

Spears was determined to follow up his success in forcing the Free French to announce elections by ensuring that the French were afforded no opportunity of rigging those elections. He feared that unless British influence could somehow be brought into play to neutralise French efforts to sway the elections, both countries would be saddled with Chambers which were packed with stooges who would all too willingly sign any treaty proposals the French might care to place before them; he was quite happy therefore, to lend every possible assistance to nationalist candidates who would oppose the French. By bringing to bear all the influence he could possibly muster, and at the cost of considerable acrimony with the Free French and the Foreign Office, Spears did in fact manage to ensure the relative freedom of the elections by transforming them into a straightforward contest between "British" and "French"

candidates. The local politicians happily availed themselves of whatever stick they could to beat the French and welcomed the British intervention.

Nor did Spears' efforts cease there. He went on to play a significant rôle firstly in the Lebanese Presidential election contest between the nationalist Bechara el Khoury and the pro-French Emile Eddé and secondly in the formation of the strongly nationalist Lebanese Cabinet under Riad Solh. In the letter Spears wrote to Casey after he had secured the election of Khoury, he positively gloats over the defeat which he had managed to inflict on the Free French. No matter how many allowances one tries to make for Spears, for the difficulties of his position, for his frustration with the Free French for hampering the progress of the Levant States towards independence and for hindering the Allied war effort, it is impossible to read this letter without realising that one of his primary aims in the Levant was to destroy French influence. Yet the flip side of the coin is that as Spears had claimed all along, the Free French had sought to do everything possible to maintain their hold over the Levant and especially the Lebanon by influencing the elections and by supporting the candidature of Eddé for President.

That Spears was permitted to remain in the Levant as long as he did was due largely to the fact that he enjoyed the full confidence and support of the Prime Minister. Any number of representations by the French and by the Foreign Office failed to wake Churchill up to the havoc and damage his protégé was wreaking on the already strained Anglo-French alliance. On the contrary, Spears's continued personal interventions with the Prime Minister about the Levant rather alerted the latter to French misdemeanours there and added to his misgivings about de Gaulle and all things French.

The length of Spears's tenure and the "politique personnelle" in which he engaged represented a tragedy for the course of Anglo-Free French relations. As repeated complaints about his activities achieved no amelioration in his behaviour, the Free French were forced to conclude that Spears was in fact executing the official though undeclared policy of His Majesty's Government. Yet as Gaunson correctly points out: "In concentrating on Spears, it is easy to lose all sense of proportion and perspective".⁴ Though Spears contributed in a major way to the lamentable state of Anglo-French relations in the Levant, he alone cannot be saddled with entire responsibility and deeper and wider determinants must be taken into account.

A study of the French documents for 1943 reveals that the Foreign Office problems with Spears were to a large extent mirrored on the French side. There was considerable dissatisfaction within Carlton Gardens and later at Algiers with the performance of Helleu, especially over the rôle he played in precipitating the seating crisis and subsequently in the Mokkadem affair. The dearth of qualified and experienced personnel which afflicted the Free French movement was probably an important factor in his remaining in office as long as he did (along with other less desirable elements on the staff of the Délégation), but so too was the support of de Gaulle, which was made clear over the Mokkadem incident and again during the Lebanese crisis.

Both the British and the Free French encountered major difficulties with their principal representatives in the Levant, the British on a more long-running basis with Spears and the Free French with Helleu during 1943. Whilst this was a problem in itself, it was also a symptom of a more deep-rooted problem, namely the fundamental divergencies experienced by both powers between their Middle East

⁴ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 190.

officials and those based in London and Algiers, and more especially the inability of the latter to impose their will on the former. Though this was not a problem endemic to the Levant or particular to 1943, the conflict between the two parties was particularly extreme in the Levant in 1943, and therefore serves to highlight and emphasise the problem.

The Foreign Office had struggled for some time to inculcate in Spears and their Middle East officials in general, more respect for the Free French position in the Levant. Furthermore, Spears had been exhorted on numerous occasions to view official British policy towards the French in the Levant and the consequences of his own action against the wider background of more general Anglo-Free French relations. Foreign Office policy aimed to assist in the achievement of Levant independence, hoping that thereby Britain might reap the benefit of this policy of liberalism elsewhere in the Middle East. Yet equally, the Foreign Office asserted that it had no desire to evict the French from the Levant and hoped that the French might secure a pre-eminent and privileged position there. Regardless of the intrinsic contradiction, this policy was religiously adhered to with a twofold aim: firstly, Britain was anxious that if the French were slung unceremoniously out of the Levant, the focus of Arab attention would automatically switch to Britain's activities and a dangerous precedent would have been set which would inevitably have serious consequences for her own position in the Levant; secondly, Britain had no desire to alienate the sympathies and support of the French people during the war by presiding over the French downfall in the Levant and moreover, looked to a postwar future in which an Anglo-French alliance would provide a solid bedrock on which to found British policy towards Europe.

Yet in the face of total opposition from the vast majority of British officials in the Middle East to the idea that the French should retain any future rôle in the Levant,

the Foreign Office was completely powerless to ensure that its policy was carried out. Spears found himself able to misinterpret, completely ignore, or to exceed his instructions when it suited his purposes to do so; furthermore, he carefully monitored the reports of his activities to the Foreign Office to ensure that London only learned what he wanted it to know. Whilst Spears was one of the worst offenders, it is unfair to suggest that he was the only perpetrator of this crime. Probably with less dubious intent, Casey, when instructed to present Britain's demands to Catroux in Cairo during the November crisis of 1943, failed to seek clarification of the ambiguity in those instructions; he assumed that the British demand for the release of the Lebanese ministers also meant their reinstatement. The demands he consequently put to Catroux, forced the Foreign Office into adopting a more severe line with the French than originally had been intended. Macmillan too, over the same issue, deliberately sought to misunderstand his instructions in order to avoid increasing the pressure on the French.

The Free French were similarly plagued by the recalcitrance of their officials on the spot. Witnessing the day to day erosion of French influence in the Levant by her British ally, the majority of French personnel grew increasingly bitter and resentful. In the absence of a sufficiently firm policy directed from Algiers and lacking a strong hand at the helm of the Délégation Générale, a clique of officials with extremely reactionary views was able to take the running of French policy in the Levant largely into its own hands. By producing late or inadequate reports on the situation, the staff at the Délégation was able to gloss over the scale of its intervention in the internal affairs of the States in their attempt to reassert French authority; in the case of the elections, Algiers was kept badly informed whilst the officials tried to minimise the extent of the French defeat. Moreover, dissatisfaction

with the policy being pursued by Algiers was manifest in repeated requests, after the election defeat, for a firmer line to be adopted and in the calls for reinforcements to be despatched to the Levant. This innate capacity of officials on the spot to wreck any policy with which they disagreed is an important factor to be taken into account in any study of any subject. In a study of Anglo-Free French relations in the Levant, where feelings ran so high, where the disagreements were so evident and where there existed a body of officials on both sides sufficiently strong-willed to try and circumvent their instructions and willing to take the consequences of their actions, it is a factor of primary importance.

The Foreign Office found itself open to considerable criticism not only for its inability to impose its will on its representatives in the Middle East, but additionally, under attack from those very officials for the lack of a coherent and unified policy in the region. Criticism on that score is to a limited extent justified, but should be mitigated by remembering that the Foreign Office officials did not start off with a blank sheet and of necessity had to take into account obligations and commitments which they had had no part in making; in addition, they were obliged to engage in a constant struggle to assert the primacy of Foreign Office views over those of other government departments where the situation had often been assessed differently. In the desperately complicated Middle East, the Foreign Office was frantically trying to juggle too many conflicting priorities in circumstances which were far from favourable.

The conflicts in British policy in the Middle East were all too readily apparent. Britain was attempting to please the Arabs by granting them independence, yet at the same time, in her own interests, she was seeking to maintain a considerable degree of influence over them. She was trying

to do this without antagonising either the Jews to whom she had promised a national home in Palestine and whose welfare commanded considerable American concern, or the French, to whom she had promised a privileged and pre-eminent position, and whose future support in the European arena was deemed vital. All this was somehow to be achieved without upsetting either American or Russian susceptibilities. A tall order indeed and one in which success would have been little short of miraculous.

In addition to balancing all these external considerations, Foreign Office policy was not formulated in a vacuum, and had to take into account a variety of internal conflicts and considerations. Most notable with regard to British policy towards the French was the constant battle which the Foreign Office was obliged to wage against the prejudice of Churchill towards de Gaulle, a prejudice which, despite the best efforts of the Foreign Office, was refuelled continually by Roosevelt and often by Spears. The Foreign Office and the Cabinet frequently had to pull out all the stops to prevent Churchill impetuously breaking off relations with de Gaulle and all the dire consequences which that would have entailed.

This fundamental conflict at the heart of British foreign policy towards France and de Gaulle meant that contradictory messages were often picked up by the Free French. Churchill never tired of stating that when the chips were down, he would always choose the open sea and Roosevelt before Europe and de Gaulle. Yet Foreign Office officials often created a quite contrary impression. After an interview with Strang on 2 July 1943, Viénot was to report that "pour la durée des hostilités et pour les lendemains immédiates de la guerre, [le gouvernement britannique] considère une harmonieuse collaboration entre la Grande Bretagne et les Etats Unis comme la nécessité primordiale au point de vue politique et au point de vue militaire. Le

Foreign Office ne perd cependant pas de vue qu'à longue échéance, les rapports franco-britanniques présentent pour la Grande Bretagne une importance plus grande encore que les relations anglo-américaines".⁵

For the Free French at least, matters were more straightforward. The only conflict in their priorities was their promise of independence to the Levant States when they had no intention of granting it. Their main problem was how to extricate themselves from that position without causing too much antagonism with Britain. The Free French already suffered considerable confusion from the contradictions in British official policy towards the Levant and the *obiter dicta* and actions of officials on the spot. But in their position and in their assessment of the situation, they were obliged to rely on the old maxim that actions spoke louder than words.

The problematic Anglo-French alliance in the Levant undoubtedly served to exacerbate the difficulties of the Churchill-de Gaulle relationship. Whilst both men were generally far too preoccupied with a multitude of other issues to take an interest in the day to day affairs of the Levant, on numerous occasions their attention was drawn to matters there by special appeals from their respective representatives. In the aftermath of Casablanca, stories of petty French behaviour in the Levant only added to Churchill's wrath against de Gaulle and the latter was continually incensed by reports of British interference in Levant affairs. Yet conversely, the very characters of Churchill and de Gaulle and the difficult relationship between them contributed a good deal to the discord which prevailed in the Levant, which became something of an arena for the battle of their wills. In the face of numerous

⁵ Entretien avec W. Strang, 2 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1238.

attempts by the Foreign Office to displace him, Churchill loyally defended his protégé, Spears, for being the only man he knew who would stand up to the French; de Gaulle was equally loyal in his support for Helleu and his attempts to protect the French position in the Levant against British encroachments.

In view of the encouragement and support which Anglo-French officials in the Levant knew they enjoyed at the highest level from de Gaulle and Churchill, and of the love-hate relationship between the two leaders, what is to be marvelled at is the fact that the Levant did not have even more of an impact on Anglo-French relations. That this did not happen was largely due to the dedicated team of diplomats, both British and French, who struggled constantly to keep the alliance on an even keel, and sometimes even to prevent it from sinking without trace.

At the level of Foreign Secretary, Eden and Massigli were both sincerely committed to the belief that an Anglo-French alliance was essential for the future of their respective nations. Eden had stuck by the Free French through thick and thin; though often critical of French behaviour in the Levant, it was he who spearheaded the campaign to remove Spears in an attempt to limit the damage that he continually inflicted on Anglo-French relations. The extent of Eden's loyalty to the Free French was even to cause Churchill to threaten to break with him.

Similarly, Massigli worked unceasingly to promote better relations with the British. He even sympathised to an extent with British misgivings about certain aspects of French policy in the Levant and for example, over the Mokka-dem case, he did his best to remove the cause for those misgivings. During the Lebanese crisis, Massigli undoubtedly believed that Helleu had behaved with great ineptitude. Moreover, he was considerably perturbed by his suspicions

that perhaps de Gaulle's part in the whole affair was greater than he cared to contemplate. Massigli was nonetheless a Frenchman and his attitude towards the Levant reflected that. If he disapproved strongly of the methods which Helleu had employed against the Lebanese, he was, like most Frenchmen, not really dissatisfied with the result achieved; once the arrests had taken place, the Committee, Massigli included, were unanimous in their desire to take advantage of the opportunity presented, to try and secure the removal of Riad Solh from power and thereby to prevent any further erosion of French influence in the Levant.

Yet the Lebanese crisis and his rôle in its resolution also served to demonstrate Massigli's unstinting efforts to reduce the impact of the affair on Anglo-French relations at considerable risk to his own standing with de Gaulle. Through Viénot, he requested representations from the British which he might use to help the more moderate members of the Committee to see reason. His letters to Viénot, which describe his blazing rows with de Gaulle and his repeated threats of resignation, are testament to the strength of his convictions that the crisis ought finally to be resolved honourably in the manner stipulated by Britain. What was most alarming was the extent to which the crisis stretched Massigli's faith in the British almost to breaking point. He revealed considerable doubts to Viénot that perhaps events in the Lebanon and the increasingly harsh stance that Britain was driven to take against the French, signified the beginning of a sea change in Foreign Office thinking.

Massigli's worth to the Anglo-French alliance was certainly recognised and appreciated by the Foreign Office. In the immediate aftermath of the Lebanese crisis, the Foreign Office was disturbed to learn from French sources that de Gaulle intended to replace Massigli as Commissioner for Foreign Affairs. Sir Orme Sargent observed that Massigli's departure "would be a disaster from every point

of view -- including de Gaulle's. It would be quite natural for de Gaulle to make Massigli the scapegoat for any humiliation he suffers over the Lebanese business. We shall certainly come off worst in the bargain if we keep General Spears and in return lose Massigli!" Even though it was appreciated that any representations by Britain on Massigli's behalf might make de Gaulle "more stiff-necked", it was considered worth the risk to let him know that the removal of the Massigli would adversely affect the Committee's reputation and would be viewed by His Majesty's Government with disquiet.⁶

The efforts of Massigli and Eden to preserve the Anglo-French alliance, especially during its more critical hours, were certainly matched by those of Viénot in London, Catroux in Beirut and Macmillan in Algiers. Though not an Anglophile of quite the same stamp as either Massigli or Viénot, Catroux had always been concerned by the state of Anglo-French relations in the Levant and appreciated the need for a united Allied front in the face of increasingly strident nationalist claims. Unlike de Gaulle, Catroux was a pragmatist in the matter of French prestige, and was sufficiently astute to know when to retire gracefully, albeit to prepare for a later come-back. He had conceded over elections when he realised that he could no longer hold out against both the force of British arguments and local popular pressure; he was to do the same during the Lebanese crisis. He had initially entertained hopes of resolving the crisis in a manner favourable to France but when he recognised that this was impossible, he had recommended acceding to British demands and cutting French losses. His reports on the Levant situation were invaluable to Massigli in his battles with de Gaulle in Committee meetings.

⁶ Minutes by W. H. B. Mack and Sir Orme Sargent, 23 November 1943; Foreign Office to Macmillan, 24 November 1943, Z11958/5/G69, FO 371/35135.

Likewise, Viénot, an ardent Anglophile, was untiring in his efforts to alleviate the damage being done to the French position by Helleu's actions in the Levant. He was himself surprised and disappointed by the severity of the British reaction to the crisis and suspicious that certain elements of the British establishment were seeking to use the incident to take advantage of France and to create trouble for de Gaulle. He nonetheless remained firmly convinced that this was not official British policy and did everything possible to convince the Foreign Office that the Levant incident was a minor aberration and not symptomatic of the policy which might be expected from the Free French in the future. He provided vital support and reassurance to Massigli when the latter began to doubt British policy.

In addition to the support with which Catroux and Viénot were able to provide Massigli in his struggle to force de Gaulle to settle the Lebanese crisis peaceably and without resort to a show-down as he had threatened, it should be remembered that not long before the crisis had erupted, two events had occurred on the political scene in Algiers, which were to prove to be of major significance during the Lebanese crisis. The first of these was the enlargement of the Committee and the second, the creation of the Consultative Assembly. The import of both these events for the successful resolution of the crisis is not to be overlooked. Massigli was himself to repeatedly acknowledge and applaud the assistance he received in the Committee from its newer members who were less under the sway of de Gaulle and therefore more able to advocate a moderate line. Similarly, the sentiment of the more independent members of the Consultative Assembly was overwhelmingly in favour of a firm alliance with Britain and not even the emotive issue of the Levant deflected them from this course. Both these positive factors were crucial in deterring Churchill from adopting a much more severe policy towards the Free French

by persuading him that at very long last, de Gaulle was "in commission".

Since taking up his post in Algiers, Macmillan had proved an able campaigner on behalf of de Gaulle and the Free French; on many occasions he had acted as an effective counterweight to the influence of Spears, especially so during the Lebanese crisis, when he was prepared to involve himself in all sorts of manoeuvres designed to assist the French as much as possible. He interceded with Churchill and did what he could to attenuate the Prime Minister's anger over the affair whilst making repeated entreaties to London for tolerance towards the Committee.

Moreover, Macmillan had outspokenly criticised the belligerent policy of ultimata and threats advocated by Spears and Casey and firmly believed that his approach of dealing with the French by gentle persuasion was more effective whilst causing less damage to Anglo-French relations. Makins spoke for Macmillan when he reported in late November that in general, he did not believe that the recent crisis had left the French any permanent feelings of bitterness towards the British. Perspicaciously, Makins added that he could not, however, be sure "that the affair had not imprinted another permanent grievance upon that sensitive film, the mind of de Gaulle".⁷

The boundless efforts of all these individuals were instrumental in rescuing the Anglo-French alliance from the trough into which it had been steered by the Lebanese crisis. Yet the alliance did not emerge unscathed. On the surface there was little visible damage: there was no rupture of relations, Duff Cooper's appointment was not delayed and early in 1944 Churchill and de Gaulle met at Marrakesh for what was to be a cordial encounter. Below the

⁷ Makins to Strang, 26 November 1943, FO 800/432.

surface however, the harm was considerable: despite the encouraging signs that the Committee was now more representative, more democratic and capable in the final resort of standing up to de Gaulle, the Lebanese affair had reinforced Churchill's worst suspicions about the Free French leader and had had an equally detrimental effect on Roosevelt. The two Allied leaders were confirmed in their doubts that de Gaulle could not be trusted and that there could be no question of recognising the CFLN as the legitimate government of France.

As a direct result of the crisis therefore, and the subsequent attitude of Churchill and Roosevelt, de Gaulle was deprived of the chance to participate in the momentous decisions connected with the liberation of France. Additionally, the effect of the crisis on the French position in the Levant was close to fatal; de Gaulle was forced to preside over the effective dismantling of the French mandate, whilst for the time being, the British were to enjoy an increased surge of prestige. Ironically, the crisis was to effect something of a change in official British policy. From the time of the invasion up until 1943, British policy, in view of the war and the French refusal to make any concessions, had of necessity, been weighted slightly towards the Levant States as the underdogs. Yet after 1943, there was a belief that it was the French who were now the underdogs and that it was they who were now in some danger for the Lebanese crisis had, to use Eden's words to Spears, "tilted the balance somewhat unduly against them".

Yet at this stage of the game, no amount of support could revive the French position in the Levant and nothing could alter the fact that the policies which both Britain and France were trying to implement there were anachronistic and therefore doomed to failure. Neither power seemed to have grasped that treaties along the lines of the

Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930 or the unratified treaties of 1936 between France and the Levant States which they so assiduously tried to force on the States, were in the new conditions of the time, no longer acceptable. The British, in trying to preserve a French position of privilege and pre-eminence in the Levant, found that where a degree of flexibility and compromise in the French attitude was called for, none was forthcoming. The French too, continued to delude themselves about the strength of the Levantine attachment to their independence and about the place of France in the hearts of the Syrians and the Lebanese. Given such lack of realism from both Britain and France, it was hardly surprising that their relations in the Levant should impede the quest for an Anglo-French alliance for several more years to come.

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