

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

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ABSTRACT

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

This thesis provides a detailed account and analysis of Anglo-French relations in the Levant and their impact on the more general relationship between the British and the Free French during the important year of 1943. It aims to examine and explain how the Levant, traditionally an area of mutual suspicion and rivalry, created and accentuated discord and dissension between wartime Allies and, on occasion, even came perilously close to rupturing their relations.

The introduction provides a survey of Anglo-French relations in the region as a backdrop against which the period covered by the thesis must be viewed. Chapters I-IV examine two policies pursued by Britain in the interests of the war effort, the persuasion of the Free French to honour their independence pledge to Syria and Lebanon and the encouragement of the formation of a unified French movement in North Africa. Arising from these policies, the mounting tensions between the Foreign Office and its principal representative in the Levant and between Churchill and de Gaulle are explored. The influence of deteriorating Anglo-French relations in the Levant on the Churchill-de Gaulle relationship is considered as are the high-level Anglo-French discussions in the summer of 1943 which acknowledged the need for better co-operation in the Levant. Chapters V and VI investigate the increasing British involvement in Levant politics, which resulted in the establishment of strongly nationalist and anti-French governments in both Syria and Lebanon.

Chapters VII-XII are concerned exclusively with events in the Lebanon during late October and November 1943 which provoked a major crisis in Anglo-French relations. Attention is focused on the efforts of the Foreign Office and their French counterparts to defuse the crisis and to lessen its overall impact, and is contrasted with the intransigence displayed by Churchill and de Gaulle and with the belligerence of both French and British authorities on the spot. The final chapters deal with the efforts made to heal the breach in the Anglo-French relationship by both sides and the attempt by both to re-evaluate and reform their policies in the Levant. The troubled course of the Anglo-French alliance in the Levant throughout the remainder of the war, including the crisis in Syria in May and June 1945, is examined in a brief epilogue.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though a wealth of literature already exists which deals to a greater or lesser extent with the various aspects of the relationship between Britain and France in the Levant during the Second World War, it is bound together by one common factor -- practically without exception, no extensive use has ever been made of French primary source material. Some authors have chosen to ignore the French aspect altogether, some have relied on published official material and personal memoirs and polemics, whilst others acknowledge the existence of French material, but discount it on grounds of limited range and accessibility. What has tended to emerge from these approaches is an Anglo-centric version of events, an attempt to analyse all aspects of the problematic relationship from a British sources, with very little consideration for the French point of view. In making full use of the material gathered on two short research trips to Paris, this thesis is a limited attempt and a very small beginning, at redressing the balance.

On a more general note, when embarking on this research, I encountered scepticism in various quarters about the possibility of access to and the quality of French sources. That scepticism did not prove justified. It is true that French archives are not always as "user-friendly" as their British equivalents, to which the opening hours and restrictions on orders of documents at the Quai d'Orsay are testament. Admittedly also, French material cannot compare in range and quality with that on the British side and this, to a certain extent, is revealed in the thesis. Nonetheless, there *is* French material and it is invaluable for any attempt to gain a proper insight into French mentality and policies.

Some elaboration is required on the limited span of this thesis. My original intention was to cover the years 1943 to 1946, though the thesis would then inevitably have been less detailed. Material was gathered both in France and Britain to cover these years, though due to exigencies of both time and space, that material has yet to see the light of day. Had circumstances permitted, the thesis would have proceeded beyond 1943 to an account of the troubled, though less critical, state of affairs during 1944 and an analysis of the effect on Anglo-French relations of the arrival of Général Beynet in the Levant, of Duff Cooper in Algiers, of the liberation of France and the removal of General Spears shortly thereafter. It would then have gone on to examine how, by May 1945, despite all these developments which seemed to augur so well for the future of the Anglo-French alliance, another even more serious crisis erupted in the Levant during which the intervention of British troops was not forestalled and a series of frosty exchanges between de

Gaulle and Churchill plunged the temperature of Anglo-French relations to well below zero.

As it stands the thesis is confined to a detailed coverage of the eventful year of 1943. The year is particularly important in the context both of the improved Allied military situation and the vastly strengthened position of de Gaulle, due to his establishment in North Africa. In terms of the situation in the Levant, the year is crucial in that it witnessed the most significant challenge yet to the French mandatory position there from the independent and strongly nationalist Lebanese government. These events provoked a serious crisis in Anglo-French relations: Britain threatened to take over the Levant by declaring martial law and de Gaulle retaliated with a threat to withdraw his troops. A serious rupture was only narrowly averted by the considerable efforts of the Foreign Office, Macmillan and Massigli in Algiers, and Catroux in Beirut.

In order to set new material, both French and British, in its proper context, it has been necessary to use certain well-established British primary sources, such as FO 371, (General Political Correspondence) and the CAB series (Cabinet Minutes and Memorandum). Wherever possible however, I have used lesser known and hitherto unpublished material to its fullest extent to provide new insights into the events covered. This is especially so with the vast bulk of the French sources: the material gathered at the Quai d'Orsay was the most valuable, and, for example, the telegrams between Viénot and Massigli are interesting whilst those from Helleu and Catroux at the time of the Lebanese crisis are particularly revealing. The archives at Vincennes, though primarily concerned with the military, yielded some extremely useful and surprising telegrams. In the realm of British documents, which have been much more heavily trawled, I have tried, for example with the FO 226 (Spears Mission), FO 660 (Minister Resident, Algiers), FO 800 (Makins papers) and WO (War Office) categories, to incorporate new material where considered appropriate and relevant.

Inevitably, constraints of space have meant that many aspects of the complex situation which prevailed in the Levant are covered only in a peripheral manner or not at all. The intricacies of the political situation in the Levant, the intrigues of local politicians and particularly their considerable success in utilising the British as a tool in their efforts against the French, have only been considered when impinging in a direct and significant way on the relations between Britain and France, as for example, in the question of the election of the Lebanese President. There is no attempt to cover American or Soviet involvement in the area. Developments in the field of Arab unity have not been discussed, nor has Britain's more general Middle Eastern policy, with regard to Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and

Transjordan. Equally, important aspects of the Anglo-Free French relationship outside the Levant have been treated only in the broadest sense.

For all these shortcomings, I bear full responsibility, as for any other errors of fact, translation or interpretation. By way of humble excuse and apology, I offer a thought of Churchill's. On learning, in December 1942, of the high grade conditions which were being attached to the plans for Overlord, he minuted: "The maxim "Nothing avails but perfection" may be spelt shorter, "Paralysis"."

During the research and preparation of this thesis, I have incurred a debt of gratitude to institutions and individuals alike. I am grateful to the University of Leeds for the award of a postgraduate studentship, without which my research could never have been undertaken. I am most grateful to my supervisor, Professor David Dilks, who first encouraged me to embark on postgraduate research. In addition to providing me with invaluable advice over the years, he has engaged in lengthy correspondence on my behalf, was instrumental in securing me a grant from the Drummond-Wolff travel bursaries towards the cost of a research visit to Paris, as well as an extension of the time-limit imposed by the University to enable me to complete the thesis. More recently, he has had to persuade me to put pen to paper, then struggle through the generally illegible results; finally, he has had to contend with bulky and incomplete typed drafts, in insufficient time. For all this assistance, I am indebted to him. I am additionally grateful to Vivien Collins and Lisa Lodge, the Departmental secretaries, and to Penny Todd, Professor Dilks's private secretary, for their part in this saga. Also within the University of Leeds, I must record my thanks to the late Mr. Graham Ross who provided me with several useful articles and to Dr. Richard Whiting for words of encouragement on occasional meetings in the Public Record Office.

I am grateful to the staff at all the archives and libraries in Britain and Paris which it has been my privilege to use, but especially so to those at the Public Record Office.

In the course of this research, I have made numerous friends and acquaintances amongst researchers in general and fellow students on the PhD "quest". I would like to express my appreciation to them *en bloc* for the spirit of camaraderie which has always prevailed and in which I much enjoyed participating. I would like to extend particular thanks to Dr. Stefan Petrow and Dr. Moshe Gammer for their advice and their loyal friendship.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my family and friends for their faith, their hope and their charity. My deepest thanks of all are to Peter, to whom I dedicate this work.

INTRODUCTION

i) The Foundations of Franco-British Influence

Traditionally, the Levant¹ had always been a fertile breeding ground for Anglo-French rivalry and mistrust and the period spanned by the Second World War proved no exception. The sowing of the seeds of doubt and suspicion between the two nations pre-dates even the First World War by many decades, and as such any detailed examination of the genesis of the conflict falls outside the limited scope of this thesis; nonetheless, to achieve a better understanding of the legacy of distrust between the two Allies, a general outline of the history of the British and French presence in the Levant is both relevant and beneficial.

The first significant Franco-British involvement in the Levant can be traced to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to the Crusades, or the Christian Holy War against the infidel; thereafter, Britain and France became engaged in their own Hundred Years' War, during which the lands of the Near and Middle East were engulfed by the ascendant Ottoman Turks, though both nations maintained a trading relationship with various regions of the vast Ottoman Empire². In 1535, Francis I obtained the first capitulatory grant from Suleiman the Magnificent, by which France gained certain privileges concerning both the maintenance of her commercial links and the continued enjoyment of religious liberties for her nationals within the Empire. Other European powers subsequently acquired similar capitulations, including Britain in 1583; these

¹ The Levant traditionally denoted the Eastern part of the Mediterranean and the regions immediately adjacent to it, i.e. those countries known in recent times as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. The term gradually came to be used to relate more specifically to Syria and Lebanon.

² Peter Mansfield, The Arabs, (London, 1987), pp 56-59.

capitulations were frequently renewed and restated.³ In one such renewal in 1740, France acquired the right to protect all missionaries in the Ottoman Empire, regardless of nationality; as time passed, this right was extended not merely to foreign clerics, but to their congregations, including the indigenous Catholic population too. "Thus France came to view herself as the representative throughout the Levant, not only of Catholicism, but of Christianity in all its forms".⁴

During the eighteenth century the vulnerability of the Ottoman Empire was already apparent; it suffered assaults from Poland, Austria and three defeats inflicted by Russia. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte led an expedition to Egypt aiming to strike at Britain by threatening what had become the linchpin of her defence of India. Though initially successful, he was forced to abandon his armies two years later and Britain joined the Ottomans in overseeing their expulsion in 1801. So began "the long Anglo-French rivalry for political control over the Arab lands", for the episode alerted Britain not only to the need to safeguard her imperial possessions, but also to the fact that "the principal menace" was not Russia as she had formerly believed, but France.⁵

Britain's position and interests were further endangered when Muhammad Ali, a young Albanian officer amongst the Ottoman forces sent to expel the French, drew inspiration from Napoleon's example and seized power himself in Egypt. Recognised as viceroy in 1805 by the Ottoman Empire,

³ Ann Williams, Britain and France in the Middle East and North Africa, (London, 1968), pp 2-3.

⁴ W. I. Shorrock, French Imperialism in the Middle East. The Failure of Policy in Syria and the Lebanon, 1900-1914, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p 13.

⁵ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 105.

Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha, extended their empire by a series of military victories to include Arabia, the entirety of the Sudan and Syria. Muhammad Ali had retained close associations with the French, but British hopes that the latter might curb his territorial appetite proved false. Finally, in 1841, Britain successfully mobilised a major diplomatic offensive of European powers to confine Muhammad Ali to Egypt and the Sudan and to force Ibrahim Pasha out of Syria. Despite their sympathies with Muhammad Ali, the French stopped short of actually backing him against Britain's decision to put a stop to his ambitions.⁶

During this period of Ottoman disarray, the Egyptians had found support among the Maronite Christian elements ensconced mainly in the Lebanon. Consequently, as part of the subsequent Turkish effort to regain effective control of the area, the Sultan sought to systematically weaken the Maronites by encouraging the Moslem Druzes to attack them; this policy was to culminate in a massacre of Christians in 1860, in which 11,000 died. The European powers could not stand aside: though the Treaty of Paris in 1856 had forbidden all outside intervention in internal Ottoman affairs, it had also made clear the determination of the great powers to protect the Christian minorities. Of those powers, however, it was France under Napoleon III which despatched an expeditionary force to the Levant in 1860 to protect the Maronites. The force succeeded in restoring order and remained until June 1861, when by the signature of the *Règlement Organique*, the small area of Mount Lebanon was recognised as a specially privileged district or an

⁶ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 106-109; Williams, p 4.

autonomous "sanjak" with a Christian Maronite majority and a Christian governor.⁷

In terms of the respective positions of Britain and France, the period is significant: the arrival of the French expeditionary force led Christians to believe that France was the prime mover for intervention and her prestige was greatly enhanced; though in fact the British recognised and accepted France's rôle as protector of the Christians, they were widely believed to have encouraged and supported the Druzes, though this is not borne out by historical evidence. This inevitably further accentuated the element of competition between the two nations in the region. Certainly French influence reached new heights after 1860. French missionaries flocked to the Levant to establish schools, hospitals and other philanthropic institutions.⁸ Despite the religious overtones of this invasion, a Jesuit remark of 1880 demonstrates an awareness of its political significance: "Were we not such good Frenchmen, the British flag would presently be flying over all our oriental establishments".⁹

Though both Britain and France were supposedly committed to a policy of upholding the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, (and Britain's record was more consistent than that of France), both powers turned a blind eye to various encroachments upon it when it suited their purposes or did not directly affect their interests. Hence Britain acquiesced in the French occupation of Algeria in 1830, and France repaid the favour nine years later when Britain

⁷ S. H. Longrigg, Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate, (London, 1958) pp 21-22; Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 118-19; Shorrocks, *op cit*, pp 13-16.

⁸ See Mansfield, *op cit*, p 119; Shorrocks, *op cit*, p 16-17.

⁹ Shorrocks, *op cit*, p 17.

established herself in Aden on the southern coasts of Arabia.¹⁰ Both countries however, saw fit to join forces with the Sultan to defend the Ottoman Empire against Russian incursion during the Crimean War of 1854-56.¹¹

Anglo-French relations in the Middle East tended to fluctuate with the exigencies of international politics, though a direct clash between the interests of the two had thus far been avoided. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 finally ended the uneasy equilibrium which had prevailed for so long. For some time in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, Britain had actively opposed the French-sponsored Suez Canal project, realising that it would impose upon her a much heavier burden of defence; it was correctly foreseen that she might ultimately be forced to occupy Egypt to guard the safety of the all-important route to India. Her opposition was to no avail, but once the Canal had opened, Britain set about acquiring some degree of control over it. This was achieved in 1875, when the British government came to the assistance of the financially stricken Egyptian pasha, Ismail, and bought his forty four per cent share in the Suez Canal Company. Britain and France now established what became known as the Dual Control over Egypt, to ensure the functioning of the Canal and to support her ailing economy.¹² "Henceforth, Britain and France would be scrutinising every move of the other in Egypt".¹³

Britain and France were both reluctant to contemplate direct intervention in Egypt but a challenge to the pasha from an army colonel, Arabi, forced them to reconsider.

¹⁰ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 110-118.

¹¹ See D. Thomson, Europe Since Napoleon, (London, 1980), pp 245-246, 248.

¹² Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 119-122; Williams, *op cit*, p 4.

¹³ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 121.

When, in May 1882, diplomatic initiatives failed to bring Arabi into line, Britain and France despatched a squadron to Alexandria in a joint show of strength. This served only to escalate feelings between Christians and Moslems causing serious rioting in which several hundred were killed. Ottoman intervention to restore order was not forthcoming; fortunately for the British, who were desperately hoping to avoid the inevitable tensions of a joint Anglo-French occupation, a more cautious government in France also drew a line at further intervention. Britain proceeded alone to finance an expeditionary force of 30,000 which quickly defeated Arabi's forces and assured the pasha his throne.¹⁴

One dilemma solved however, only created another: how now to proceed? Britain desperately needed to preserve the *status quo* in Egypt but straightforward occupation was out of the question as other interested powers, most notably France, would never permit it. The system eventually adopted was "the Veiled Protectorate" whereby Egypt retained her status as an autonomous viceroyalty of the Ottoman Empire, but British troops remained in occupation and British authority was effectively what counted.¹⁵ Britain's control of Egypt now meant that she was the predominant European power in the East Mediterranean, and represented "a direct challenge to the French, driving them constantly to assault a position they had not the power to capture".¹⁶

British predominance in the area was further driven home to France, when, during Kitchener's conquest of the Sudan, British and French expeditionary forces collided close to the head waters of the Nile at Fashoda. Both sides refused

¹⁴ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 122-126.

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp 127-128.

¹⁶ Royal Institute for International Affairs, British Interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East, A Report by a Chatham House Study Group, (London, 1958), p 4.

to yield and for some time, were on the brink of war. Eventually, the French forces were obliged to give way to *force majeure* and make a humiliating retreat.¹⁷ This confrontation and other such incidents became associated in the minds of the French public as a matter of national prestige and as such, acquired a significance which far outweighed their actual importance. Fashoda was to live on in the memory of French public opinion not as representing a setback for French colonial expansion, about which it cared very little, "but because of rivalry with England about which it cared a great deal".¹⁸ It has been observed that the French reverse at Fashoda "helped to make French imperialist and service opinion hostile to Britain; its memory inspired French suspicions of British policy in the Middle East from 1915 onwards and even underlay the attitude of certain French circles to Britain in 1940".¹⁹

As the twentieth century dawned, Britain was established as the predominant power in the Eastern Mediterranean. France's main interest now centred on the Maghreb, or North Africa, though owing to her historic "mission civilisatrice" in the Levant, she remained a power to be reckoned with. In the financial and economic fields, French investors held over half the Ottoman debt; French experts controlled the Ottoman Bank and French economic activity in the region was practically unrivalled; France monopolised the railways, ports, roads, lighthouses and most construction work. Culturally, French had the status of a semi-official language and French influence was spread far and wide through numerous missions, monasteries, schools, colleges,

¹⁷ See D. Thomson, *op cit*, pp 511-513, for a fuller version of the crisis at Fashoda.

¹⁸ C. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, France Overseas. The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion, 1914-1924, (Stanford, 1981), p 30.

¹⁹ Royal Institute of International Affairs, British Interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East, p 4.

hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages and workrooms.²⁰ It seemed therefore that in Syria and Lebanon at least, where the French effort had been concentrated, the French position was unassailable.

Yet this was very far from the case and the French had to wake up quickly to the fact that their pre-eminent position was not only dwindling but was actively being undermined on all fronts. In some respects, she had only herself to blame: she had become preoccupied with the conquest of Tunisia and had subsequently turned her attentions to Morocco, which she finally occupied in 1911.²¹ France had indeed seemed reluctant to intervene in the area with quite her usual zeal. She had failed conspicuously to prevent the massacres of Armenians by the Kurds during the period 1893 to 1897 and her prestige among Christians had accordingly suffered a decline.²² It was observed that by 1912, she had even forgotten the name of Syria.²³

The early 1900s saw inroads being made on the French religious and commercial position in the Levant by the Italians and the Germans, and France's religious protectorate suffered considerable erosion. The same period was also one of significant Lebanese emigration which reduced the Christian population and led inevitably to a further decline in French influence. Matters were worsened by an intensification of the lay-clerical debate within France itself; many now criticised France's almost exclusive reliance on her position as protector of the Christian

²⁰ See Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 41-45 on the extent of French influence in Syria and Lebanon

²¹ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 129-133.

²² Shorrocks, *op cit*, p 21.

²³ Cambon to Poincaré, 26 November 1912, cited in Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 44.

minorities when this was bound to alienate the sympathies of the Moslem majority.²⁴

France had however, taken some steps to try and reassert her influence, by covertly encouraging and supporting the plethora of Christian and Moslem reformist and separatist groups which had sprung up in the Levant, all increasingly dissatisfied with Ottoman rule and all demanding a variety of reforms. It suited France to "burn the Ottoman candle at both ends": publicly, she expressed her commitment to a policy of maintaining the Ottoman Empire intact, while covertly, her diplomats sought to extend their influence amongst these reformist groups, whilst urging moderation on them lest any extreme action they took precipitated international intervention and diminished French influence.²⁵

By 1911, the affairs of the Ottoman Empire and particularly Syria and Lebanon had once again begun to exercise French diplomatic minds, as witnessed by the formation of the Comité de Défense des Intérêts Français en Orient in that year.²⁶ Fears grew that unless France staked her claim more forcefully, she would be overlooked when the time came to share out the Ottoman cake. Particular concern was expressed that the British might usurp France's position and these fears were not without foundation. Britain had been worried by the apparent decline of French influence in Syria and the Lebanon and was concerned that the powers of the Triple Alliance might eventually supersede her. To prevent this eventuality, Britain had capitalised on her own substantial commercial interests in the Levant at French expense. Moreover, the British were doing their own fair

²⁴ Shorrocks, *op cit*, pp 23-64.

²⁵ *ibid*, pp 65-101.

²⁶ The Comité was dedicated to maintaining and developing France's moral, political and economic situation in the Levant. See Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 46.

share of courting disaffected Moslem reformist elements as certain British circles believed that efforts should be made to acquire southern parts of Syria for annexation to Egypt, as a further line of defence for the route to India.²⁷

Fears of the British threat to the French position peaked when a group of high-ranking British officials from Cairo took a holiday in Syria in 1912. The French immediately suspected the worst. In Paris, warnings were issued that Syria was "a ripe fruit within the grasp of whoever wishes to pluck it. Unless we take care, it will fall from the Ottoman tree, perhaps in the near future, and land in the neighbouring garden.[i.e.Egypt]".²⁸ In subsequent Anglo-French talks during late November and early December 1912, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, assured Paul Cambon, the French ambassador, that England had no intention of joining Syria to Egypt. When rumours continued to abound, however, Grey gave the French a formal assurance of désintéressement that Britain was "carrying on no intrigues in Syria and ... had no intentions or aspirations respecting it".²⁹

Despite British denials of any interest in the Levant, the Quai d'Orsay remained concerned about British activities in the region and especially about the pro-British sentiments being expressed by many Moslem circles. A report received in June 1913 singled out Britain as continuing to represent the most serious threat to French influence in Syria, and recommended a more energetic policy to woo the Moslems away from Britain's pernicious influence.³⁰ As war loomed, and with it the prospect of partition of the Ottoman

²⁷ Shorrocks, *op cit*, pp 115-123.

²⁸ Cited in Andrew and Kanya Forstner, *op cit*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ Shorrocks, *op cit*, pp 124-125.

³⁰ *ibid*, p 132.

Empire, the great mass of the French public had no real interest in Syria and the Lebanon: "But they could readily be persuaded that French prestige would suffer an intolerable affront if these territories were absorbed by the British -- rather than the French -- Empire".³¹ Whatever else, "the feeling in Britain and France of an Anglo-French rivalry for political influence in Syria, remained very real".³² Yet in reality, the British had made relatively few concrete attempts to undercut the French position in Syria or to assert their own position there. "But the fact is that France viewed English activities with considerable alarm and the atmosphere of suspicion in the pre-war era forms the back-drop for the wartime and postwar Anglo-French rivalries".³³

ii) The Partition of the Ottoman Empire: British and French Influence Consolidated

Hopes entertained by the Anglo-French entente on the outbreak of war in August 1914 of preserving Ottoman neutrality were finally dashed when, on 5 November 1914, Turkey declared war on France, Britain and Russia. Britain was most immediately affected due to her position in Egypt, and she hurriedly announced a formal Protectorate over the country a month later.³⁴ Despite the grim realities of the situation, Britain and France hesitated considerably in formulating their war aims with regard to the Ottoman Empire. Owing to the enormity of her interests in the

³¹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 32.

³² Shorrocks, *op cit*, p 133.

³³ W. I. Shorrocks, French Suspicion of British Policy in Syria, 1900-1914, Journal of European Studies, Vol II, (September 1976), pp 190-191, cited by A. Susser, Western Power Rivalry and its Interaction with Local Politics in the Levant, 1941-1946, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Tel Aviv, 1986).

³⁴ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 162; Williams, *op cit*, p 9.

Empire, France was reluctant to take any hasty belligerent action and still continued to hope that Turkey might be persuaded to leave the war before partition became inevitable; Britain fretted about the influence that the Ottoman ruler might wield over her multitudinous Moslem subjects in India and in Egypt, many of which made up a considerable portion of her armies. Similarly, the Foreign Ministers of both countries correctly anticipated that the whole question of Ottoman partition might severely damage the Anglo-French alliance.³⁵

A body of French opinion did believe that as partition was inevitable, France must be ready to deal with it, and called for the despatch of an expeditionary force to the Levant to foment an armed uprising against Turkish rule and simultaneously to establish a French claim on the territory. By December 1914, however, Germany had already invaded a considerable and vital portion of France; the French government remained convinced that the defence of France was paramount and saw little point in diverting precious manpower to a secondary theatre.³⁶ Britain, which had not suffered invasion and could rely on a vast network of imperial bases, had greater room for manoeuvre; she decided in January 1915 to launch an operation in the Middle East in the hope of knocking Turkey out of the war and of re-establishing communications with Russia. Yet crucial military decisions still had to take into account French susceptibilities in the area. A proposed landing at Alexandretta and Haifa was abandoned, in favour of the Dardanelles, when the French who had decided to contribute a token squadron, opposed the use of Alexandretta for fear of Britain gaining a foothold in Syria: thus, "the fear of some measure of supersession in the Middle East by the

³⁵ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 162-63; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 65, 72.

³⁶ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 55, 65-68.

British with their forces on the spot and with a freer hand in strategy, was already evident".³⁷

Britain and France were forced to grasp the nettle of partition when Russia and Italy staked their claims on certain areas of Ottoman territory; these were respectively accommodated in the Tripartite Constantinople agreement on 18 March 1915 and the Pact of London on 25 April 1915.³⁸ Britain had established the de Bunsen Committee to sort out its own imperial desiderata³⁹, though the French had no such similar mechanism. In view of the larger ambitions of the British and French, the settlement of their claims was to prove considerably more complex.

As early as spring 1914, Kitchener in Cairo had been approached for help against the Ottomans by Hussein, Grand Sherif of Mecca, through his son, Abdullah. At that stage Britain was determined to prop up the Ottoman Empire for as long as possible and nothing came of the meeting. The outbreak of war however, drastically altered circumstances. Hussein in particular, found that his importance had soared as the effectiveness of any call to a jihad, or Holy War, depended entirely on an endorsement from Mecca. Whilst stalling the Ottomans with assurances of loyalty, Hussein sounded out the British again.⁴⁰

Between July 1915 and January 1916, a correspondence ensued between Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, in which Hussein offered, with

³⁷ Longrigg, *op cit*, p 53.

³⁸ Williams, *op cit*, p 11; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 72-73.

³⁹ See J. Nevakivi, Britain, France and the Arab Middle East, 1914-1920, (London, 1969), pp 19-24 on the de Bunsen Committee.

⁴⁰ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 161-163.

British assistance, to rise up against the Ottomans, in return for British recognition of Arab independence over an area which included Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. The Foreign Office was initially very sceptical about the whole scheme, but McMahon was eventually authorised to agree in essence to the proposals. British acceptance however, was qualified by the exclusion of certain areas⁴¹ from within Hussein's suggested frontiers as they were not purely Arab and moreover, because Britain was unable to act with regard to them "without detriment to the interests of her ally France".⁴² The matter of exact frontiers was never satisfactorily resolved in the correspondence between the two men; both maintained their positions and Hussein launched the Arab revolt on 5 June 1916. Though the latter promised to avoid action during the war which might threaten the Anglo-French alliance, he warned that afterwards, he would press claims for "what we now leave to France in Beirut and its coasts".⁴³

Before the correspondence was complete, Anglo-French talks to settle the Syrian matter took place. The commitments to Hussein had not been discussed with the French, but as Britain had carefully protected French interests, on 23 November, Sir Arthur Nicolson (Permanent Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs) quite happily revealed their general nature to the French representative, Georges Picot. To increase his bargaining power, the latter had pretended real horror at the extent of the British

⁴¹ The areas excluded were those to the west of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.

⁴² Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 87-90; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 54-55; H. H. Cumming, Franco-British Rivalry in the Postwar Near East. The Decline of French Influence, (Oxford, 1938), pp 33-36; Nevakivi, *op cit*, pp 26-29.

⁴³ Z. N. Zeine, The Struggle for Arab Independence. Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of Faisal's Kingdom in Syria. (Beirut, 1960), p 7.

concessions to Hussein, but promised to submit the proposals to his government for perusal. What Picot subsequently "ably presented as the most reluctant of French concessions, was in reality France's own preference", i.e. that French post-war influence in the Levant should be based on the mainly Maronite sanjak of Lebanon, enlarged by as many non-Christian areas as it could safely dominate, and with the opportunity to closely monitor the Syrian interior under the nominal sovereignty of the Sherif of Mecca.⁴⁴

On 21 December, Picot informed the British that his government accepted the proposals. Further negotiations took place throughout February between Picot and Sir Mark Sykes, his British counterpart, and after Russian consent had been obtained, the Sykes-Picot agreement as it finally became known, was signed on 16 May 1916. It consisted in the main of a decision to divide the whole of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon into zones of direct British and French control, leaving Palestine to an international administration; the area remaining was to form an autonomous Arab region, though even that was to be divided into a southern and a northern half in which British and French influence would predominate.⁴⁵

The merits and demerits of the Sykes-Picot agreement are numerous. It has been justified on grounds of war necessity: at a crucial stage in the war, once Gallipoli had failed, it was expedient, for through it, Britain was able to secure French acquiescence in the Arab revolt, a matter over which their suspicions bordered on paranoia. The agreement also took account, in a somewhat cavalier fashion, of the commitments already made to Hussein, though it has been observed that many within the British and French

⁴⁴ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 91-92.

⁴⁵ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 93-96; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 56-59; Mansfield, *op cit*, p 166; Nevakivi, *op cit*, pp 30-43.

establishments had little faith in an Arab uprising and so never took the promises to Hussein seriously. On the negative side the Sykes-Picot agreement has been pilloried as a testament to British and French greed; it showed no regard whatsoever for the wishes of the Arabs to determine their own future, arbitrarily placing them under this or that European control. Arab independence was not taken seriously and the fundamental tenet of the agreement was that once the Turks were dispensed with, Western European powers must take their place.

The Sykes-Picot agreement represented a major diplomatic achievement for France, for it provided formal British recognition of her position in Syria and the Lebanon and secured an international administration for Palestine. The French could not afford to rest long on their laurels however, as circumstances rapidly altered and with them the extent to which the British were prepared to abide by the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement. Though initially successful, the Arab revolt had encountered fierce Turkish resistance by autumn 1916. Britain was obliged to step in and decided in favour of an attack through Sinai on El Arish in Palestine. French suspicions were immediately aroused and there was revived pressure on the government to send an expeditionary force to Syria to establish a French military presence in the area; it was eventually agreed that some 3,000 troops should participate alongside the British. The presence however, of such a symbolic force served only to underline France's declining power in the Middle East.⁴⁶

The attack on El Arish in December 1916 was successful and by March 1917, the British forces had advanced as far as Gaza. After two defeats there, the British commander was replaced by Sir Edmund Allenby who, by October, was ready to

⁴⁶ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 110-112.

continue the advance.⁴⁷ The French had very good reason to be perturbed; coinciding with the initial British military successes in Palestine, Asquith had been succeeded as British Prime Minister in December 1916 by Lloyd George, who was committed to a vigorous conduct of the war in the East and was convinced that for her efforts, Britain should "grab" Palestine.⁴⁸ Moreover, to the argument that Palestine was British by right of conquest could be added the increasingly vocal Zionist demand for a British protectorate for Palestine; the subsequent Balfour declaration of 2 November 1917, proclaiming a Jewish national home in Palestine, did little to quell French fears.⁴⁹

Just as British interests in the Middle East were being championed by Lloyd George, the cause of those in France pressing claims for "la Syrie intégrale" was being undermined by the return to power of Clemenceau, to whom the battle against Germany was everything. On 28 November 1917, he informed Lloyd George, further whetting the latter's appetite, "that he did not want Syria for France ... that if Lloyd George could get him a protectorate over Syria for France, he would not refuse it as "it would please some reactionaries", but he attached no importance to it". Despite considerable efforts by the parti coloniale and its adherents, nothing would alter Clemenceau's priorities.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, on 9 December 1917, Allenby's forces entered Jerusalem, followed closely in the early months of 1918, by swarms of British officialdom, who were, it was claimed, "tirelessly pursuing by every available means ... the

⁴⁷ Longrigg, *op cit*, p 62.

⁴⁸ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 112-113.

⁴⁹ See Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 172-177; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 126-130.

⁵⁰ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 150-152.

following objectives ... in Arabia and Palestine, the effective destruction of the Anglo-French parity of influence which was agreed in principle; in Syria, the complete independence of the country or its incorporation into an Arab state in order to curb the freedom of action which we were given there".⁵¹ By the summer of 1918, the Quai d'Orsay at least was more or less reconciled to the loss of Palestine. It seemed to the French, however, that Palestine was merely a dress-rehearsal for Syria and the major French preoccupation now became whether or not the British would usurp them there. The French were in a quandary: if Syria remained under Turkish control, there seemed little hope of acquiring it at a peace conference in the new climate of Wilsonian idealism which prevailed; equally, judging by her performance in Palestine, if Britain succeeded in occupying Syria, the French cause would be lost.⁵²

France was all too aware that in contrast to Britain's overwhelming military presence in the Middle East, she had no military forces to speak of there; similarly British imperial ambitions were for the moment conveniently cloaked by her support for Zionist and Hashemite claims for self-determination, whereas France's traditional rôle as protector of the Maronites, had left her only a glaring absence of Moslem allies.

All France did have, in fact, was the influence gained by her "historic mission" and the Sykes-Picot agreement. By 1918, it seemed that even the latter was worthless for Sykes himself was convinced that it was "dead and gone and the sooner scrapped the better".⁵³ There were consequently real and very great fears within France that now even Syria was

⁵¹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 153.

⁵² *ibid*, pp 153-157.

⁵³ *ibid*, p 157.

to be denied her. Picot was despatched to London in June to see his old friend Sykes and to warn him that France could not allow their 1916 agreement to lapse. The pair attempted to embellish the agreement and to endow it with a veneer of respectability so as to make it less offensive, but Lloyd George shared no such desire to accommodate the French. Picot eventually succeeded in concocting another agreement guaranteeing French administration of liberated Syria and this was signed on 30 September; the agreement however, placed the French administrator under command of Allenby and effectively eroded French influence.⁵⁴

The resumption of Allenby's advance in September 1918, the entry of Faisal, Hussein's son, into Damascus on 30 September 1918, and thereafter the swift occupation of northern and central Syria by British and Arab forces, seemed set to finally thwart the French. Hope was provided however, when on 23 September, Cambon was informed "that the British government adhere to their declared policy with regard to Syria -- namely that if it should fall into the sphere of any European power, that power should be France".⁵⁵ Yet less than two weeks later, on 3 October, Lloyd George informed his Cabinet that the Sykes-Picot agreement "was quite inapplicable to the present circumstances, and was altogether a most undesirable agreement from the British point of view". Lloyd George continued to display an almost complete disregard for French susceptibilities in the Middle East, culminating in the unilateral signature of the Mudros armistice with Turkey on 30 October 1918. Numerous unscrupulous schemes which he contemplated for Syria revealed his total disregard for the sanctity of the Sykes-

⁵⁴ Nevakivi, *op cit*, pp 76-77.

⁵⁵ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 159.

Picot agreement, and before long he was proposing that it undergo a complete revision.⁵⁶

The Quai d'Orsay remained adamant that a renegotiation of the agreement would be most imprudent and was out of the question as "it ... recognises, in principle, our preponderance over the whole of Syria, including the interior; it thus gives us a possible basis for a resolute policy and allows us to claim, immediately, the administration of the Syrian coast". In late December 1918, the French Chamber was assured that there would be no retreat from the Sykes-Picot agreement, which was still regarded as "binding".⁵⁷

The signature of the German armistice on 11 November set the stage for the peace conference and the final showdown over Ottoman spoils. Pre-conference Anglo-French discussions had been considered advantageous; these took place in London during early December 1918, but merely served to reveal the weakness of France's bargaining position. Clemenceau's primary objective was to extract cast-iron guarantees for France's position against a resurgent Germany; to obtain British goodwill on these matters, he was prepared to be more flexible than many French wished over the Middle East. The British were fully aware of the strength of their own negotiating position, superbly buttressed by their military efforts in the Middle East and the wishes of the Zionists. Within Britain in fact, now that the war was won, suspicions of aggressive French imperialism were already reviving and warnings were being issued that the power Britain would have most to fear from in the future, was France.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *ibid*, pp 162-163.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, pp 171-172.

⁵⁸ Curzon to the Eastern Committee, 2 December 1912, cited in Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 172.

Ironically, France had entered the discussions with Britain in the hope of strengthening her position; she actually emerged from them considerably weakened after an informal bartering session between Lloyd George and Clemenceau, during which Clemenceau sacrificed France's two best bargaining counters, Mosul and Palestine, without even consulting the Quai d'Orsay. Though Clemenceau did not walk away completely empty-handed (he obtained an assurance from Lloyd George that in the event of another attack by Germany, France would not be deserted, and also a guaranteed share of Mosul's oil), his behaviour indicated his willingness "to sacrifice extra-European objectives for the sake of European security"⁵⁹, seemingly regardless of the fact that by doing so, he was vastly improving Britain's position in the Middle East to the detriment of France.

The Peace Conference finally commenced in January 1919 at Versailles. It quickly became apparent to the French that Syria would not be handed to them on a plate. Faisal appeared personally at the Conference in February to fight his corner; he begged the Allies to adhere to the promises made to his father and to the joint Anglo-French declaration of November 1917 in which both powers had reaffirmed the purity of their future intentions regarding the liberated territories of the Ottoman Empire. He conceded the special position of Palestine and agreed that Britain and France could maintain a privileged position in Iraq and Mount Lebanon respectively, but for the rest he asked for complete independence. He pleaded finally, that before any decision was made, an international commission should be despatched to investigate the wishes of the peoples concerned.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 174-176; Nevakivi, *op cit*, pp 89-92.

⁶⁰ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 179-180; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 87-88.

Negotiations had soon reached a total deadlock and between February and May 1919, "a series of bitter Anglo-French exchanges ensued". Even Clemenceau was transformed temporarily into a "Syrian" and at one point, threatened to renege on his agreement over Palestine unless Britain abandoned its support for Faisal and ordered Allenby to permit the French occupation of Syria; the British merely retorted that a French occupation would provoke a war in the region with "incalculable consequences". In the absence of any other way forward, the proposal was taken up for an international commission of enquiry to visit the territories and report back; until this was done, Britain agreed not to withdraw her troops from the Levant.⁶¹

The Foreign Office was extremely dubious about the idea of the commission and the French were positively hostile, realising that it would inevitably expose the complete lack of Syrian support for a French mandate. Increased diplomatic efforts to reach an entente with Britain and with Faisal, however, failed; France was reduced to sabotaging the commission by withdrawing her two candidates, whereupon Britain and Italy followed suit. The commission was reduced to two Americans, Dr. Henry King and Mr. Charles Crane, who arrived in the Levant on 10 June 1919. Despite the allocation of some two million francs to stimulate the zeal of the local population in their favour, the French still came out worst in the commission's report. Faisal had returned to the Levant in April to general popular acclaim and had set about preparing his country for the advent of the commission; elections had been held, and a National Congress duly elected, which on 2 July 1919, repudiated the Sykes-Picot agreement and demanded sovereign status for a united Syria-Palestine. King and Crane reported that though the Syrians generally disliked the idea of a mandate, if one

⁶¹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 188-189;

were to be forced upon them, it should be allotted to the United States or Britain, but not under any circumstances to France. For all the attention which was paid to the King-Crane report, the pair might well have spared their effort and the French their money. By the time it was submitted on 28 August 1919, events had moved on and the report was ignored by the peace-makers. The commission at least served a useful purpose in that it temporarily halted the Anglo-French feud, but the Versailles conference ended without settling the Arab problem.⁶²

The cleavage between Britain and France in the conference halls of Europe was effectively mirrored in the Levant where their partnership was far from happy. During the initial phase of French administration of the coastal strip of Syria, "the predominance of British garrisons and the inevitable subordination ... to a British Commander-in-Chief were, not surprisingly, galling to French pride and pretensions".⁶³ There was much French suspicion of British interference and the French were convinced that the British were "hand-in-glove with Faisal's agents and determined to embarrass (ultimately, no doubt, to supersede) the French occupation".⁶⁴ Relations steadily deteriorated during the spring and summer of 1919; in Paris, a concerted anti-British press campaign was waged throughout the summer, the severity of which "convinced statesmen on both sides of the Channel that Anglo-French relations could be seriously and perhaps permanently damaged by a failure to resolve the Syrian problem".⁶⁵ More pressingly, in a time of financial

⁶² Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 193; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 89-92; Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 180-181; Nevakivi, *op cit*, pp 165-171.

⁶³ Longrigg, *op cit*, p 80.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, p 81.

⁶⁵ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 197-198.

stringency, Britain was realising the need for drastic economies. Domestically, the government faced an increasing clamour for demobilisation and a crisis in Ireland; elsewhere, revolt and insurrection seemed to threaten numerous parts of the Empire, yet Britain did not possess the military means to deal with them all simultaneously. It seemed futile therefore, to continue a costly occupation of Syria from which she stood to gain nothing.

Early in September 1919, Lloyd George announced to Clemenceau that Britain had decided to evacuate Syria and would begin a withdrawal from 1 November. France had far fewer troops in the Levant than Britain and she too faced pressure for demobilisation, whilst urgently requiring troops for the Ruhr, the Balkans and Morocco; nonetheless, she accepted the British proposal with alacrity and it was agreed that British troops in western Syria would be replaced by French troops; in the Syrian hinterland, including Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Damascus, Arab troops would relieve the British. On 15 September, Clemenceau offered his formal acceptance, though the French anxiously enquired whether this now signified a renewed British acceptance of the Sykes-Picot agreement; they were disappointed to learn that the arrangement was purely a military one. The French also resented the fact that their troops were to be confined to the coastal strip and that British troops remained in Mosul, but quickly despatched Général Gouraud to Beirut as High Commissioner. In view of its shortcomings, the agreement was regarded by the French as merely "an instalment, on acceptable lines, if greatly overdue".⁶⁶ However incomplete in French eyes, "the British decision to evacuate Syria at least provided the essential pre-condition for French control".⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 93-94.

⁶⁷ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 200-201.

The British meanwhile had invited Faisal to London where he was informed in September of the *fait accompli*. Despite his protests, he was left very little room for manoeuvre as the British cut his subsidies by half and pressured him to go to Paris and there make the best terms that he could. Initially, Faisal received very short shrift from the French, but eventually, an agreement was hammered out in early January 1920: France recognised Arab rule in inland Syria and Faisal reciprocated by recognising the separate status of Lebanon and a special régime for Alexandretta. Any assistance Syria might require was to be provided by France, who undertook to conduct Syria's foreign affairs, and to run her civil, military and financial establishments; in addition, France was to have priority in the award of any economic concessions. It was generally realised that these terms amounted to a virtual French protectorate over Syria but Faisal was bereft of an ally to whom he could appeal for support. Capitalising on the disappearance of America from the international scene, Britain had seized the opportunity during talks with the French in December 1919, to extract a formal agreement from them to cede their interest in Palestine and Mosul; they had also received an assurance that Faisal would be recognised as head of an autonomous Arab state, but beyond that they had little interest in the particulars of any settlement. Entirely abandoned by the British, Faisal had little option but to agree to the French terms.⁶⁸

On his return to Syria in January 1920, Faisal faced considerable hostility and criticism from his supporters over the agreement with Clemenceau, which was stigmatised as a derogation of the country's unity and independence. More alive to the stark impossibility of Syria's predicament, Faisal warned a nationalist gathering that rejection of the accord would signal war with France, but was informed, "We

⁶⁸ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 94-95.

are ready to declare war on both England and France".⁶⁹ Faisal's pleas for moderation fell on deaf ears; rather than lose all influence totally, he gradually resigned himself to a policy of sabotage and blockade on French installations and attacks on French personnel and the Christian communities which supported them.⁷⁰

By March 1920, the Syrian National Congress in Damascus had proclaimed the complete independence of a united Syria within its natural boundaries, i.e. to include Palestine and a specially guaranteed Lebanon, and declared a constitutional monarchy with Faisal as King. A similar meeting of Iraqi nationalist leaders in Damascus had also declared Iraq's independence, with Abdullah, Faisal's brother as King. These resolutions were regarded as untenable in Paris and London alike; a joint Anglo-French declaration condemning Faisal's action and refusing to recognise the Damascus resolutions was quickly forthcoming.⁷¹

Equally, when talks on the Turkish peace resumed at San Remo in April 1920, the Anglo-French entente remained solid. Many of the outstanding difficulties between the two nations had been settled during talks the previous December, and those that remained, for example the question of the protection of French rights in Palestine, were soon dispensed with. On 25 April, the Allied Supreme Council offered a mandate for Syria and the Lebanon to France and

⁶⁹ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 215.

⁷⁰ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 215-216; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 96-97; Mansfield, *op cit*, p 183;

⁷¹ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 183; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 97-99; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 202.

for Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan to Britain. Neither power hesitated in accepting the offer.⁷²

The San Remo decisions and their subsequent sanction by the League of Nations on 24 July 1922, seemed once and for all to have settled British and French spheres of influence and interest in the Middle East. In acquiring the mandates she did, Britain had achieved her paramount aim of creating a further bulwark for her defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal. France in her turn, had achieved a long-standing ambition: in addition to the objectives of prestige, strategic advantage and commercial opportunity, she had, by securing international recognition, legitimised her position in Syria and the Lebanon, gained a free hand to enjoy her traditional "rights" and an opportunity to continue her mission *civilisatrice*.

The years of the First World War and its immediate aftermath witnessed the final death throes of the Ottoman Empire and an end to its suzerainty over the lands of the Near and Middle East; the fact that the area had offered Britain and France their major opportunity for territorial gain had served only to intensify the antagonism between them. The mutual suspicion and distrust with which each power viewed the other was only accentuated by the series of conflicting promises which Britain, in the exigencies of war, had made to both France and to the Arabs, by the enthusiastic encouragement and active sponsorship which Britain accorded the Arab cause and furthermore, by the overwhelming and preponderant military presence of the British in the entire region. While tied down herself in Europe, France had witnessed a considerable expansion of Britain's influence in the area; she had nonetheless dug in tooth and nail, and though emerging from the war perhaps

⁷² Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 216-217; Mansfield, *op cit*, p 183; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 109-113.

less well endowed than she would have liked, she had retained the essence of her position in the Middle East. Subsequently, Syria and Lebanon were to assume an inordinate significance for France as a vital symbol of her influence in an otherwise British dominated area.

iii) The Mandatory Experience.

Once Britain and France had firmly established their mandatory positions, the relatively stable situation in the Middle East over the next twenty years provided scant opportunity for any territorial aggrandisement, even if either nation had had the inclination. It might therefore have been expected that the two powers would learn to live with each other's presence in the region in an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust. Old habits die hard however, and whilst it is true that for long periods in the inter-war years, Anglo-French relations were civil, "behind the veneer of civility lay mutual suspicion",⁷³ and the partnership was far from happy.

Neither Britain nor France attempted to conceal their almost total disregard for the lofty ideals which had inspired their mandatory privileges. As far as Palestine was concerned, it was bluntly admitted that the powers had made "no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate".⁷⁴ Similarly, Syria and Lebanon were regarded by the French as imperial possessions to be exploited as such. The Arabs of the mandated territories had taken the Allied promises seriously and the ensuing decades were characterised by the struggle between the mandated peoples for their liberties and

⁷³ P. S. Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945, (London, 1987), p 583.

⁷⁴ Statement by Balfour, August 1919, cited in Mansfield, *op cit*, p 189.

independence, and the mandatory powers, who, desperate to maintain their strategic positions, their economic investments and in the case of France, their traditional "rights", made only grudging and belated efforts to meet the nationalist demands.⁷⁵

Both Britain and France were obliged to assert their authority over their mandated territories by force. Despite their commitment to support an independent Arab state in inland Syria, in the face of continuing acts of violence and the refusal of the Syrian National Congress to accept the mandate, the French had decided that Faisal's government must either be brought more effectively under French control or crushed militarily. On 14 July 1920, Général Gouraud presented Faisal with an ultimatum which formulated various complaints against the Damascus government and made a series of specific demands, not least of which was acceptance of the mandate. Two extensions were bought by the Arabs in the desperate hope of soliciting outside intervention, though this was not forthcoming. By now, the French had decided to occupy Damascus regardless; they routed Faisal's forces in a single battle on 24 July and entered the capital the following day, deposing and exiling Faisal.⁷⁶

The British, too, faced a violent uprising in Egypt in November 1919, anti-Jewish activity by Moslem and Christian Arabs in Palestine during 1920 and 1921, and in the summer of 1920, a major uprising in Iraq, which cost Britain over 2,000 casualties and £40 million to suppress. Once peace was restored however, a more liberal policy was of necessity pursued: provincial administration was Iraqi from 1920 and by 1924, a nucleus of parliamentary institutions had been

⁷⁵ H. M. Sachar, Europe Leaves the Middle East, (London, 1974), pp 1-5.

⁷⁶ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 101-103; Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 183-184; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 216, 218-219.

created, a constitutional monarchy had been established and the powers of British officials had been gradually reduced. Killing two birds with one stone, Britain quelled Iraqi nationalist opposition to the mandate and compensated Faisal for the loss of his Syrian kingdom, by installing the latter as King of Iraq in June 1921, though this did provoke bitter recriminations from the French.⁷⁷ Britain additionally managed to secure her special position by an Anglo-Iraqi treaty in 1924, which was amended in 1927 and replaced in 1930. Similarly, by 1921, Britain had installed Faisal's brother, Abdullah, in Transjordan and by 1928, had transferred many of its mandatory powers, though Britain retained control over finance and foreign affairs. In Palestine, similar developments were precluded by the presence there of two bitterly opposed peoples, though after the initial period of unrest, the territory was largely peaceful until 1929.⁷⁸

From the outset, the French mandate was bitterly opposed by the Arab Moslem majority in Syria, but generally welcomed by the traditionally Francophile Maronite and Christian elements within the Lebanon. Aware of the power-base of her support, one of France's first steps was to create "le grand Liban" at Syria's expense, by adding to Mount Lebanon the coastal towns of Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre and the Bekaa plain, all of which were predominately Moslem areas. In so doing, France had hoped to strengthen her influence over the Eastern Mediterranean littoral; effectively, she shot herself in the foot as the rapidly increasing Moslem birth rate meant that in the long term, the basis of her rule would be eroded.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 221-222; Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 185-186.

⁷⁸ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 185, 198-99, 212-213.

⁷⁹ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 203; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, pp 235-236.

Despite the wishes of the majority of the population for a unified Syria, France plainly intended to rely on the tried and tested doctrine of "*Divide et Impera*". Only weeks after Faisal's removal, Lebanon was subdivided into four administrative units, Mount Lebanon, north and south Lebanon and the Bekaa. Syria was similarly fragmented into four states, Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alaouite and Druze states, the latter two being based around the minorities contained within those regions.⁸⁰ Pressure from Paris to drastically reduce the costs of the mandates seemed to have little effect, and the territories were soon equipped with a vast bureaucratic machine; French officialdom, though ubiquitous, was not always of the best quality. Solid administrative foundations were laid in matters of legislation, justice, finance and the armed forces. Administrative efficiency may have improved significantly, but the French bestowed minimal powers on the Syrians and Lebanese, preferring "sound meticulous government to far less competent self-government".⁸¹ In conformity with the provisions of the mandate, limited attempts were made toward constitutional advance: in each administrative unit, a census (often inaccurate) and elections (sometimes improperly conducted) were held to return deputies to representative councils, which exercised little more than debating functions.⁸²

The tenuous grip exercised by the French over Syria and Lebanon however, was exposed during the summer of 1925. Trouble began when the highly traditional Druze society became offended by the tactless imposition of a series of social reforms. Protests proved fruitless, but the situation

⁸⁰ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 123-127; G. Lenckzowski, The Middle East in World Affairs, (Ithaca, 1962), p 232.

⁸¹ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 114-115; Lenczowski, *op cit*, pp 232-233.

⁸² Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 127-128.

escalated when Général Sarrail, the High Commissioner, arrested certain Druze leaders who had been invited to Damascus to air their grievances. A retaliatory attack by Druze gangs on some French aircraft was followed by two separate defeats inflicted on French convoys, one of which was some 3,000 strong; munitions were seized and the resultant prestige enabled the Druzes to swell their ranks by hundreds. The rebellion spread over a considerable portion of Syria and even southern Lebanon and an alliance was formed between the acknowledged Druze leader, Sultan el Atrash, and one of the main nationalist leaders, Dr. Shahbender. Amongst other towns, the rebels attacked Aleppo, Hama and even Damascus, leading to a French bombardment of the city in October. As a result of the international outcry which was aroused, Général Sarrail was recalled.⁸³

By November, the situation was sufficiently bad for a declaration of martial law, though once reinforcements arrived, the French were able to restore the situation partially in southern Lebanon. Henri de Jouvenel, Sarrail's successor, vigorously though unsuccessfully pursued a liberal policy of peace. He offered an amnesty to all insurgents and promised the Druzes their own constitution and government; in response, the rebels demanded Syrian unity, an immediate Franco-Syrian treaty, complete home rule and the evacuation of French troops. The French were finally reduced, throughout 1926, to a painfully slow eradication of rebel resistance region by region, and order was not completely restored until March 1927.⁸⁴

The rebellion lacked effective leadership, co-ordination and supplies and though troublesome and costly in terms of life and finance, never seriously threatened French rule in Syria and the Lebanon. Nonetheless, the French had been

⁸³ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 154-160.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, pp 161-167.

taken completely by surprise; for several weeks they had seriously underestimated the scale of the uprising and more especially the strength of local nationalism, and their army had been hard pressed to finally restore order. As always in any such manifestation of opposition to their rule, the French, and especially Général Sarrail, were inclined to detect British complicity in a Hashemite plot to regain control of Syria. Though in contrast, de Jouvenel was sure of British benevolence, the French continued to be obsessed by lingering doubts and that the British had not been as vigilant as they might, in halting the supplies of men, arms and money which had come flooding in from Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq during the rebellion.⁸⁵

Paradoxically, the period spanned by the unrest was also a time which witnessed a certain degree, however limited, of further constitutional advance under de Jouvenel and Ponsot, his successor. In the more dependable Lebanon, French difficulties were considerably less and a constitution providing for limited self government was drafted and proclaimed in May 1926 (though subject to considerable amendment subsequently). In Syria, the French faced a more intractable situation and several efforts to draft an acceptable constitution ended in deadlock; in May 1930, a constitution was imposed by Ponsot, though two years passed before it became operative and the first Syrian Parliament was elected.⁸⁶

The relative lack of progress towards constitutional life in French mandated territories was inevitably contrasted unfavourably with the much smoother and more rapid transition in neighbouring Iraq and the comparisons

⁸⁵ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 162, 168-169; P. S. Khoury, *op cit*, p 583.

⁸⁶ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 203-204; Lenczowski, *op cit*, pp 233, 235-236; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 170-189.

cannot but have annoyed the French. They believed that Britain was moving too far, too fast and setting a dangerous precedent, and strongly disapproved.⁸⁷ The publication of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of June 1930 led to increased expectations for a similar Franco-Syrian treaty; though attempts were made between 1932 and 1935 to produce one, the conflict between French policy and nationalist aspirations proved insurmountable.⁸⁸

A period of considerable unrest ensued during 1935 and early 1936 during which the Syrian and Lebanese lack of progress towards independence was further accentuated by the negotiations during 1936 for an Anglo-Egyptian treaty.⁸⁹ A more liberal French attitude at last seemed forthcoming when de Martel was accorded a wider degree of scope and latitude in negotiations by the Quai d'Orsay; by 1 March 1936, substantial agreement had been reached on the essentials for a future treaty. A Syrian delegation arrived in Paris to pursue the negotiations only to discover that the terms the Quai d'Orsay officials now felt able to offer were far less flexible than they had hitherto been led to believe and it was not long before the negotiations were once again in deadlock.⁹⁰

The situation was saved when Sarraut's government was replaced by that of Blum which was of a more liberal and left-wing complexion. In the new atmosphere which prevailed, an agreement was reached on 9 September 1936, and was ratified by the Syrian Parliament on 27 December. Where Syria had led the way, the Lebanon quickly followed suit and

⁸⁷ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 199-200.

⁸⁸ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 190-199; Lenczowski, *op cit*, pp 236-237.

⁸⁹ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 215-217.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, pp 217-218.

her treaty was ratified on 17 November. The treaties provided formal independence for Syria and the Lebanon, and reattached the Druze and Alaouite states to Syria. France however, still retained considerable rights: she was to be consulted on matters of defence and foreign policy, and in wartime would provide assistance; she retained two air bases in Syria for the duration of the treaty and was permitted to station ground troops in certain areas for up to five years; (in Lebanon, there was no restriction as to the type of troops nor was any time-limit applied); similarly, advisers to the government and any professional technicians required were to be French. The treaties were to be considered effective from the date of Syrian and Lebanese admission to the League of Nations, which was assumed would take place no later than 1939.⁹¹

The treaties were generally favourably received in the Levant. In France though, they were accorded a more mixed reception: Blum's supporters regarded the treaty as a liberal and progressive gesture; others were pleased that at last France was divesting herself of the financial burden the mandates represented. Such views, however, were not the views of the French majority. Many Frenchmen watched the increasing tension in the Mediterranean and thought it sheer folly that France should surrender control of these vital strategic bases; the French civilian and military establishment in the Levant immediately saw the treaties as a threat to their careers and livelihoods. Most looked on the bleakest side and saw the treaties as a sign of French weakness, extorted by extremists, a sacrifice of years of expense and effort; "they foresaw an early probability of the oppression of Christians and the internecine strife of Muslims; and they feared that French withdrawal would give the signal for the entry of some other European Power --

⁹¹ *ibid*, pp 220-224.

which could be, of course, no other than "Perfidious Albion".⁹²

Unfortunately for the hopes of the Syrians and Lebanese, France did not match the speed with which they had ratified the treaties. By June 1937, Blum had resigned and was replaced by a more conservative government under Chautemps, which contained many die-hard imperialists to whom the notion of abandoning the mandates over Syria and the Lebanon was complete anathema. A visit to Paris by a Syrian delegation in December 1937, to quell French doubts about the treaties was fruitless. By now, the conflict between France's contractual obligations and her strategic needs was being emphasised by a rapidly deteriorating international situation: Mussolini had invaded Abyssinia, Hitler had remilitarised the Rhineland and both dictators were actively intervening in the Spanish civil war and "the menace implicit in the developing European situation discouraged French statesmen from changes in the Levant".⁹³ Additionally, the French were obliged to consider the possible consequences of the Syrian and Lebanese treaties on their North African Empire; with the threat of war hanging over her, France was more than ever likely to have to rely on the invaluable manpower the Empire could provide and could ill afford to risk giving any encouragement to North African cries for independence.⁹⁴

The Syrian government faced considerable criticism for the extent of its concessions to France over the treaty but continued to hope that all would be well; a further assurance was extracted from Bonnet in December 1938, that everything would be done to expedite the ratification of the

⁹² *ibid*, p 224.

⁹³ *ibid*, p 232.

⁹⁴ Mansfield, *op cit*, p 204.

treaty; only days afterwards, however, the French Foreign Minister, having encountered significant hostility himself, reversed his decision and announced that France had no wish to alter the situation in the Levant "for the moment". In Syria, indignation over the French perfidy was rife.⁹⁵

Syrian disillusion with France was intensified by subsequent French behaviour revealing that she was prepared to sacrifice Syria's territorial integrity, if it suited her purposes to do so. The sanjak of Alexandretta, in Northern Syria, remained the one Turkish *terra irredenta*. On account of its mixed Turkish, Arab, Armenian and Kurdish population, the sanjak had always been granted a special status. The fact that the proposed Franco-Syrian treaty provided for the unification of Syria however, aroused Turkish concern over its future. France had no wish to antagonise Turkey and referred to the League of Nations in December 1936. As a result of the League's resolutions, Alexandretta was granted complete internal autonomy and Turkish was recognised as an official language. "Thus the first dent in the unity of Syria was made: the sanjak was virtually separated from the new republic and its predominantly Turkish character was recognised".⁹⁶

The decision over Alexandretta aroused further bitterness towards the French. France had abandoned Alexandretta to appease the Turks and it was correctly anticipated that appeasement would result in the eventual

⁹⁵ Sachar, *op cit*, pp 52-54.

⁹⁶ Lenczowski, *op cit*, pp 238-240; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 237-239. The French record on Alexandretta was another instance in which unfavourable comparisons were made with the British championship of Iraq's right in such matters. Britain assistance was vital in ensuring that Iraq gained the oil-rich region of Mosul in 1925 and again in 1937, when the question of navigation rights on the Shatt al Arab river was decided in Iraq's favour. (See Mansfield, *op cit*, p 201.)

incorporation of the sanjak into the Turkish state. Surely enough, as the likelihood of war with Germany increased, so did the French desire to conciliate the Turks. In July 1938, an agreement to jointly garrison troops in the sanjak was further complemented by a treaty of friendship between France and Turkey. Although the Arab and Armenian population together outnumbered the Turks, electoral lists were engineered to show a Turkish majority of sixty three per cent, ensuring that a majority of seats in the Chamber were allocated to Turks. Elections in September 1938 returned a Turkish-dominated Assembly. The province was renamed the Hatay and by January 1939, was effectively absorbed into Turkey. On 23 June 1939, a Declaration of Mutual Assistance was signed in Paris by Turkey and France, simultaneous with the signature in Ankara for the final cession of the Hatay. In the balance, France had seen the need to placate Turkey as greater than her need to uphold Syrian integrity.⁹⁷

The double betrayal of Syria by France over the non-ratification of the treaty and the cession of Alexandretta, caused a violent reaction in Syria, which continued during the early months of 1939. The new High Commissioner, Gabriel Puaux, erroneously convinced that France still meant to ratify the treaties, visited Paris in April for consultations. He returned declaring that France remained faithful to its commitment to establish an independent Syria, but spoke only in terms of a treaty to be ultimately agreed. As France became increasingly preoccupied with the Axis threat, her tolerance in Syria and Lebanon diminished. On 7 July, the Syrian constitution was suspended and on 21 September, the Lebanese constitution suffered the same fate.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Lenczowski, *op cit*, pp 239-240; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 239-242; Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 204-205.

⁹⁸ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 235-236, 294.

The mandatory experience had not proved a happy one either for the mandated territories or for the mandatory powers. Though Transjordan had remained stable, Iraq, after the death of Faisal in 1933, had proved more of a head-ache for Britain, as even the limited British tutelage which remained was detested by the Iraqi nationalists. In Palestine, the inexorable difficulties between Arabs and Jews seemed incapable of solution and hardly any progress towards representative government was made. Arab fears of Jewish domination grew as European Jews flooded into Palestine to escape persecution; there were periods of extreme unrest, most notably in 1929, 1936 and again between 1938 and 1939. In view of the deteriorating situation in Europe, Britain too, confronted some difficult choices: with the White Paper of May 1939, which strictly limited Jewish immigration, she chose in favour of conciliating the Arabs, the majority population, realising that if war did occur with Germany, the Jews would have little choice but to range themselves with her against the Axis.⁹⁹

In Syria and Lebanon, as has been explained in greater detail, the French had fared no better. French rule had been opposed from the outset and France failed miserably to win the support and co-operation of the vast majority of Syrians and Lebanese; the one occasion in 1936 on which she might have done much to improve her standing, slipped through her fingers when the deteriorating European situation made her afraid to loosen her control over the mandates. By 1939, the opposition to her rule was if anything, more entrenched. It has been pointed out that France won her mandates not in the Middle East but by her unrivalled military contribution on the Western front during the First World War¹⁰⁰. In 1936, it was the threat of war which made France reluctant to relinquish her mandates; ironically, it was the advent of

⁹⁹ Mansfield, *op cit*, pp 200-202, 213-216.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, *op cit*, p 11.

war between 1939 and 1945 which created the conditions in which France was to lose her mandates.

Though the inter-war period at least provided a brief respite from the prewar years of Anglo-French rivalry and competition, it was not sufficiently long, nor sufficiently free from unrest to completely eradicate the mutual distrust with which each power regarded the other: "Much ... French opinion remained the victim of the curious obsession of a British malignity shown, it was averred, in every Syrian political claim or anti-French demonstration".¹⁰¹ Due to Britain's position of comparative strength, France continued to resemble the poor relation and proved reluctant to accept the rôle fate had forced her to play. She guarded her rights as jealously as a child its favourite toy and seemed incapable of realising that it was as much to Britain's benefit as to her own for the mandate to succeed. The French always suspected British complicity in the Druze revolt. Relations between the two nations were not helped by the fact that many of the most violent anti-French polemics originated in British controlled territory. Outbreaks of anti-Jewish activity^{or} of anti-British unrest in Palestine always excited great sympathy in Syria and Lebanon, signalled by demonstrations, gun-running and the despatch of armed volunteers; whilst the French always maintained a strictly correct attitude at such times, they must also have watched the British struggle with a certain degree of satisfaction. It is easy to see why the sores inflicted on Anglo-French relations by the period of suspicion and distrust up to and during the First World War, were never allowed the chance to heal properly in the inter-war years, and why, with the advent of the Second World War, those old wounds reopened on contact.

iv) The Advent of War: The Middle East Unsettled

¹⁰¹ Longrigg, *op cit*, p 140.

As Allies once again, Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany on 3 September 1939; on 10 May 1940, the Germans launched their blitzkrieg offensive against Holland and Belgium, both of which were rapidly overrun; a matter of days later, the Germans stormed through northern France. British and French troops were evacuated from Dunkerque, the French government relocated to Bordeaux, and on 14 June, Paris fell.

The general confusion, mutual misunderstanding and the increasingly strident calls of some French for a separate peace, led to steady deterioration in Anglo-French relations. Some French argued that the struggle could be continued from North Africa, and the newly-appointed Under Secretary of State for National Defence, Général de Gaulle, flew to Britain several times to convince the British Prime Minister, Churchill, of this. Despite his efforts, the defeatism of the French government was all too apparent. Premier Reynaud resigned on 16 June and was succeeded by Pétain, who, on 22 June, signed an armistice with Germany, under the terms of which France was divided into occupied and unoccupied zones and her army and navy were to be disarmed and demobilised.¹⁰²

On 17 June, de Gaulle, accompanied by General Spears¹⁰³, had abandoned France for London, from where, a day later, he made an impassioned plea to keep the flame of French resistance alive and inaugurated the Free French movement.

¹⁰² A. Cobban, A History of Modern France, 1871-1962, Vol III, (London, 1977), pp 176-181; François Kersaudy, Churchill and De Gaulle, (London, 1981), pp 48-76.

¹⁰³ Major General Sir Edward Louis Spears had distinguished himself during the First World War as a liaison officer with the French. An old friend of Churchill's, in May 1940 he was appointed as the Prime Minister's personal representative with the French government.

On 28 June, the British government formally recognised de Gaulle as "the leader of all Free Frenchmen, wherever they may be, who rally to him in support of the Allied cause".¹⁰⁴ In a further exchange of letters between Churchill and de Gaulle on 7 August, the latter pledged to fight against Germany, and the former to "restore completely the independence and greatness of France".¹⁰⁵ Initial reaction within the French Empire to the armistice and to de Gaulle's call to carry on the fight, was mixed: Général Catroux in Indochina categorically refused to accept the armistice and upon dismissal, flew to London and rallied to de Gaulle. Much of Equatorial Africa declared for de Gaulle, though other governors and generals in France's overseas territories, particularly in North and West Africa, were more hesitant, and one by one, capitulated to Pétain's authority.

The question of which way the French authorities in the Levant would vote was seen as particularly crucial, not only because of the strategic importance of the region but because considerable numbers of French troops were still stationed in Syria and the Lebanon. High Commissioner Puaux was determined to guarantee the integrity of the territories entrusted to him; Général Mittelhauser, who had recently replaced Général Weygand as Commander-in-Chief of the French Army of the Levant, also announced that his forces would continue the struggle against Germany; yet despite considerable British efforts to encourage this attitude, both had submitted to Vichy's authority by the end of June, though Mittelhauser was subsequently replaced by Général Fougère, a more loyal and reliable Vichyite.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 77-83.

¹⁰⁵ A. Hartley, Gaullism. The Rise and Fall of a Political Movement, (London, 1972), p 59.

¹⁰⁶ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 296-298.

Interestingly, it has been observed that the acquiescence of the French in the Levant to Vichy was to some considerable extent influenced by traditional distrust of Britain. Suspicions had been aroused by a scheme mooted in June 1940 for an Anglo-French union and it was feared that this might presage a British take-over of the Levant and possible territorial concessions to Turkey. The suspicions which had germinated during the First World War and its aftermath had certainly not perished.¹⁰⁷

If any Frenchmen in the Levant had eleventh hour doubts about declaring for Vichy, these were almost certainly dispelled by British efforts early in July to neutralise parts of the French fleet. Britain had been assured that the French fleet would not fall into German hands, but Vichy promises meant very little and the fate of the fleet continued to preoccupy the British government. Britain was forced to act quickly: though French naval forces at Alexandria succumbed to persuasion, at Mers el Kebir(Oran) on 3 July 1940, a large part of the French fleet was attacked by the Royal Navy, and three ships were destroyed with the loss of almost 1,300 Frenchmen. The impact of this episode was such as to drastically affect recruitment for de Gaulle's Fighting French force, to cause Vichy to rupture diplomatic relations with Britain and to seriously embitter Anglo-French relations for generations to come.¹⁰⁸

Italy's belated entry in to the war on 10 June and her Mediterranean designs aroused serious British concern for her own strategic position in the Middle East, where her troops were fairly thin on the ground. The fact that French forces in the Levant had rallied to Vichy did little to assuage her anxiety, as British planning had always assumed

¹⁰⁷ Sachar, *op cit*, p 116.

¹⁰⁸ A. Crawley, *de Gaulle*, (London, 1969) pp 124-126; Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 83-86; Sachar, *op cit*, pp 112-114.

that Syria and Lebanon would remain in friendly hands. For the moment, in order to stay afloat a few months longer, Britain preferred to rely on continued Vichy neutrality. Nonetheless, she bravely issued a warning on 2 July that she could not permit Syria or the Lebanon to be occupied by any hostile power, or to be used as a base for attacks on other Middle Eastern countries under her control and would take "whatever measures" were necessary to prevent such circumstances arising.¹⁰⁹

The British dreaded the increasing possibility that a working relationship might be established between Germany and the Vichy authorities in the Levant as this would threaten her entire strategic position in the Middle East. Enemy aircraft operating from airfields in Syria and Lebanon could jeopardise the security of Britain's vital oil supplies and pipelines, as well as her imperial communications via the Suez canal. Anxieties about the safety of the Levant heightened with the arrival of the Italian and German Armistice Commissions in July and September 1940. This, along with the Italian invasion of Egypt and Greece in September and October 1940, seemed set to pave the way for an Axis occupation of the Levant States. In such circumstances, Britain determined to do all she could to regain the support of the French in the Levant, though Churchill was by now convinced that Britain would be obliged to "obtain control of Syria by one means or another in the next few months..." for "on no account must Italian or Caitiff-Vichy influences become or remain paramount [there]".¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ A. B. Gaunson, The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940-1945, (London, 1987), pp 11-12; Longrigg, *op cit*, p 297.

¹¹⁰ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 12.

De Gaulle, now recognised and subsidised by the British government as the leader of the Fighting French, also realised the benefits of winning over the Levant to his influence: it would provide a strategically prestigious base for his movement and the opportunity to recruit among an army which, in June 1940, had been estimated as almost 70,000 strong. Also prevalent in de Gaulle's mind, even at this early stage, was the need to establish the Free French there before England took France's place. The situation in the Middle East was sufficiently desperate in September 1940 for the British and de Gaulle to contemplate supporting a plan hatched by some disaffected French officers, to depose Puaux. Général Catroux was despatched incognito, to Cairo, to monitor the situation and to seize any advantage that might offer itself; unfortunately, by the time he arrived, the plan had already been foiled. Worse still, any gains that the Free French might have made over Vichy in the popularity stakes were wiped out by the disastrous Anglo-Free French attack on the naval base at Dakar in West Africa.¹¹¹

All options were tried in the attempt to convert the Vichy régime in the Levant to the Allied cause. In November, after much deliberation, an economic blockade was instituted in the hope of creating dissatisfaction with the Vichy authorities. In this, extreme caution was required as a substantial body of British opinion, including Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, opposed the blockade. It was considered that a challenge to the Vichy authority in Syria and Lebanon might well inspire a similar challenge to British authority in neighbouring Arab countries, where Axis propaganda was having considerable

¹¹¹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 12-15; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 298-299. On the Dakar operation, see Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 92-103.

success and loyalty to Britain was, at best, only lukewarm.¹¹²

Meanwhile, by November 1940, Puaux's attitude had been found unsatisfactory by Vichy; his more dependable replacement, Jean Chiappe, was shot down en route for Beirut by over zealous Italians, and he was succeeded by Général Henri Dentz, another loyal Vichyite. Widespread unrest faced Dentz in his first months in office. Protests in early January in Damascus and Aleppo against inflation, unemployment and chronic food shortages developed into full scale riots, seemingly vindicating the views of those British who had been seriously concerned about the effects of the blockade on the local population. With a renewed German offensive imminent, Wavell insisted that he could not risk the possibility of a pro-Axis Arab uprising and the Allied blockade was lifted. The disturbances spread to most Syrian and Lebanese cities, and, under nationalist direction, assumed a clearly political complexion.¹¹³

Past experience had left the Syrians with few, if any, reasons for loyalty to the French. Since the French collapse in 1940, the Syrians had been acutely aware of their position of humiliation in being occupied by an occupied power. They had been impressed by the success of the German blitzkrieg and regarded an Axis victory as almost a foregone conclusion.¹¹⁴ Since September, they had been encouraged in these ideas by a network of German agents which had been established throughout the Levant. These had actively courted the nationalists, making large promises about

¹¹² Y. Olmert, British Policy towards the Levant States, 1940-45, (University of London, 1984); A. Mansur, Anglo-French Rivalry in the Levant and the Question of Syrio-Lebanese Independence, 1939-43, (University of Oregon, 1964).

¹¹³ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 299-302.

¹¹⁴ Sachar, *op cit*, pp 158-159.

ridding the Arab world of the French, the British and not least the Jews, and had done much to erode French prestige.¹¹⁵ Certain nationalist leaders clearly regarded an Axis victory as the one that would suit them best, but so too, in more general terms, did the vast majority of the Arab population, who saw "nothing to choose between the oppression exercised in the name of democracy and that exercised in the name of Fascism".¹¹⁶

Unrest continued in Syria and Lebanon throughout February and into March 1941. Shukri Quwatli, the self-appointed nationalist spokesman, argued that as the League of Nations was now a dead letter, so too, was the French mandate; he demanded the re-establishment of constitutional government and the resurrection of the 1936 treaties. By 1 April, Dentz had realised the need for concessions: though full independence could not be contemplated until after the war, he announced a package of reforms, including the formation of new ministries, which he hoped would go some way to satisfying the nationalists.¹¹⁷

Though Britain had been successful in clearing the Italians out of Egypt and had captured Tobruk and Benghazi in January and February 1941, Rommel had been sent to bolster the Italian forces and Britain now faced a major German offensive. By spring 1941, Britain faced a dire threat on all fronts. From late March, Rommel launched his counter-offensive in North Africa: Benghazi fell, Tobruk was

¹¹⁵ See Mansur, *op cit*, pp 40-47 on German influence and propaganda in the Levant. He quotes a verse published in the New York Times on 5 April 1941, which neatly embodies the appeal to the Arabs by the Germans: "No more Monsieur, No more Mister, In heaven Allah, On earth Hitler".

¹¹⁶ A. H. Hourani, Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay. (London, 1946), p 230.

¹¹⁷ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 301-302.

besieged and German troops swept towards Egypt, threatening Suez. Yugoslavia and Greece were overrun by the Germans early in April.¹¹⁸ Worse still for Britain, the situation in Iraq had "turned sour". Concern had been expressed for some time about the pro-Axis sympathies of Rashid Ali, the Iraqi Prime Minister, and in November 1940 his removal had been urged. Ali had protested his loyalty whilst continuing to negotiate with the Axis powers in the belief that this offered the best hope of furthering the Arab cause; his position became untenable however, as opposition to his policy of realignment grew and on 31 January, he resigned. Supported by four leading army officers known as the "Golden Square", a successful coup was launched on the night of 1 and 2 April to restore Rashid Ali to power.

The Iraqi coup took both Britain and the Axis powers by surprise. Britain quickly realised that Ali's insistence that he would uphold the Anglo-Iraqi treaty was a pretence to buy more time until he could call on Axis support. Ali's bluff was called when on 17 April, Britain announced its intention of landing troops at Basra on 18 April, ostensibly en route for Palestine. The troops landed without incident, but Rashid Ali subsequently laid down certain restrictions on the future concentration of British troops on Iraqi territory. The arrival of further British contingents at Basra on 29 April, brought the matter to a head: Rashid Ali refused permission for them to land and surrounded the British air base at Habbaniya with over 9,000 troops, where fighting began on 2 May.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ P. Calvocoressi and G. Wint, Total War. Causes and Courses of the Second World War, (London, 1979), pp 154-55, 164-165.

¹¹⁹ On the Rashid Ali coup and the subsequent British campaign in Iraq, see George Kirk, The Middle East in the War, 1939-45, (London, 1952), pp 62-78; Sachar, *op cit*, pp 168-179.

v) Invasion and Armistice

Events in Iraq sounded the death knell on Vichy neutrality in the Levant. Admiral Darlan, Pétain's second in command, quickly realised that in the prevailing situation in the Middle East, Syria and Lebanon were the trump cards. In return for certain concessions in metropolitan France, he offered to provide the Germans with landing and refuelling facilities in Syria for aircraft going to the assistance of Rashid Ali. The Germans additionally managed to wring from the French munitions seized in the Levant by the Armistice Commission but still stored in Syria. Though at first Dentz threatened to resist German planes, he backed down when confronted with stern orders from Pétain. From 12 May, with the full co-operation of Dentz, German and Italian aircraft made extensive use of Syrian and Lebanese airfields and substantial quantities of munitions were forwarded by rail to Iraq for Rashid Ali's use. In retaliation, Britain bombed the airfields at Palmyra, Rayak and Mezze on 14 and 15 May. Fortunately for Britain, Axis help was too little and too late. An Anglo-Arab force had been scraped together and marched 500 miles from Palestine to relieve Habbaniya on 18 May; thereafter, as support for Rashid Ali crumbled, it pressed on to Baghdad where, by early June, a pro-Allied government was installed.¹²⁰

The Levant States now assumed a new significance in Allied strategic planning. The complicity and the active co-operation of the Vichy authorities in the Levant in the German assistance to Rashid Ali and the active steps Britain had taken to oppose the German infiltration meant that there was no longer any "if" about the likelihood of British intervention in Syria and the Lebanon; the only questions now remaining to be settled were "how?" and "when?". On 22

¹²⁰ Kirk, *op cit*, pp 92-95; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 304-305; Sachar, *op cit*, pp 185-191.

May, Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, had issued the warning that if Vichy took or permitted action detrimental to the British war effort or designed to assist the enemy, Britain considered herself "free to attack the enemy wherever he may be found". The import of this statement was fully appreciated by the Germans, who relaxed the armistice terms to enable Vichy France to send supplies and land and air troops to the Levant; British consuls were expelled from the Levant and any French officers or civil servants suspected of criticising the collaborationist policy were also weeded out.¹²¹

Britain had in fact been contemplating some form of action in the Levant since Catroux's despatch to Cairo in September 1940. Catroux had first suggested an attempt to overthrow the Vichy régime there by joint Anglo-Free French action; it was his suggestion too, that the Arabs could be won over to the Allied cause by the offer of Egyptian-style independence. The British were not averse to the idea, though it was quickly realised that great care would be required not to prejudice wider Anglo-French relations, by giving rise to suspicions that advantage was being taken of France's weakness to whittle down her position in the Levant. Additionally, Britain would have to be certain that any political assurance which might in the future be given to Syria and the Lebanon would not cause dissatisfaction amongst her own Arab subjects.¹²²

That the whole project was a minefield of dangerous possibilities which might easily wreck the Anglo-Free French alliance is obvious from the earliest initiatives in the area. British reconnaissance missions though militarily legitimate, showed precious little regard for French susceptibilities on the diplomatic front and in their

¹²¹ Kirk, *op cit*, p 96; Longrigg, *op cit*, p 305.

¹²² Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 16-17.

propaganda tended to omit any mention of British intentions to replace Vichy authority by that of the Free French. When these activities became known, de Gaulle was convinced that Britain intended to oust France from the Levant altogether. "To the Gaullists, unable to reconcile Foreign Office assurances with the behaviour of British agents on the spot in Syria, the episode was simply proof of "an English policy of encroachments on our domain"." As Gaunson comments, the reconnaissance attempt was invaluable when the time came to invade Syria, but in "nourishing the myth of a ubiquitous network of Arabophiles", it was to prove a real stumbling block for Anglo-Free French relations.¹²³

Despite a reluctant realisation by the British that action in the Levant was inevitable, in view of pressing commitments elsewhere during the early months of 1941, it had been decided that, whilst keeping a careful eye on Syria, the situation there should be allowed to simmer. When de Gaulle, accompanied by Spears¹²⁴, joined Catroux in Cairo on 1 April 1941, it was patently obvious that he and Spears thought otherwise. Despite sympathising with Wavell's plight, they had criticised the heavy reliance in British strategy on the continued neutrality of Vichy and urged a firmer line in Syria. Whilst Wavell agreed in principle, in practice he had no troops with which to contemplate any action on the Levant and he realised that what forces the Free French might muster would be painfully inadequate.¹²⁵

Events in Iraq, and in their train, in Syria and Lebanon, served to vindicate the views of de Gaulle and Spears. Wavell, however, remained adamant that "intervention

¹²³ *ibid*, pp 21-26.

¹²⁴ Spears had been appointed head of the British Mission to de Gaulle in July 1940.

¹²⁵ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 27.

in Syria meant dispersal of effort and therefore defeat"¹²⁶, forcing Spears to intervene with Churchill. The Prime Minister, already considerably annoyed by Wavell's overly cautious attitude, was anyway toying with the idea of replacing him; Churchill subsequently indicated his grave displeasure to Wavell, who was urged to assemble the largest force he could and prepare to move into Syria; Wavell stubbornly held out until faced with the choice of being relieved of his command or obeying orders, whereupon he set about preparations for Operation Exporter, the plan to invade Syria.¹²⁷

The political arrangements preceding the invasion of Syria and Lebanon were equally fraught. Britain was obliged to try and balance two sets of essentially conflicting interests. Her own interests in the Middle East dictated the need to appease Arab sentiment. Britain realised that any action she took in Syria and Lebanon would be carefully watched as a litmus test with regard to her future intentions elsewhere. Yet Britain had frequently repeated her commitment to restore France as a great Power, with all that that signified on the European arena. She knew that the Free French would also be applying the same test to her actions in the Levant and hoping for opposite results. In the prevailing situation, it was deemed expedient to try and conciliate Arab opinion; in the House of Commons on 14 and 15 May, Eden spoke of British sympathy with Syrian aspirations for independence and on 29 May, in a speech at Mansion House, he pledged British support for any scheme of Arab unity which could command general support.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Major General Sir Edward Spears, Fulfilment of a Mission, The Spears Mission to Syria and Lebanon, 1941-44, (London, 1970), p 62.

¹²⁷ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 31, pp 35-38.

¹²⁸ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 85-86; Gaunson, *op cit*, p 40.

Such declarations did little to inspire the Free French with confidence about Britain's aims and Anglo-Free French tensions soon surfaced over the text of the proclamation to be issued by Catroux on entry into the Levant States. British military authorities in the Middle East, concerned to ease the path of their army as much as possible, were anxious that any declaration should grant full and complete independence to the States, but Catroux, with whom the negotiations were being conducted, was anxious to preserve as much of a position for France as he could. The Foreign Office too, was anxious not to make promises which could not be kept and also mindful of the possible repercussions of such sweeping promises on territories under British control.

It was realised that a declaration issued by the Free French alone would probably hold little sway with the Arabs, and a purely British declaration would serve only to incense the Free French. A proposed joint statement, however, was rejected out of hand by de Gaulle when he returned to Cairo on 25 May, "on the ground that the word of France had no need of a foreign guarantee"; he immediately suspected the British of ulterior motives and believed that they hoped to enjoy the political kudos arising from their association with the Free French proclamation of independence, and thereafter wheedle their way into a position as arbiters between the Free French and the Levant peoples.¹²⁹

A compromise of sorts was finally reached when Catroux's proclamation was scattered in leaflet form over Syria and Lebanon on 8 June 1941 coinciding with the launch of Operation Exporter. The proclamation declared that Catroux was coming to "terminate the mandatory régime" and to proclaim the Syrians and Lebanese "free and independent". They would henceforth be sovereign and independent peoples and their status as such was to be guaranteed by a treaty

¹²⁹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 40-42.

which would define relations between them and the Free French. A British guarantee was issued the same day which declared that the British government supported and associated itself with the French assurance of independence.¹³⁰

Further wrangles ensued over de Gaulle's decision to proclaim Catroux High Commissioner of Syria and the Lebanon. The British realised that the title smacked far too much of the old mandatory system and would be complete anathema to the Syrians and Lebanese; only eventual intervention by Churchill (at Spears's request), achieved a climb down. De Gaulle proposed instead to designate Catroux Délégué-Général et Plénipotentiaire; though lacking the title, Catroux was nonetheless instructed to exercise all the powers hitherto held by the High Commissioner.¹³¹ De Gaulle's intentions were already becoming clear. On 31 May, he had informed Free French representatives that the Levant mandate could not be abolished "purely and simply", as any modification in the source or nature of the authority governing the Levant would be dangerous whilst Syria was a battle zone and moreover, would be undesirable juridically.¹³² De Gaulle plainly had no intention of granting the Levant States their independence; rather, he hoped to implement a few minor changes on the basis of the unratified 1936 treaties and to preserve the French position more or less intact.

De Gaulle also tried to make it quite plain to the British that any political settlement which did arise in Syria and Lebanon fell "within the province of the representatives of France jointly with the representatives of the Syrians and the Lebanese" and that there was no call

¹³⁰ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 309-310.

¹³¹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 42-43.

¹³² Mansur, *op cit*, p 89-90.

for any British participation.¹³³ The British however, who were shouldering the main burden of the invasion and had guaranteed the Free French pledge of independence, would not stand for this. Spears remonstrated with de Gaulle and intervened yet again with Churchill, warning that the Free French interpretation of independence would probably not satisfy Arab aspirations; he argued that in view of her considerable interests in the Middle East, Britain could not afford to simply surrender all rights to intervene in the Levant to suit the whims of de Gaulle. As a result, Churchill wrote to de Gaulle just prior to Exporter and tried to reassure him that whilst Britain had no designs on the French Empire, "mutual trust and collaboration" must be the motif for future policy in the Middle East; British and Free French policies towards the Arabs "must run on parallel lines", nor must any settlement of the Syrian question be allowed to endanger the stability of the Middle East.¹³⁴

Resistance to the joint Anglo-Free French invasion of Syria and the Lebanon was fierce and far exceeded all expectations.¹³⁵ An appeal to Vichy forces to defect by Catroux was to no avail, and subsequent personal appeals by Free French and British officers met with abuse and even gunfire. Despite the intense resistance, the Allies did make headway and after a week or so had reached the environs of Damascus. Prior to the invasion, Dentz had worked furiously to rid the Levant of all traces of Axis infiltration to thereby remove the justification for any attack. Though he had also refused early offers of Axis assistance, by 12 June he was forced to request Luftwaffe support from Darlan.

¹³³ Mansur, *op cit*, p 92; Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 42-43.

¹³⁴ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 43-44.

¹³⁵ This brief account of Operation Exporter is derived from the following sources: Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 311-314; Kirk, *op cit*, pp 97-101; Mansur, *op cit*, pp 63-72; Sachar, *op cit*, pp 203-208;

Vichy forces succeeded in launching a counter-offensive, which temporarily halted the Allied advance but this was short-lived; reinforcements arrived from Iraq and on 21 June Damascus was seized by Allied troops.

Though almost 20,000 Vichy French troops had reached Salonika en route for the Levant, and Germany was negotiating with Turkey for their transport across Turkish territory, on 18 June Dentz made preliminary overtures for an armistice; on 26 June he officially requested permission from Vichy to sue for peace, though authority to do so was withheld until 7 July. Terms of a cease-fire were received a day later though it was not until 14 July that an armistice was eventually signed at St. Jean d'Acre; this was to prove "a blow from which Anglo-Free French relations never fully recovered".¹³⁶

Once an Allied victory seemed certain, fears that the British would effectively supplant the Free French in the Levant again dominated de Gaulle's thinking. He was convinced that British policy would endeavour "sometimes stealthily and sometimes harshly, to replace France at Damascus and Beirut". His letter of appointment to Catroux as Délégué, instructed him to oppose British interference in spheres relating to the sovereignty of France and to exclude all British control. On 28 June he warned Churchill of the need for local British authorities to tread carefully in the Levant, lest they carried out a "displacement of authority to the detriment of France or a sort of control over the authority of France".¹³⁷

From very early on in the Syrian campaign, de Gaulle had correctly forecast that Dentz would attempt to secure repatriation for his forces. As the Free French leader hoped

¹³⁶ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 45.

¹³⁷ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 93-94.

to avail himself of the opportunity to try and rally a substantial number of Vichy French to his cause, he urged, that under no circumstance should repatriation be conceded. Unfortunately, this view was in direct opposition to the opinion of the British military command in Cairo, where early repatriation was favoured to stabilise the Levant situation as quickly as possible and release Allied troops for active service elsewhere. A compromise was finally arranged: Free French representation at the armistice negotiations was assured and it was agreed that Vichy troops would be given the opportunity to rally to the Free French: those prepared to serve under the Allies would be permitted to remain in the Levant; those unwilling to do so would be repatriated.¹³⁸

Though de Gaulle believed that he had done all he could to adequately protect the Free French position at the armistice negotiations, Dentz, for his part, was struggling to secure the best terms possible for Vichy. In addition to demanding the repatriation of all his troops, Dentz categorically refused to negotiate with any Free French representatives. Oliver Lyttelton, the newly appointed Minister of State instructed Wilson, the British Commander in charge of the negotiations, to insist on Free French representation. To expedite matters on the spot however, and without regard for the political implications of his actions, the pragmatic Wilson devised a compromise solution with which Catroux flexibly complied, in which the latter would attend the negotiations as part of the British delegation but merely as an observer and without the right of separate recognition or signature. Several days elapsed before Cairo realised that Wilson had failed to ensure adequate representation for the Free French.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 48-51.

¹³⁹ *ibid*, pp 55-56.

Wilson went on to negotiate an armistice which he regarded as very favourable to the Allies but which de Gaulle subsequently denounced as "a pure and simple transference of Syria and Lebanon to the British". Bowing to Dentz, the armistice made no mention of the Free French and provided for the early and rapid repatriation of Vichy troops, with their arms, though without ammunition, in formed units under Vichy officers and in French ships. Any war material which the Vichy forces had not managed to ship out before the armistice was signed, was to be placed under British control, as were the *Troupes Spéciales*.¹⁴⁰ Catroux had merely signed a letter agreeing to the terms of the Convention. Worse still, a confidential protocol between Wilson and the Vichy authorities prevented personal contact between Gaullist and Vichy forces and strictly limited the means by which the former were permitted to try to rally the latter to their cause. These restrictions were so severe as to render all attempts by the Gaullists to influence their compatriots virtually futile.¹⁴¹

When discovered, the terms of the armistice and of the protocol caused dismay in Cairo and severely raised eyebrows in London. It seemed that the military authorities had been excessively generous to Vichy and into the bargain had betrayed Free French rights. Despite grave British embarrassment over the Acre armistice, it was generally thought to be too late to cry over spilt milk; only a limited effort was made to try and compensate the French in any way¹⁴², and comfort was sought in the fact that as

¹⁴⁰ The *Troupes Spéciales* were native Syrian and Lebanese, recruited and trained by the French.

¹⁴¹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 55-57; Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 314-315; Mansur, *op cit*, pp 97-99.

¹⁴² Spears eventually managed to secure a more favourable "interpretation" of the Convention, on the grounds that the Convention and the Protocol were essentially contradictory. See Major General Sir E. L. Spears, Fulfilment of a Mission, (London, 1977), pp 127-131.

Catroux had at least been associated in the negotiation and conclusion of the terms of the armistice, de Gaulle could have little room for complaint.¹⁴³

An enraged de Gaulle, however, had plenty to complain about. He descended upon Cairo in a towering rage and denounced the armistice *in toto*. On 21 July he handed Lyttelton a document which repudiated its terms, formally withdrew all French troops from the command of the British Commander-in-Chief and announced that from midday on 24 July, de Gaulle and the French Empire Defence Council would resume "the full and entire disposal of all French armed forces in the Middle East. The document was tantamount to a rupture of the Anglo-Free French alliance and Lyttelton refused to accept it."¹⁴⁴

Spears and Lyttelton were thoroughly alarmed by the gravity of the situation and felt that a complete breach seemed inevitable. Subsequent meetings with de Gaulle however, took place in a calmer atmosphere. Though Churchill was adamant that de Gaulle should under no circumstances be allowed to hinder British policy in Syria, the wider dimensions of the problem did not escape him, and Lyttelton was instructed to make "full allowance for the difficulties of his [i.e. de Gaulle's] position". Smuts too, warned Eden of the importance in this instance of upholding French interests, for what was at stake was the attitude of the whole French Empire and "when the turn of the tide comes in this war, the French will probably be the first to be with us". Equally, members of the French Empire Defence Council, aware that the alliance with Britain represented the "sole guarantee for the restoration of France and her Empire",

¹⁴³ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 57-59.

¹⁴⁴ See Spears, *op cit*, pp 133-136, for a complete printed copy of Lyttelton's account of his meeting with de Gaulle.

became perturbed by the news from Cairo and cabled de Gaulle, advising against any rupture.¹⁴⁵

Over the next three days in Cairo, a series of agreements were hammered out; known collectively as the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements, they were to become the cornerstone of Anglo-French relations in the Levant. They consisted of an Interpretative agreement on the Armistice Convention, initialled on 24 July, which rendered the terms of the armistice more acceptable to the Free French by effectively negating the confidential Protocol (and repudiating Wilson's signature), and two enclosures initialled the following day, which dealt with future Anglo-Free French military collaboration in the Middle East.¹⁴⁶ The enclosures stipulated that in view of the preponderance of British troops in the Middle East, overall responsibility for planning and assigning rôles in military operations would reside in the British Command; regardless of relative troop ratios, territorial command in Syria and Lebanon belonged to the French.¹⁴⁷

In a separate letter to de Gaulle on 25 July, Lyttelton assured him that Britain had no interest in Syria or the Lebanon except to win the war, and no desire to encroach upon the French position there. Once the essential step of carrying out the pledge of independence had been taken, Lyttelton continued, Britain freely admitted "that France should have the dominant and privileged position in the Levant among all European nations". Two days later, neatly reversing Lyttelton's terms de Gaulle happily noted the

¹⁴⁵ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 61; Mansur, *op cit*, pp 99-100; Olmert, *op cit*.

¹⁴⁶ For texts of the "Interpretative Agreement" and the two enclosures, see Spears, *op cit*, pp 143-147.

¹⁴⁷ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 315-316; Kirk, *op cit* pp 111-112.

assurances of British disinterestedness in Syria and Lebanon, "and the fact that Great Britain recognises in advance the dominating and privileged position of France in the Levant when these states shall be independent".¹⁴⁸

vi) The Levant: "No Place For Two..."

For de Gaulle, the whole Syrian affair and especially the armistice served to confirm suspicions of British intentions which he already entertained. He was convinced that Britain was determined to establish her supremacy in the entire Middle East at France's expense. Nor did post-armistice events bode particularly well for future Anglo-Free French relations. During this initial period of adjustment when considerable uncertainty reigned over the exact division of responsibilities, numerous clashes occurred between British and Free French troops. Up to 7 August, the former claimed to have no knowledge of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements whilst in contrast, the latter were desperate to blaze them abroad and to prove that France was mistress of her own territories. Less than two weeks after the joint invasion, the British and Free French were at each other's throats, when a British brigade occupied and hoisted the Union Jack over the French residency at Soueida in the Druze region; on de Gaulle's orders, Catroux despatched some French forces to repossess the building but the British commander refused to leave and threatened to fire on the French troops. The possibility of a grave incident seemed all too likely and was only prevented when Lyttelton intervened and ordered the British to withdraw.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Kirk, *op cit*, p 113.

¹⁴⁹ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 72.

Considerable efforts on Lyttelton's behalf to conciliate de Gaulle and to reassure him that French rights would be meticulously observed seemed to no avail.¹⁵⁰ De Gaulle's influence in the Levant continued to be a disruptive one as he sought to emphasise French control in any and every way possible. When Lyttelton requested British participation in future negotiations between the Free French and the Levant States, de Gaulle warned that the presence of a third power at such negotiations would be "an inadmissible interference".¹⁵¹ De Gaulle remained convinced that in Syria and Lebanon, there was at work "a fanatical group of Arabophiles, supported by the Prime Minister and the Colonial Office". He instructed the Free French representative in London to inform Eden that "meddling by England was leading ... to the gravest complications and that the doubtful advantages that British policy could derive, in the Levant, from this neglect of the rights of France would be mediocre indeed compared with the major disadvantages which would result from an open quarrel between Free France and England".¹⁵²

News of de Gaulle's disruptive antics in the Levant soon reached Churchill, who advised Lyttelton that as de Gaulle's behaviour ran the risk of endangering the Anglo-Free French alliance, it would be prudent "to let him see the gulf on the edge of which he is disporting himself".¹⁵³ An accumulation of subsequent incidents served only to increase Churchill's wrath and made him determined to deflate French

¹⁵⁰ Lyttelton visited commanders throughout the Levant to personally emphasise the status which should be accorded to the Free French and even secured the removal of certain British agents known for their less than satisfactory attitude towards the French. See Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 74-75.

¹⁵¹ Mansur, *op cit*, p 110.

¹⁵² Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 144-145.

¹⁵³ Gaunson, *op cit*, p 76.

pretensions in the Levant. Pressure was exerted to expedite de Gaulle's return to Britain, where the Prime Minister instructed he was to be left to "stew in his own juice". In a statement in the House of Commons on 9 September, Churchill reiterated that Britain had no designs on Syria or Lebanon. He stressed however, that it was a "a prime feature" of British policy "that Syria shall be handed back to the Syrians, who will assume at the earliest possible moment their independent sovereign rights ... There is no question of France maintaining the same position which she exercised in Syria before the war ... There must be no question, even in wartime, of a mere substitution of Free French interests for Vichy French interests. The Syrian people are to come back into their own". Echoing Lyttelton's words, Churchill did go on to concede that of all European nations, "the position of France in Syria is one of special privilege, and that in as far as any European countries have influence in Syria, that of France will be pre-eminent".¹⁵⁴

During a meeting between Churchill and de Gaulle three days later, when the latter complained that it was the unavowed aim of many British officials in the Middle East to diminish the influence of the Free French, Churchill rebuked him for his Anglophobia. The Prime Minister offered the usual assurance that Britain had no ambitions in Syria and Lebanon, except to win the war, but pointed out that as events there were regarded as a touchstone for the rest of the Arab world, they would require handling in such a way as to give the Arabs real satisfaction.¹⁵⁵

In the Levant itself however, the French were doing anything but satisfying Arab aspirations. To the great

¹⁵⁴ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 76-77, Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 148-154.

¹⁵⁵ For complete report of the meeting between Churchill and de Gaulle, see Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 155-160.

disillusion of the Levant people, the introduction of the Free French administration effected little change in the existing structure of the mandate: French control remained all pervasive, the Syrian and Lebanese constitutions were not reinstated, Catroux continued to legislate by decree and the *staus quo ante* was strictly preserved.¹⁵⁶ Catroux worried that representative governments might fall prey to intransigent nationalists and lead to the exclusion of France in the guidance of affairs. Hence in Syria and Lebanon, "moderate" governments were appointed by the French under Sheikh Taj al Din al Hasani and Alfred Naccache respectively, both of whom could be relied upon not to make difficulties for the French.¹⁵⁷ Though proclamations of Syrian and Lebanese independence were issued by Catroux on 27 September 1941 and 26 November 1941, these were carefully hedged about with limitations due to the exigencies of the war.¹⁵⁸ It was clearly the intention of the Free French to postpone any effective change until such time as treaties could be arranged which would ensure France's position. In conversation with Churchill on 1 October, de Gaulle hastened to stress that the declarations of independence must inevitably be regarded as provisional, since the Free French had no power to negotiate the termination of the mandate, though the Prime Minister warned him that juridical considerations should not be allowed to delay the grant of independence which was essential on both political and military grounds.¹⁵⁹

Despite the puppet nature of the new régimes, Syrian and Lebanese independence was recognised by Britain and in February 1942, Spears was appointed as the first British

¹⁵⁶ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 321-322.

¹⁵⁷ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 114-116.

¹⁵⁸ Longrigg, *op cit*, pp 322-323.

¹⁵⁹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 80-81.

Minister to both governments and head of the Mission to the Free French in the Levant. The choice of Spears disconcerted certain British and French circles alike. From Cairo, considerable reservations were expressed about him as he was "much disliked" by the French, and tended to make "mountainous protests about molehill incidents". Catroux too had raised grave objections, pointing out that Spears's presence in Syria had "greatly accentuated the difficulties [between] the Free French and the British authorities".¹⁶⁰

In fact Spears' experiences in the Levant had wrought a transformation in his attitudes and feelings towards the Free French. During the stormy sessions with de Gaulle over the armistice, Spears had become sufficiently incensed by his attitudes and threats to contemplate with apparent nonchalance his deposition, imprisonment and replacement by Catroux.¹⁶¹ Since the armistice, Spears had become increasingly disillusioned with the Free French and their conduct in the Levant, which he had made plain in a series of telegrams to London. He lamented their over-sensitivity and having to work with them, "knowing full well that nothing, absolutely nothing, would lead de Gaulle and most of his adherents to trust us, to cast off their inner conviction that we were intent on stealing the Levant ... from them".¹⁶² On numerous occasions he had made his disenchantment patently obvious, leading to a widening rift with both de Gaulle and Catroux, which even their wealth of shared experience could not diminish.

Spears had been particularly dismayed by the conveniently rapid conversions of many former Vichy officials to the cause of the Free French; the Free French

¹⁶⁰ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 85-86.

¹⁶¹ See Spears, *op cit*, pp 137-138.

¹⁶² *ibid*, p 159.

shortage of manpower was such that invitations were even extended to Vichy officials in Turkey to fill administration posts in the Levant. Additionally, in his liaison work with the French in the Levant, he had witnessed to his distaste, many of the bitter quarrels which had erupted between British and French military authorities. Continual "bogus interpretations of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreement" by the French, particularly over matters such as recruitment of Syrian and Lebanese nationals for the British army, whereby the war effort was sacrificed for the sake of French *amour propre*, also frustrated Spears. It had become increasingly apparent to him that "the Free French attached more importance to asserting their position than to making what contribution they could to the winning of a war involving their survival as well as [Britain's]".¹⁶³

Spears had been horrified by what he regarded as the British abandonment of the Levant States to the "tender mercies of the Free French" and called for Britain to take "an ever-increasing hand in the direction of affairs". He returned to Britain on leave in December 1941, determined to make London realise the real attitude of the Free French in the Levant. At a meeting of the War Cabinet's Syria Committee, Spears called for a drastic reappraisal of British policy. He painted a bleak picture of the Levant where the French were hated and their administration was such that security was endangered. Unless Britain provided solid and genuine support for Syrian and Lebanese aspirations, he warned that all faith would be lost in the British and disturbances would result, which Britain could ill afford.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Spears, Britain and the Levant Crisis, The Arab Word, Vol XVIII, January 1954, quoted in Sachar, *op cit*, p 290.

¹⁶⁴ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 82-83.

Once confirmed in his appointment as British Minister to Syria and Lebanon on 6 February 1942, Spears started as he so obviously meant to go on. Whilst still in London, at a function hosted by de Gaulle, Spears demanded to know why Catroux had not granted any real measure of independence to the Levant States. Dissatisfied with de Gaulle's response, Spears pointed out that in future, "there were likely to be quite serious difficulties in the Levant, as [he] happened to be accredited to two independent Republics and not to puppet Governments existing on General Catroux's and General de Gaulle's favour". Reaching the Levant in late March 1942, Spears presented his credentials to both the Syrian and Lebanese government, but conspicuously failed to pay a courtesy visit to Catroux; over this and a host of other petty differences, the two men were soon at loggerheads.¹⁶⁵

On his return to the Levant, Spears had been struck by the noticeable deterioration in the local situation: general complaints about inflation, food shortages and unemployment were being channelled into complaints about the French-imposed governments and demands for real representative governments were increasingly being heard. Equally disturbing was the fact that the cause of the Levant people was being taken up by both the Iraqi and Egyptian governments. Spears's voice was quickly added to those demanding that the Levant people should enjoy real independence.

From April onwards he began pressing Catroux to honour the French pledge of independence and to hold elections with a view to replacing the puppet régimes by representative governments, which could command the support of the population. In this view, he was supported by heavy-weight opinion on the Middle East War Council, which recommended that elections should be held by no later than December

¹⁶⁵ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 86-87.

1942. This feeling was inspired as much from a genuine concern for the fulfilment of Allied promises to the Levant States as from the fear that, unless the French took more positive action towards implementing her pledge of independence, serious disorders might flare up in the Levant which would jeopardise the Allied war effort just as it was suspected that Rommel was about to renew his offensive in North Africa. Consequently, in mid May, Richard Casey, Lyttelton's successor as Minister of State, presented Catroux with the recommendations of the Middle East War Council, demanding elections by November 1942 at the latest and an early announcement to that effect.¹⁶⁶

The French however, realised only too well that free elections would inevitably return nationalist governments which would have no truck with them. Catroux believed that Spears was merely using the election issue to increase British influence and prestige at France's expense. Ironically, the British were pressing for progress on the independence front in order to forestall the likelihood of any serious Arab unrest when the military situation once again looked threatening. That very threat, in the form of Rommel's new offensive, launched at the end May 1942, provided Catroux with the perfect excuse to try and delay any definite plans for elections: he argued that given the critical military situation, it would be foolish to open an election campaign, with the inevitable upheaval and political ferment it would cause. British pressure continued unabated and eventually Catroux was forced to agree to announce elections by 1 July. He informed de Gaulle that after three meetings to discuss the situation, he had felt that he could no longer hold out, without serious damage to French prestige, against the combined pressure of the British, the Iraqis and the Egyptians. But as events transpired, by 1 July, Rommel was only sixty odd miles away

¹⁶⁶ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 88, 92.

from Alexandria, and the British were forced to back down, though Casey warned that as soon as the military situation improved, progress would be expected.¹⁶⁷

Despite the imperative need for solidarity in the face of the serious military situation, relations between Catroux and Spears showed no signs of improvement. The two had managed to co-operate in a spectacularly successful scheme which had rendered Syria and Lebanon self-sufficient in wheat, thereby greatly reducing the threat of famine and moreover, alleviating the burden on Allied shipping. This achievement however, was marred by continual Anglo-French bickering arising chiefly from the division of supreme authority between the two men. In the war effort Spears demanded efficiency above all else; Catroux however, bitterly resented the British intrusion into what was essentially a French domain, and saw the scheme as a means whereby Spears succeeded in flooding the country "with a legion of economic officials who were above all, agents of political propaganda".¹⁶⁸

The Spears-Catroux conflict had even become cause for outside comment. In April 1942, Engert, the American consul in Beirut, informed the State Department that the relationship between the two men was strained almost to breaking point. His temporary successor William Gwynn, observed in July: "Relations between Catroux and Spears seem worse than ever ... things have reached such a pass that no satisfactory arrangement can be reached while they are both here ... not even simple problems can be solved satisfactorily as political consideration is always

¹⁶⁷ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 92-93; Mansur, *op cit*, pp 131-134.

¹⁶⁸ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 135-138; Sachar, *op cit*, pp 287-288; Spears, *op cit*, pp 173-186.

present".¹⁶⁹ In a separate despatch, Gwynn voiced his suspicions about the plethora of British officials employed by the Spears Mission such that "a British substitute could easily be found on the spot for each French official".¹⁷⁰

Nor did matters improve: Spears continued to chide Catroux for his failure to consult him over various matters and issued a stern warning that when elections were held, they must on no account be rigged. Catroux was sufficiently incensed to write to Casey, refusing to have any more dealings with Spears; he complained that Spears acted as though determined to supplant him and to deprive France of her position. He had interfered in political and administrative matters and was now clearly associated in public opinion as "the man who has assigned himself the task of destroying French influence in Syria and the Lebanon". Casey was obliged to try and effect a reconciliation between the pair: both were summoned to Cairo where Casey assured Catroux that Spears had "no intention of destroying French influence in Syria and Lebanon" and fully recognised France's special position and rights. Though a certain rapprochement was reached, it was to Catroux's cost: he came away from the meeting having conceded Spears's right to intervene in all matters affecting British interests and having promised in future to consult the British Minister before taking any decisions.¹⁷¹

The respite in Anglo-Free French relations produced by this meeting was short-lived. De Gaulle arrived in the Levant in August 1942, determined "to demonstrate the

¹⁶⁹ Sir L. Woodward, British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, Vol IV, (London, 1975), p 221; Mansur, *op cit*, p 138.

¹⁷⁰ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 138-139.

¹⁷¹ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 93-94; Mansur, *op cit*, pp 139-140.

predominance of France in both fact and spirit", and once again, relations plummeted.¹⁷² A portent of the trouble to come had been given, when on 29 July 1942, prior to his departure, de Gaulle had informed Churchill that he was going to the Levant where Spears was active and causing trouble. In reply, Churchill had pointedly observed that Spears had "a lot of enemies", but one friend -- the Prime Minister himself.¹⁷³

Surely enough, de Gaulle's Levant sojourn during the summer of 1942 was packed with incident. An initial meeting with Casey in Cairo on 8 August quickly degenerated into a shouting match when Casey broached the subject of Syrian and Lebanese elections, and the vital importance of holding them before the year was out. De Gaulle had declared that the Committee had decided against elections during 1942 and that anyway, that issue was an exclusively French concern. He proceeded to attack Spears' activities which "were of a nature to compromise both order in the Levant and Franco-British relations", and accused the British of trying to oust the Free French from the Levant.¹⁷⁴

Once he reached the Levant, de Gaulle's anti-Spears crusade increased in intensity. In two interviews with Gwynn in Beirut on 12 and 16 August, he stated that he intended to threaten to end all collaboration with the British unless they got rid of Spears; in an interview with General Holmes¹⁷⁵, he pursued the same theme.¹⁷⁶ For the moment,

¹⁷² Abed Al-Hafiz Mansur, Great Britain and the Birth of Syrian and Lebanese Independence, International Studies, Vol 16, No 2, April-June, 1977, p 253.

¹⁷³ Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 191-192.

¹⁷⁴ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 94-95; Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 198-99.

¹⁷⁵ Lieutenant-General W. G. Holmes, GOC, Ninth Army.

however, despite the grave concern of the Foreign Office and even of certain British representatives in the Middle East, Spears was still able to rely on the support of Churchill; during an after lunch chat in Cairo on 23 August, Spears recorded that Churchill was out to help him avoid pitfalls; the Prime Minister had warned him not to be over-zealous, but told him that "his own personal conclusion was that [he] was keeping up British prestige in the Levant".¹⁷⁷

De Gaulle's presence in the Levant led to a near rupture in Anglo-Free French relations. On 14 August, he sent a telegram to Churchill in which he claimed that the constant interventions of various British representatives in the Levant were "incompatible with British disinterestedness in Syria and Lebanon, with the respect of French policy and with the régime of the mandate". He asked that Churchill restore the application of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements to ensure military co-operation between Britain and the Free French and to demonstrate their unity to the Middle East. A reply from the British, much stiffened after consultations with Spears, denied either that Britain was seeking to undermine French influence or pursuing political aims of her own. Her over-riding aim in the highly sensitive Levant area was to ensure that nothing happened which might jeopardise military security or hinder the war effort; she therefore expected to be consulted beforehand concerning any major political developments. Her second interest in the Levant was as guarantor of Catroux's declaration of independence. Neither of these aims constituted a violation of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Gaunson, *op cit*, pp 96-97; Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 199-200.

¹⁷⁷ Diary Entry, 23 August 1942, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, Middle East Centre, St Antonys College, Oxford; Gaunson, *op cit*, p 97; Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 200.

¹⁷⁸ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 230-233.

De Gaulle was not prepared to let matters rest at that. He had decided that it was time "to force [the British] out of their equivocations by which they were attempting to conceal their hand" and to espouse "a general attitude that would exclude all compromise".¹⁷⁹ In a further telegram on August 24, de Gaulle stated that he was unable to accept the view that British political interventions in the Levant were compatible with her commitments to France. He pointedly referred to the fact that the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements had stipulated that overall military command should reside with the power which had a preponderance of troops in the area. In a scarcely veiled threat, he pointed out that as French forces now had a numerical superiority, this should result in a transfer of Allied military affairs to the French command, and that he was ready to discuss the matter with Casey.¹⁸⁰

The situation became increasingly fraught as de Gaulle played his hand for all it was worth. He had involved the United States representative in the wrangle in an attempt to play off one government against the other; he obstinately insisted that discussions with Casey should take place in Beirut and then refused to accede to a request from the Prime Minister to return to London without delay. On 5 September Casey was presented with an official request for the transfer of Allied command in the Levant to the Free French within five days; on 10 September, he received a forty page indictment of British activities in the Levant written by de Gaulle.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Mansur, *op cit*, pp 145.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*, pp 233-234.

¹⁸¹ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 234-241.

In London meanwhile, all the stops were being pulled out to try and reign in the General. The idea of preventing his monthly subsidies was discussed and representations were made to members of the National Committee in London.¹⁸² Finally, on 9 September, Eden saw Dejean and Pleven¹⁸³ and informed them that Britain was about to resume operations in Madagascar.¹⁸⁴ He hinted that it had been her intention to hand over the island's administration to the Free French, but that de Gaulle's suspicions about British good faith in the Levant now made this doubtful. If, however, de Gaulle would return to London, Britain would be happy to discuss with him her original intention. This did the trick: on September 13, Eden received a message to the effect that de Gaulle would be leaving Cairo on 23 September, en route for London.¹⁸⁵

When a meeting eventually took place between Churchill and de Gaulle on 30 September¹⁸⁶, it was particularly stormy. "It was clear that the dispute over the Levant had effectively poisoned the whole meeting, which ended in

¹⁸² *ibid*, p 237.

¹⁸³ Dejean and Pleven were the National Committee's spokesmen for Foreign Affairs and for the Colonies respectively.

¹⁸⁴ British doubts about the wisdom of associating the Free French in their military operations had been confirmed by the failure at Dakar and the embittered resistance encountered in the Levant. An attack on Madagascar in May 1942 was therefore launched without prior consultation with de Gaulle. Even without Free French participation, the British met fierce resistance and after taking the port of Diego Suarez, were obliged to seek a *modus vivendi* with the Vichy forces.

¹⁸⁵ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 240, 243.

¹⁸⁶ De Gaulle was accompanied by Pleven; Eden and Morton were also present.

something perilously close to a rupture".¹⁸⁷ The question of elections was pressed, though de Gaulle insisted that they would cause considerable political difficulties; over the matter of military command, Churchill categorically denied that the French possessed numerical superiority; he accused de Gaulle of attempting to assert his position in such a way as to endanger the common cause for which they were both fighting; de Gaulle claimed that on the contrary, all difficulties were caused by the behaviour of British representatives; Churchill said that with such disagreement evident over the Syrian situation, Britain was not eager to pave the way for similar problems in other vital war zones, such as Madagascar. Eden too, stressed that the British had no desire to open another Syrian chapter in Madagascar. The British had hoped that the French would meet them over Syria, but these hopes had been disappointed. The meeting ended with both parties agreeing to differ, and de Gaulle announcing boldly that he would accept the consequences of his actions.

Whilst Churchill made his displeasure with de Gaulle known by administrative obstruction, a note received by the Foreign Office on 2 October expressed the complete and unanimous solidarity of the National Committee with their leader. Behind the scenes however, there was feverish activity to try and heal the breach. On 5 October 1942 Dejean presented the Foreign Office with an aide-mémoire containing three proposals consisting of a Free French agreement to announce Syrian and Lebanese elections by the end of 1942 for the following spring, if the military situation permitted, a Free French abandonment of their claim to command Allied troops in the Levant, and finally, a suggestion for the establishment of a Franco-British committee in London to deal with all Levant difficulties

¹⁸⁷ Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 209. For a full report of the meeting, see Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 202-209.

incapable of being solved locally. On 8 October, the Foreign Office accepted the proposals, and subsequently suggested that an attempt be made to redefine the basis for Anglo-French collaboration in the Levant. In the slightly improved atmosphere, a draft interpretative agreement was also quickly agreed upon.¹⁸⁸

The views of the Middle East authorities when sought, however, soon dissipated any hopes of an early settlement of the Levant problem. Spears was outraged by the French proposals. He pointed out that what they effectively amounted to was a postponement of elections for at least another eight months; moreover, the establishment of a London committee would merely enable the Free French to circumvent Spears and Casey by appealing over their heads; in return, all that the French had conceded was the command of Allied troops in the Levant, a right which was anyway British by virtue of the relative numbers of her troops in the Levant. Casey thought the proposals were at least acceptable as a basis for negotiation. Both men were against the idea of the interpretative agreement and thought that a comprehensive new settlement should be worked out. Furthermore, Casey observed that any "new deal" for the Levant would be jeopardised by the bitter conflict of personalities between Spears and Catroux, remediable only by new appointments for both men. This provided an opportunity for the Foreign Office, which had long been convinced of the unsuitability of Spears for his post, to advocate his removal. Churchill, however, thought that both men should remain at their posts.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 246-247; Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 209-213.

¹⁸⁹ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 247-249; Gaunson, *op cit*, p 101-103.

The doubts expressed by the British authorities in the Middle East were matched by those of Catroux, who criticised the draft as conceding every British demand and failing to protect French interests. In de Gaulle's eyes, the possibility that Dejean had been too conciliatory towards the British immediately made him suspect, and he was removed from his post and replaced by Pleven, with whom discussions were started afresh. Towards the end of 1942 the negotiations became increasingly complex as the French proposed new versions of the interpretative agreement and the British tried to link the Levant negotiations to those concerning Madagascar.¹⁹⁰

In more general terms, Anglo-French relations enjoyed something of a rapprochement during late October and early November 1942. The ball had been set rolling by a conciliatory visit from one of Churchill's personal representatives to de Gaulle on 30 October, a gesture which delighted de Gaulle. On 6 November, the day after an armistice was finally concluded in Madagascar, Eden informed de Gaulle that Britain was prepared to reopen negotiations on the matter and furthermore, to give the Free French a public assurance as to their future position there. There was however, method in the apparent British madness: on 8 November, Operation Torch was launched, the Anglo-American expedition to clear French North Africa of Axis troops.¹⁹¹ The entire operation, on American insistence had been planned and was to be executed without consultation with de Gaulle.

The concessions the British were prepared to make to sweeten the pill of Torch, however, evidently did not extend to the Levant. In mid-November, a French counter-draft of the interpretative agreement was rejected by the British and

¹⁹⁰ Woodward, *op cit*, pp 249-251.

¹⁹¹ Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 212-214.

all negotiations were finally abandoned by both sides in favour of Dejean's original three proposals. Though the French agreed in principle to the holding of elections in the Levant as soon as possible, in practice the signs were far from encouraging: by late December, the French had done nothing to implement their promises.¹⁹²

Throughout the turbulent eighteen months which had elapsed since the joint invasion and occupation of Syria and Lebanon, the capacity of the Levant issue to disrupt the Anglo-Free French alliance had already been amply demonstrated. The Rashid Ali coup and subsequent Axis penetration into Syria and Lebanon had finally woken Britain up to the vulnerability of her strategic position in the Middle East. Operation Exporter however, had been undertaken without relish as an extreme measure in extreme circumstances, and the potential danger of the whole venture from the point of view of the alliance had been realised by both parties from the very start.

Appreciating the need first and foremost to secure the goodwill of the local population and the fact that a Free French promise of independence would carry little weight with the indigenous population, the British sought to provide the Syrians and Lebanese with an insurance policy in the form of a guarantee of the pledge of independence. Yet twinged by conscience in the aftermath of the armistice negotiations, Britain had also conceded that France should have the pre-eminent and privileged position in the Levant among European nations. The inherent contradiction in her promises to the Arabs and to the French was to make her future life in the Levant extremely difficult, and her future relationship with the French even more so.

¹⁹² Woodward, *op cit*, pp 251-254.

The armistice fiasco could not have provided a poorer start to the joint occupation. It served to sour the whole enterprise and to confirm de Gaulle's worst suspicions. The shabby treatment and total disregard for Free French *amour propre* reinforced de Gaulle's belief that Britain aimed to oust the French from the Levant and to establish her own supremacy throughout the entire Middle East. De Gaulle's rage over the terms of the armistice was such that he was prepared to threaten a break with Britain, though it is questionable whether, in the final reckoning, he would have carried out his threat. Aware of the precariousness of their position without the British alliance, de Gaulle's colleagues urged moderation on him and de Gaulle was sufficiently astute to share their views. Nonetheless, his threat was useful in that it rendered the British more propitious.

The Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements were a further by-product of the armistice negotiations and these quickly became a troublesome and constantly running sore in the Anglo-Free French relationship in the Levant. The Free French were already in the invidious position of being very much the junior and inferior partners in an unequal alliance; they therefore sought to use the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements to shore up their position against what were regarded as perpetual and unwarranted British encroachments on the French domain. The British, under Spears, used the agreements to justify, on grounds of military necessity, an ever-increasing interference in all aspects of Levant matters. By the summer of 1942, de Gaulle deemed that French prestige had been so eroded that he was obliged to visit the Levant to stop the rot and to reassert French rights, though the manner in which he did this almost led to another rupture with the British.

The security and stability of the Levant States remained a paramount Allied requirement and as the military situation

had deteriorated during 1942, the need to placate Arab opinion had increased. Britain realised full well that her behaviour in the Levant was being carefully monitored as an indicator of her good faith elsewhere in the Middle East and she was obliged to press the French for concessions towards Levant independence, creating further discord in the alliance. The French however, were struggling to justify their claim to speak in the name of France; they were desperate to maintain every ounce of their position and to avoid any criticism from Vichy and from amongst elements within their own support that they were willing to surrender France's historic position in the Levant. They bitterly resented the fact that British involvement in the Levant, especially that of Spears, who had become an ardent champion of the Arab cause, had transformed the political situation there. Instead of a two-way contest between the Levant States and the French, the situation had become a three-cornered struggle involving the British, in the course of which, the British need for security, (which the Arabs quickly learned to exploit), was frequently to take priority over her commitment to protect French rights.

As 1942 drew to a close, the innumerable problems which beset the Anglo-Free French alliance in the Levant remained unsolved. The mandate survived intact, and stood as a focus of discontent for the Levant peoples. All attempts at revision or replacement of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements had been confounded. Most worryingly for the French, efforts to persuade the British of the need to replace Spears had failed, and the British Minister remained at his post, determined that at all costs, the French should honour their promises of independence to the Levant States and that the British guarantee should be upheld.

Yet despite all their grievances against the British, during the eighteen month period of the Anglo-French condominium in the Levant, the Free French had clung on to

their position with remarkable tenacity. The mandate endured, unaltered and intact and de Gaulle, on his most recent visit to the Levant in the summer of 1942, had done his utmost to emphasise and promote its existence, much to the disgust of the British authorities there. The French had managed successfully to resist continual harrying by Spears and Casey, and had made few, if any, concessions towards Syrian and Lebanese independence. As a prelude to Torch, British pressure on the Free French to make concessions had been reduced, as demonstrated by her involvement in the last quarter of 1942, in protracted and virtually worthless negotiations on the Levant. In late December 1942, Catroux, a master in the art of tergiversation, was able to declare that in view of improved Allied fortunes, a slight delay in the announcement of elections would be harmless.¹⁹³ Meanwhile, the Levant people, who had tolerated but never welcomed the Free French presence, still hoped desperately for some signs of progress towards the independence with which they had been wooed. As the months passed, they grew increasingly impatient and disillusioned with the tactics of delay and postponement employed by the Free French.

The growing status of de Gaulle and his movement was another disquieting factor to be taken into account in the Levant equation. De Gaulle and the Free French had come a long way since 1940. The movement was expanding rapidly at grass roots level and was also attracting support among significant members of the pre-war French establishment. The French National Committee had been established on 24 September 1941 and although subject to de Gaulle's autocratic rule, provided the movement with an organisation approximating towards a government. The Free French had furthermore extended their control over a wide range of territories, from Equatorial Africa to the New Hebrides, from St. Pierre et Miquelon to Madagascar. The Allied

¹⁹³ *ibid*, pp 253-254.

invasion of North Africa in November 1942, if fraught politically, had been militarily successful. Darlan, the former Vichy Commander-in-Chief installed as High Commissioner by the Americans, was assassinated on 24 December and replaced by Giraud. This combination of events was to open up new vistas of opportunity for de Gaulle and can have offered little comfort to the Syrians and Lebanese who realised that de Gaulle was hardly likely to be less intransigent as his authority grew. Equally, the prospect of an increasingly powerful and assertive de Gaulle did not bode well for the future course of Anglo-French relations.

As 1943 approached, the roller coaster nature of the desert war seemed at last to be over and the Allies began to sniff the scent of victory, even though at this stage it was realised that it would be some time before they could actually taste its fruits. Rommel's retreat and Operation Torch paved the way for the eventual elimination of the Axis in North Africa, and thereafter for the invasion of Sicily and the assault on Italy. The recession of the Axis threat in the Mediterranean in late 1942 and early 1943 was to add a new dimension to the situation in the Levant. In Britain's estimation, the improved Allied military circumstances finally removed the main French excuse for refusing elections. As de Gaulle and Catroux became more and more involved in the North African imbroglio and the Levant was left in the less capable hands of Helleu, Spears was able to launch a renewed assault to hold the Free French to their promise to hold elections. His success and the events which followed from it were to spell disaster for the French position in the Levant and another critical period in the Anglo-Free French alliance.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRESSURE FOR ELECTIONS

i) "Reminding" The French

On 5 January 1943, Sir Edward Spears forwarded to the Foreign Office a report by Colonel W. F. Stirling¹, which he believed was "a valuable introduction to the study of the current political problems in the Levant".² The report outlined the opinions, hopes, fears and general outlook of the various communities of Northern Syria, but its main interest lay in Stirling's assessment of the French position. The French, he claimed, were determined that

at any cost, the idea of the mandate must be maintained and that everything must be done to buttress the prestige of their aims and their erstwhile country, even at the expense of truth.³

Syria had long been the "milch-cow" of French officials, who were desperate to retain their posts; the "corrupt and vindictive" French administration was prepared to do everything in its power to thwart elections, or at least to ensure the defeat of the Nationalist bloc. "Retribution is written large", Stirling warned. Unless the return of a freely-elected constitutional government could somehow be

¹ Colonel W. F. Stirling, Political Officer, Aleppo, 1942-43. See Safety Last, by Lt. Col. W. F. Stirling, (London, 1953), pp 216-21, for his personal account of his time at Aleppo. Stirling observes that "a political officer on the Spears Mission had to walk, like Agag, very delicately; he had to keep on good terms not only with the Army but with the French Administration and the Syrian people as well". *ibid*, p 217.

² Spears to Foreign Office, 5 January 1943, E508/508/89, FO 371/35207. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to sources in the Public Record Office, Kew.

³ Report by Colonel W. F. Stirling, Political Officer, Aleppo, 23 December 1942, E508/508/89, FO 371/35207.

secured, he predicted that, upon British withdrawal, there would be "an immediate revolt against the mandatory administration and that much French blood [would] be shed".⁴ For the long term, Stirling advocated that it was

absolutely necessary, for their sake, for our sake and for the sake of peace, that the French should leave this country on the conclusion of the war, and give a declaration now that such is their intention. If they do not -- there will be a revolt against them which may possibly, and even probably, be helped by the Iraqi army. If this should happen, we could not let the French down and we should find ourselves in the unhappy position of fighting the Arabs to maintain the French -- contrary to all democratic principles. It is for our statesmen to find a means of inducing the French to be sensible in this matter.⁵

Indeed, that was exactly what British statesmen believed they had been attempting to do, for some considerable time. 1942 had come and gone, but despite continual British urgings, the French had procrastinated and done nothing to offer the Syrians and Lebanese concrete proof of their goodwill towards them and of their intention to implement their promises of independence. It seemed that the Levant States were no nearer independence than at the time of Catroux's initial proclamations in 1941. The first months of 1943 therefore, saw increased British pressure on the French, both in London and in the Middle East, to announce the long-promised, and by now symbolic, elections. Egged on by Spears, the Eastern Department instructed Charles Peake⁶ in early January, to "remind" the French National Committee of its previous undertakings to announce, before the end of

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Charles Peake: British Representative to the French National Committee, February 1942 - September 1943.

1942, elections for the spring of 1943.⁷ He was to express the hope that the Committee might see its way, in Catroux's absence⁸, to authorise Helleu⁹ to take the necessary steps. On 6 January, Peake duly passed an aide-mémoire to Pleven¹⁰, who fully agreed with the British recommendations, but explained that the Committee wanted Catroux, because of his standing in the Levant, to be personally associated with any election announcement.¹¹

⁷ On 27 November 1942, after considerable British pressure had been applied, the French had agreed in principle to the holding of elections early in 1943, and had informed the Foreign Office accordingly. (See above).

⁸ Catroux left Beirut on 25 December 1942, for a visit to the United States.

⁹ Jean Helleu: Former Vichy Ambassador at Ankara; rallied to de Gaulle in August 1942; he became Acting Délégué Général in the Levant during Catroux's absence. See Weekly Political Summary, No 39, 30 December 1942, E27/27/89, FO 371/35174. Woodward observes that Eden agreed with the view of one of his staff "that M. Helleu, as an Ambassador of France, and a man of weight, might lead the General to better behaviour in international matters". Sir Llewellyn Woodward, British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, Vol IV, (London, 1975), p 240.

¹⁰ René Pleven: had rallied early to de Gaulle; replaced Dejean as the French Committee's representative on Foreign Affairs in October 1942 and was himself replaced by René Massigli in February 1943. He became Commissioner for Colonies.

¹¹ Text of aide-mémoire to the French and Note by H. A. Caccia, 8 January 1943, E56/27/89, FO 371/35174. De Gaulle had long felt that Catroux was one of the few men capable of dealing with the Levant. When himself posted to the General Staff of the Army of the Levant at the end of 1929, he had written despondently that France had "scarcely penetrated beneath the surface" of the Levant States, and commented further: "There is one man, and I believe only one, who understands Syria well and knows what to do here: it is Colonel Catroux". From L. Nachin, Charles de Gaulle. Général de France, (Paris, 1944), p 59, cited in A. Crawley, de Gaulle, (London, 1969), p 65. Subsequently, de Gaulle had tempered his opinion of Catroux slightly: he had been infuriated by Catroux's poor performance during the armistice negotiations and his willingness to accept whatever treatment the British saw fit to mete out; de Gaulle's own visit to the Levant in August 1942, had been

In view of their definite verbal and written commitments to announce elections, Sir Maurice Peterson¹² thought it "quite absurd" that the French should now seek to delay.¹³ It seemed all too possible that once again, they were beginning to hedge: throughout 1942, they had claimed, with good reason, that elections could not possibly be held whilst the Axis armies bore down on Cairo, yet according to Spears, Catroux had recently claimed that the urgency for elections had decreased now that the Axis menace was reduced.¹⁴ The Foreign Office considered that the French procrastination created an intolerable situation, which, given the British guarantee of the French promise of independence, might have serious consequences for Britain's own position in the Middle East.

To bolster the aide-mémoire and to emphasise increasing British displeasure, Peterson saw Catroux on 12 January, and reproached him for the French failure to announce elections. Unperturbed, Catroux defended himself, alleging that his

occasioned largely by Catroux's failure to adequately stand up for French rights against the ever-increasing encroachments of Spears.

¹² Sir Maurice Peterson: former ambassador, temporarily employed in the Foreign Office as head of the Eastern Department.

¹³ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 9 January 1943, E273/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁴ Rommel's renewed offensive in North Africa during summer 1942, had been effectively stemmed by the battles of Alam el Halfa (30 August-1 September) and by the second battle at El Alamein (23 October). By early November, Axis forces were in retreat through Egypt and Libya. On 8 November, Operation Torch, the Anglo-American offensive in North West Africa had been launched, with landings at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers. By 9 November, the Vichy Commander Darlan had ordered a cease-fire and the military situation was quickly settled; the political situation however, remained confused. (See below).

last stay in the Levant had been interrupted by a series of Moslem holidays. He counter-attacked by accusing Spears of "letting the electoral cat out of the bag", as a result of which he had been obliged to expend considerable time and energy trying to restore calm, as "everybody, from the President down, had come rushing to [him] in alarm for their positions". He had been adamant that Spears, contrary to all his undertakings, had given precise information about French intentions regarding the Levant elections to Levant politicians.¹⁵ Catroux eventually departed, promising "once more, that elections [would] be announced within a few days of his return".¹⁶

In the Levant meanwhile, Spears had managed to persuade Helleu of the need to pester the Committee for authority to set the electoral ball rolling. He chided the Eastern Department for its inaction in the matter of pressuring the Committee to announce elections, since it was "inadmissible that a question of such vital importance to the Levant States should be allowed to hang fire merely through Catroux's fortuitous absence". He warned of the "ferment of intrigue" caused by the uncertainty surrounding the election issue, and of the real danger that the Syrians might upstage the French by announcing elections themselves.¹⁷

Although the Foreign Office replied that both the Committee and Catroux had been tackled on the matter¹⁸, Spears was not satisfied. By 20 January, there was still no

¹⁵ During a conversation between Catroux and Spears on 21 December 1942, it had been agreed that elections would be held in the first fortnight of March.

¹⁶ Note by Sir M. Peterson, 12 January 1943, E273/27/89, FO 371/35174.

¹⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 9 January 1943, E220/27/89, FO 371/35174.

¹⁸ Foreign Office to Spears, 13 January 1943, E220/27/89, FO 371/35174.

sign of Catroux, nor any definite information as to his intentions, and Helleu remained without any constructive instructions. The elections would require considerable preparation and Spears felt that valuable time was being lost. Furthermore, internal developments in Syria were giving cause for concern: the President, Sheikh Taj al Din, died on 17 January and the new Prime Minister, Jamil Ulshi¹⁹, was proving to be even more subservient to the French than his predecessor had been and was reportedly less keen on the idea of early elections.²⁰ Spears urged once again that the Committee be asked to fix a date or to authorise Helleu to do so.²¹ Fortunately, on 22 January, Helleu finally received instructions to issue a preliminary communiqué, which he published two days later, foreshadowing a return to constitutional régimes in Syria and the Lebanon upon the arrival of Catroux.²²

ii) Keeping The Ball Rolling

Though the year began so promisingly with some slight progress in the Levant on the election front, by late January, the apparent British success began to look nothing more than illusory. Catroux failed to materialise and Spears worried that unless he did so soon, to provide momentum, the good effect of the initial French communiqué might be "worse than stultified". The Syrian government was beginning to show signs of getting out of hand and Helleu had already

¹⁹ Jamil Ulshi had become Prime Minister on 10 January 1943.

²⁰ Weekly Political Summary, No 42, 20 January 1943, E423/27/89, FO 371/35174.

²¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 January 1943, E406/27/89, FO 371/35174.

²² Spears to Foreign Office, 22 January 1943, E511/27/89, FO 371/35174.

been confronted by a threat from the Lebanese government to restore the constitution on its own initiative; though Helleu had reacted strongly, the government had at first been inclined to ignore his veto, but, Spears alleged, "were dissuaded by his Majesty's Legation from a course of action which would have brought about a serious conflict with the French".²³ Although both governments seemed eventually to have accepted the French action, if with bad grace, Spears warned that unless it was quickly followed up, neither government "could be restrained much longer from attempting to steal the French thunder".²⁴

The Foreign Office promised to continue its efforts to keep the Committee "up to the mark". Catroux was due to leave London on 4 February and it was to be hoped that there would be no more lengthy delays.²⁵ Such hopes were soon dashed however, for Catroux was much in demand. Though he had long been billed to make the electoral announcement in the Levant, he was also the prime candidate to head de Gaulle's delegation to Giraud in North Africa, a project on which he himself was keen and thought vitally important, and for which, it was generally agreed, he was eminently suitable.²⁶ Despite the obvious and urgent need for Catroux in the Levant, Peterson observed to Strang²⁷ at an inter-

²³ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 January 1943, E511/27/89; Weekly Political Summary, No 43, 27 January 1943, E615/27/89; both in FO 371/35174.

²⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 January 1943, E563/27/89, FO 371/35174.

²⁵ Foreign Office to Spears, 25 January 1943, E511/27/89; Foreign Office to Casey, 31 January 1943, E562/27/89; both in FO 371/35174.

²⁶ Report by Peake of conversation with Catroux, 27 January 1943, Z1388/1388/G17, FO 371/36067. See also John Harvey (Ed), The War Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1939-45, (London, 1978), Entry for 29 January 1943, p 215.

²⁷ Sir William Strang: Assistant Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office since September 1939.

departmental meeting, that the worst situation was the one which presently obtained, "namely a situation of doubt whether Catroux is going to return to Syria at all". Peterson had even reluctantly admitted that North Africa was "more important than Syria and that if General Catroux is required for Algiers, the claims of Syria must not be pressed".²⁸ However frustrating such a concession might have been for Peterson, the Free French lack of adequately experienced and high-ranking personnel was an all too frequent problem; in this case, as in many others, the Eastern Department was forced to take a back seat in the interests of a higher good. The apparent readiness with which the Department generally submitted however, greatly irritated Spears, especially when the best interests of the Levant States suffered as a consequence. Equally, Spears's more insular and blinkered approach and his refusal to view relations with the French outside the narrow confines of the Levant were a constant source of annoyance in London.

Surely enough, Catroux subsequently revealed to Peterson that he had been obliged to delay his return to the Levant by over a fortnight and even then, he would only be able to manage the briefest of visits. In future, he expected to commute between the Levant and Algiers, leaving Helleu as acting Délégué and resigning his post only when the elections were over.²⁹ More promisingly, he assured Peterson that he had no intention of estranging the nationalists,

²⁸ Minute by Sir W. Strang, 27 January 1943, Z1388/1388/G17, FO 371/36067. Strang did note that Peterson had added the proviso that if Catroux could possibly return to Syria for a short while before going to Algiers, this would be "all to the good".

²⁹ Spears had suspected that Catroux intended "to run Syria as well as his job in North Africa". He was horrified by the prospect, which would mean the "complete paralysis of the administration" in the Levant. Diary Entry for 12 February 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, Middle East Centre, St. Anthony's College, Oxford. (Hereafter denoted Spears Papers, MEC).

though he was not prepared to simply turn the elections over to them.³⁰ Reassurances such as this were most welcome to Spears who, having secured what seemed like a firm and irrevocable commitment from the French to hold elections, was now determined to ensure that they did not stall or waver in any way.

Spears was equally determined that the elections held should be as fair as possible. He had already reported to the Foreign Office the conviction of most politically minded people that the French would rig the elections to obtain a submissive Chamber.³¹ Nationalist elements especially feared that they had no hope of a fair deal and were threatening to boycott the elections. These fears seemed only too well-founded, Spears believed, for several French representatives had been conducting almost open campaigns to intimidate nationalist sympathisers or people known to have pro-British sympathies. Though already Spears had little confidence in Helleu's abilities, he had nonetheless protested to him about this behaviour. He also advised the Foreign Office to broach the matter, however delicate it seemed, with the French Committee, as he believed that the French should be left in no doubt as to the paramount importance Britain attached not only to the holding of elections but also to their freedom and impartiality.³²

To drive his point home, Spears forwarded a report to the Foreign Office by Political Officer Lt. Col. G. W. Furlonge entitled "French Electoral Manoeuvres". In this

³⁰ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 2 February 1943, E631/27/89, FO 371/35174.

³¹ In conversation with Peterson in early December 1942, Catroux had mentioned the need for the elections to be strictly controlled, in order "that pro-Axis elements might not be returned to power". Woodward, *op cit*, p 252.

³² Spears to Foreign Office, 26 January 1943, E631/27/89, FO 371/35174.

Furlonge stated that conversation throughout the Lebanon already revolved around the steps the French were taking to influence the elections in their favour. He alleged that a committee had been formed by staff at the Délégation Générale, which was busily compiling a list of "French" candidates, i.e. those who would be amenable to French influence and to whom the Délégation Générale would lend its support. Certain French officials, most notably Pruneaud, Dementque and David³³, were already far advanced in their campaigns of intimidation and Furlonge warned that unless something was done soon to suppress such activities, "the population would form the impression that nothing has changed since the Mandatory régime" and that Lebanese independence was nothing more than "a label cloaking the virtue of French domination".³⁴

iii) The Advent Of Catroux

Spears was not alone in his championship of Levant independence. Richard Casey, Minister of State Resident in the Middle East, had expressed his continued concern about the Levant on a visit to Washington in early January, and had declared his intention of tackling the problems there "hammer and tongs" upon his return.³⁵ Casey's first real opportunity to get to grips with Levant matters presented itself on 17 February when Catroux eventually passed through

³³ Pruneaud: Délégué Adjoint, South Lebanon; Dementque: Délégué Adjoint, Tripoli; David: Délégué Adjoint, Beyrouth.

³⁴ "French Electoral Manoeuvres" by Lt. Col. G. W. Furlonge, despatched to Foreign Office by Spears, 16 February 1943, E1273/27/89, FO 371/35175.

³⁵ Memorandum of conversation by F. D. Kohler, Division of Near Eastern Affairs, 8 January 1943, Foreign Relations of the United States, (hereafter FRUS), 1943, Vol. IV, pp 953-955.

Cairo en route for Beirut.³⁶ The Minister of State strongly recommended to Catroux that as soon as constitutional régimes were re-established in the Levant, the incumbent governments should be permitted to announce elections.

Catroux shied away from such a frontal assault. He insisted that he was out of touch with recent developments in the Levant and required time for exploratory consultations before taking any decisions. He did however, mention his concern that whatever they did and however they behaved, the French would be accused of rigging the elections. When Casey brought up the possibility of the French handing over the Intérêts Communs³⁷ to the Levant governments, Catroux declared that he considered the latter incapable of administering such funds without expert guidance. Despite Casey's protestations, Catroux blithely announced that anyway he intended to stall in surrendering the Intérêts Communs and to use them as a bargaining counter with which to induce the States to enter into a treaty with France. By way of conclusion, Casey expressed the hope that Catroux would keep Spears fully informed and would consult with him on all matters of common concern, which Catroux consented to do. Before departure however, Catroux added the pointed rejoinder,

³⁶ Such was the demand for Catroux that only two weeks had elapsed since his arrival in the Middle East, before Macmillan, Minister Resident at Allied Headquarters, Algiers, had telegraphed that his presence in Algiers had become an "urgent necessity"; he had requested that pressure should be put on Catroux to advance the date of his departure. Eden minuted "We should do this if we can". Macmillan to Foreign Office, 2 March 1943; undated minute by Eden; both in Z2854/30/G69, FO 371/36172.

³⁷ The Intérêts Communs were revenue from indirect taxes, such as from customs, the tobacco monopoly, maritime trade etc., collected and administered by the French, and which the Levant States had long sought to control themselves.

that while he had the fullest confidence in the Prime Minister's [Churchill's] disclaimer of any political ambitions in Syria, he hoped that all British authorities concerned were inspired by the same interpretation of [Britain's] pledges to the Free French.³⁸

Apart from this last remark, which seemed "both foolish and unnecessary", the Foreign Office was not dissatisfied with Catroux's performance, though his tendency "to promise much and do little" was well known from bitter experience.³⁹ Spears however, was outraged by the report of the interview. Catroux's comment about rigging he found laughable "when French preparations for rigging the elections are already far advanced, especially in Lebanon ... and this is widely known".⁴⁰ Spears explained that it had been decided that provisional or interim governments would oversee the elections, but whether these governments were appointed by the French or by the existing Presidents, who were anyway French nominees, accusations of rigging would be levelled at the French. An interim government would be trusted only if it had been jointly nominated by both France and Britain, though Spears realised that this would be most distasteful to the French. Catroux's cynical admission that he was withholding the Intérêts Communs as a bargaining counter was seen by Spears as "sheer blackmail". It was however, Catroux's final remark which incensed him most of all: taken in context, he believed it was

the clearest possible hint that, in his opinion, I and possibly also some of my colleagues, are

³⁸ Casey to Foreign Office, 18 February 1943, E1048/27/89, FO 371/35175.

³⁹ Minute by H. M. Eyres, (Official in Eastern Department), 21 February 1943, E1048/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁴⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 February 1943, E1070/27/89, FO 371/35175.

inspired by "British political ambitions in Syria", in defiance of the Prime Minister's policy...⁴¹

Such an innuendo was "totally unwarrantable", Spears claimed. De Gaulle and Catroux, he asserted, had never accepted and always resented Britain's determination to implement independence in the Levant and "one of their methods of thwarting anyone ... who attempts to forward this policy has been to insinuate that what is in fact involved, is an attack on French rights".⁴²

Yet despite this worrying outburst, when Spears and Catroux met on 20 February, the interview was "very friendly throughout". Catroux spoke at length of the North African situation and expressed pessimism concerning the ultimate relationship between Général Giraud and Général de Gaulle. Spears thought it clear that Catroux had "largely lost interest in the affairs of these countries and is thinking in the main of North Africa and of his schemes there". When the conversation turned to elections, Catroux said that he "was fed up with the whole question and wanted it out of the way", which Spears pointed out gleefully, "should greatly facilitate matters".⁴³ Though all this seemed "very satisfactory", the Foreign Office remained sceptical: an official predicted "that this second (or third) honeymoon will also end in divorce".⁴⁴

⁴¹ *ibid.* Spears subsequently complained to Casey about the remark, who replied: "You can rest assured that I did not let General Catroux's words pass". Spears to Casey, 20 February 1943 and Casey to Spears, 25 February 1943; both in FO 921/67.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 February 1943, E1082/27/89, FO 371/35175. A full report of this meeting, rather than the condensed version which Spears telegraphed to London, can be found in FO 226/243.

⁴⁴ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 22 February 1943, E1082/27/89, FO 371/35175.

iv) The "Second (Or Third) Honeymoon" Continues

For a short while, however, Levant affairs proceeded more smoothly than had been expected and confounded Foreign Office predictions. From their meeting on 20 February, Spears had guessed that Catroux was eager to hurry to Algiers to play mediator between de Gaulle and Giraud, and preferred not to waste too much time in the Levant. He anticipated correctly that Catroux might therefore prove more co-operative than hitherto. Contrary to Foreign Office expectations and despite the long history of friction between the two men, Spears' telegrams indicated some slight progress in the Levant. In conversation with Catroux on 8 March about the impending re-establishment of constitutional régimes in the Levant, Spears reported that he had voiced grave doubts about a particular aspect of the Lebanese constitutional system whereby one third of the Chamber of Deputies were Presidential nominees; to his great surprise, Catroux had responded favourably, mentioning that he might cancel the relevant clause in the constitution relating to this procedure. Spears seized upon this positive response and encouraged Catroux to act in this "progressive" manner.⁴⁵

Regarding Syria, Catroux confessed that he was toying with the idea of lending support to nationalist candidates in the elections, provided that they undertook to conclude an agreement with the French Committee along the lines of the unratified 1936 treaty.⁴⁶ Spears forewarned Catroux that although the Syrian nationalists might be contemplating such a deal, it was probably also their intention, once in power,

⁴⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 March 1943, E1383/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁴⁶ For more details about the deal Catroux proposed, see Philip S. Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-45, (London, 1987), p 600.

to double-cross the Committee and to refuse to carry out their side of the bargain, either by pleading that the force of public opinion prevented them from concluding any agreement with the French or by alleging that the Committee itself, not being recognised as the government of France, had no power to conclude any such agreement. Catroux was apparently "very much shaken" by these revelations and expressed much gratitude. Spears went on to paint "a picture of great difficulties on all sides" for any such pre-election deal.⁴⁷

The French were indeed much preoccupied with how best to extract a treaty from the Levant States in return for their independence. Catroux had already outlined his strategy to de Gaulle: in the Lebanon, he proposed to exploit traditional Christian feeling for France to secure an agreement, and in Syria, to play upon traditional Moslem fears of the threat posed by Turkey and by Zionism.⁴⁸ Catroux professed to be keen to learn what Britain's attitude would be to a treaty modelled on the Anglo-Iraqi treaty and concluded with freely-elected Syrian and Lebanese governments. Spears, however, replied that he would have to seek Foreign Office guidance before replying.

When Spears passed on the query to the Foreign Office, he pointed out that as Britain had already recognised the

⁴⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 March 1943, E1384/27/89, FO 371/35175. Spears emphasised to Catroux that the Syrian people would agitate against any agreement concluded on the basis of a pre-electoral deal; similarly, other Arab states would be up in arms about such a trick. Furthermore, British and American opinion would be strongly opposed to such an arrangement which, it would be claimed, had been obtained under duress. He tried to impress upon him that the Committee would obtain little support at the Peace Conference for their action and still less in a post-war France where Leftist elements prevailed.

⁴⁸ See Général Georges Catroux, Dans La Bataille de Méditerranée: Egypte - Levant - Afrique du Nord, 1940-44, (Paris, 1949), pp 335-337.

French right to conclude a treaty when it had endorsed Catroux's proclamation of independence, it would be difficult for her to object to a treaty based on her own with Iraq. He also stressed that any treaty which might be concluded ought not to preclude Syrian and Lebanese participation in any future Arab Federation.⁴⁹ That aside, in a second telegram on the same subject, Spears hastened to emphasise to the Department that the majority of the Levant population totally opposed the idea of any form of treaty with the French. They believed that victory in the war would bring complete emancipation and that it would therefore be foolish to encourage the French in any way. Harking back to Catroux's proposed "deal", Spears alleged that his own concern was to prevent a treaty which resulted from any "dubious bargain" and he urged the Foreign Office to advise the French in that sense.⁵⁰

The Foreign Office immediately struck a cautious note, as reflected in a minute by Peterson:

We do not want to go too fast with post-war questions. Nor, as I suspect, has General Catroux any intention of doing so, whatever Sir E. Spears may think to the contrary.⁵¹

The reply to Spears confirmed that no treaty should be negotiated before the formation of constitutional governments, but also stated that it seemed equally clear that "it would be a mistake to attempt to negotiate the treaty before the end of the war". Subject to that, the Foreign Office saw "every advantage in the Fighting French

⁴⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 March 1943, E1384/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁵⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 9 March 1943, E1407/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁵¹ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 11 March 1943, E1383/27/89, FO 371/35175.

being brought to think along the lines of a treaty based on our Treaty with Iraq".⁵²

Meanwhile, as Catroux's consultations with various local politicians continued, the Foreign Office grew uneasy. Time passed by and it was thought "more and more probable that Catroux will leave for Algiers without taking any decision about elections".⁵³ Spears and General Holmes⁵⁴ fretted especially about Catroux's avowed intention of retaining his post as Délégué in the Levant whilst conducting negotiations in North Africa: they warned him that during his absences, no decisions would be taken, and French administration in the Levant would be effectively paralysed. Such a system would be "unworkable" and would inevitably impose a real strain on Anglo-French relations. Catroux merely dismissed such fears and gave emphatic assurances that Helleu would be instructed to take decisions except on important matters of principle, when he would obviously refer to Algiers. Aware of Helleu's weakness, Spears remained sceptical.⁵⁵

In fact, Catroux himself was being hampered in his task of re-establishing constitutional régimes in Syria and the Lebanon. In the Lebanon, President Naccache⁵⁶ bitterly resented and protested against what he described as

⁵² Foreign Office to Spears, 13 March 1943, E1384/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁵³ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 13 March 1943, E1432/27/89, FO 371/35176.

⁵⁴ General W. G. Holmes: General Officer Commanding, 9th Army.

⁵⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 February 1943, E1082/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 22 February 1943, E1114/27/89; both in FO 371/35175; Spears to Foreign Office, 12 March 1943, E1485/27/89, FO 371/35176.

⁵⁶ Alfred Naccache: President of the Lebanon. Naccache had served throughout the war in various Lebanese administrations, both under the Vichy French and the Free French.

Catroux's "interference" in the political life of the country, and particularly his continual references to France's mandatory authority. He sought to enlist the assistance of both Spears and Wadsworth⁵⁷ in a variety of ploys to maintain himself in power. Spears continued to worry that a pre-election deal with the nationalists "was still very much in the wind". He informed the Foreign Office that he had written to Catroux, reaffirming his view that treaty negotiations "if conducted at all, should be conducted *ab initio* with a Government deriving its authority from a freely elected Parliament".⁵⁸

Finally however, on 18 March Catroux broadcast three decrees, announcing the re-establishment of the 1926 Lebanese constitution, elections to be held within three months and the appointment of Dr. Ayoub Tabet⁵⁹ as head of state in an interim government. Spears was delighted: the only "fly in the ointment" was the refusal of Naccache to resign; otherwise, Spears felt that Catroux had been "extremely responsive" to his suggestions, as the decrees contained all the points which he had considered essential if Lebanese independence was to be real. Moreover, Catroux had expressed views which Spears felt he could "wholeheartedly support".⁶⁰ In fact, the British Minister

⁵⁷ George Wadsworth: United States Diplomatic Agent and Consul General, Beirut, since 2 October 1942.

⁵⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 18 March 1943, E1585/27/89; Weekly Political Summary, No 50, 17 March 1943; both in FO 371/35176.

⁵⁹ Dr. Ayoub Tabet: described by Spears as "a Protestant of considerable integrity and independent mind". Spears to Foreign Office, 9 March 1943, E1431/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁶⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 19 March 1943, E1602/27/89, FO 371/35176.

broadcast a message that evening, expressing his full approval of Catroux's action.⁶¹

The Foreign Office remained a little perturbed that Catroux had not announced similar proposals for Syria, as simultaneous announcements had been considered more appropriate. Catroux did travel to Damascus on 19 March, but on the following day, serious rioting broke out and lasted four days.⁶² He informed Spears that he was shortly obliged to return to Algiers; he confessed that he had been unable to make any progress regarding the restoration of the Syrian constitution, though he had completely abandoned the idea of a pre-election deal. By 23 March however, Spears heard that Catroux had succeeded in setting up a provisional government under Ayoubi⁶³, similar to that already established in the Lebanon, and would issue formal decrees on 25 March.⁶⁴ The riots, though not of an overtly political nature, had apparently greatly reduced the willingness of any politician, of whatever party, to assume power. Spears concluded that Catroux had done "the best he could in very difficult circumstances".⁶⁵ Having issued the decrees, Catroux departed for Algiers on 25 March, expressing the

⁶¹ Wadsworth to State Department, 19 March 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol. IV, p 963.

⁶² The riots were due mainly to reductions and rumours of further reductions in the quantity and quality of the bread ration; they claimed nine lives while a good many more were injured.

⁶³ Ata bey Ayoubi: a veteran politician and sympathiser of the nationalist cause. Catroux had hoped to appoint Shukri Quwatli or Hashim Atassi but neither would accept his offer.

⁶⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 23 March 1943, E1717/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 24 March 1943, E1730/27/89; both in FO 371/35176.

⁶⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 March 1943, E1730/27/89, FO 371/35176.

hope that he would return in three weeks to continue his mission.⁶⁶

Catroux's action in installing interim governments to oversee elections in the Levant had not met immediately with favourable reactions in all quarters. Wadsworth thought it "unnecessarily arbitrary" and confessed to his government that he was frankly "perplexed" as to how he should respond. Hull⁶⁷ admitted that Catroux's procedure did seem a little "high-handed"; he noted, however, that while "the resulting change in each State appears to be essentially only a replacement of one French-appointed régime for another", at least the new governments were "specifically charged" with the responsibility of holding elections".⁶⁸ According to Spears, it was well known "from reliable secret sources, that many influential Fighting French officials in Beirut were horrified at what they regarded as a dangerously liberal solution...".⁶⁹ He alleged that de Gaulle had quickly tried to offset this impression by sending Tabet a message, the tone of which was "that of an absentee landlord addressing the bailiff of his estates". De Gaulle had referred ominously to strengthening "le lien séculaire" between France and the Lebanon, which, Spears thought, could only be interpreted "as yet another warning that the French intend to remain the masters of this house which they have never owned".⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 25 March 1943, E1792/27/89, FO 371/35176.

⁶⁷ Cordell Hull: US Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1933-44.

⁶⁸ Wadsworth to Hull, 23 March 1943, and Hull to Wadsworth, 29 March 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 963-66.

⁶⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 27 March 1943, E1965/27/89, FO 371/35176.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

Though the British Minister had himself enthusiastically welcomed Catroux's measures, he warned that there would be considerable local scepticism about elections as the population would find it impossible to believe that these elections would differ in any way from the "unscrupulously conducted contests" of previous years.⁷¹ In fact, Spears took it almost for granted that there would be a certain amount of French interference in the electoral process; what he had not bargained for however, was the tenacity and political ambition of the interim governments. By late April, it had become evident that Dr. Tabet particularly was stalling over elections, and moreover, was indulging in a variety of dubious manoeuvres to reinforce his own electoral chances; when cautioned that his electioneering activities were causing concern, he begged for a few more months' grace in order to execute his plans for fiscal reform and argued that he saw no urgency in fixing a date for Lebanese elections when no firm date had yet been set in Syria. By 12 May, Spears was forced to report that the reluctance of the provisional governments to take any decisive step towards implementing elections was giving rise to misgivings that they would simply never occur.⁷²

Helleu claimed to agree with Spears that early elections were essential, but in Catroux's absence, Spears doubted that he had sufficient weight to influence matters successfully. Spears also suspected that Helleu was being double-crossed by his own advisers.⁷³ He managed however, to

⁷¹ Weekly Political Summary, No 53, 7 April 1943, E2046/27/89, FO 371/35176.

⁷² Weekly Political Summaries, No 55, 21 April 1943, E2347/27/89; No 56, 28 April 1943, E2484/27/89; No 57, 5 May 1943, E2642/27/89; No 58, 12 May 1943, E2798/27/89; all in FO 371/35177.

⁷³ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 May 1943, E2976/27/89, FO 371/35177. Spears had told Wadsworth that he believed Helleu genuinely wanted free elections, but also mentioned the likelihood that his subordinates were intriguing against

persuade Helleu to seek Catroux's permission to force the interim governments to hold elections by July; he requested that the Foreign Office make similar representations to Catroux⁷⁴, as he believed it was imperative to break the vicious circle of procrastination which now held sway.⁷⁵ When approached, Catroux fully concurred. He said that the Lebanese had been urging further delay, but that he saw no reason for it and assured Sir Maurice Peterson that he would instruct Helleu to arrange for simultaneous elections in both States early in July.⁷⁶

The British authorities continued to urge the local governments to set a date, yet the prolonged uncertainty persisted and the impression was increasingly gained that the French authorities themselves were behind the procrastination by Tabet and Ayoubi. It was believed that they were using the time thus gained to rally pro-French candidates.⁷⁷ Evidence was also accumulating that the French were pursuing a definite policy of repression and intimidation to influence the electorate, though the Délégation Générale had been warned that this "had not passed unnoticed", and that if it continued, it would be

him. Wadsworth to Hull, 24 May 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 971-72.

⁷⁴ Catroux left Algiers on 21 May for consultations with de Gaulle in London about the situation in North Africa. See H. Macmillan, War Diaries. Politics and War in the Mediterranean, 1943-1945, (London, 1984) Entry for 19 May 1943, p 86.

⁷⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 May 1943, E2976/27/89, FO 371/35177.

⁷⁶ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 25 May 1943, E2976/27/89, FO 371/35177.

⁷⁷ Wadsworth to Hull, 24 May 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 971-72.

"effectively countered".⁷⁸ Although he had no clear proof, Spears reported that speculation was rife that the French were purposely deferring elections until a unified movement emerged in North Africa, for they would then be better placed to negotiate a treaty.⁷⁹

Considerable progress was finally made on the election front when the Syrian government decreed that primary and secondary elections would be held on 10 and 26 July.⁸⁰ As a result of the Syrian initiative, Tabet grudgingly agreed to announce on 25 June that elections would be held in the Lebanon around 10 July. The Foreign Office found this a little too good to be true and Eyres cautioned against over-optimism; by about 1 July, he predicted, "we shall probably receive a telegram from Sir E. Spears saying that the holding of elections must at all costs be delayed, otherwise chaos etc., will ensue".⁸¹

v) Criticising The Establishment

Despite the apparently successful teamwork over elections to bring the Levant States one step closer to independence, various other Levant matters had combined to reveal considerable dissension not only between Spears and

⁷⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 2 June 1943, E3260/27/89, FO 371/35177.

⁷⁹ Weekly Political Summary, No 58, 12 May 1943, E2798/27/89, FO 371/35177.

⁸⁰ Weekly Political Summary, No 64, 23 June 1943, E3691/27/89, FO 371/35177. Wadsworth reported to the State Department that during a visit to Damascus, he had gathered the clear impression that, "with achievement of French unity in North Africa, local French pressure to postpone Syrian elections has been lifted". Wadsworth to Hull, 7 June 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 974.

⁸¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 4 June 1943; Minute by H. M. Eyres, 6 June 1943; both in E3258/27/89, FO 371/35177.

the French but also between Spears and the Foreign Office. Spears had long been campaigning vigorously to persuade the Free French to allow the recruitment of five hundred Assyrians for the Royal Air Force in Iraq. In the process of negotiations, a letter he wrote upset the French, for it was interpreted as a denial of the continued validity of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements, under which they claimed the right to oversee the recruitment. On 22 January they had presented the Foreign Office with an aide-mémoire which consisted in the main of a complaint about Spears. It attributed to him the leakage of election details and expressed surprise at his inference regarding the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements.⁸²

When the Foreign Office sought an explanation, Spears took great exception. He claimed that Catroux had always argued that the question of recruitment lay within his competence by virtue of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements and Helleu had religiously followed this line. Spears claimed that he had informed the French that the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements had been concluded before the French proclamations of Syrian and Lebanese independence; his motive for doing this was certainly not to deny the continued validity of the agreements. He had no desire to become involved in the intricacies of the agreements over a purely practical issue. Instead, he had merely wanted to highlight the fact that the agreements did not specifically cover recruitment and moreover, to suggest that the French

⁸² Aide-mémoire from the French National Committee, 22 January 1943, E543/27/89; Minute by H. A. Caccia, (Official in Eastern Department), 28 January 1943, E676/27/89; both in FO 371/35174. The British in the Middle East had in fact been pressing for the negotiation of a new agreement with the French to regulate and clarify their relations and respective responsibilities. Negotiations had taken place in the latter months of 1942 for an "interpretative agreement" to define more satisfactorily and accurately the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements, but these had broken down. (See above)

might now wish to pay more heed to the wishes of the Levant governments in the matter.⁸³

Magnifying Spears's irritation in this matter was the fact that the French had still not agreed to the additional recruitment of some ten thousand Syrians and Lebanese for the British Army, for what he believed was the "inadmissible" motive that they did not want large numbers of Levant nationals to receive British military training and be subject to British influence. "There is thus a conflict", Spears alleged, "between [the] exigencies of [the] war effort and French ulterior political aims so that we cannot afford to interpret our agreements generously rather than strictly".⁸⁴ In a further telegram, Spears developed the point that recognition of Levant independence had given the States "a clearer right to be consulted as to the disposal of their own nationals".⁸⁵ A third telegram concentrated on what Spears believed to be the real crux of the matter: a system, or lack of one, which completely stultified Britain's entire policy and which enabled the French "to fog the issue whenever they like by appealing over my head on the basis of misleading complaints". None of his counterparts, Spears complained, had to contend with such a system which could only cause "confusion, inefficiency and incidentally, a heavy increase in telegraph bills".⁸⁶

Spears was evidently resentful of the Foreign Office request for an explanation of his action and unwilling to let the matter rest. Loath perhaps to increase the telegraph

⁸³ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 January 1943, No 69, FO 226/243.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 January 1943, No 70, FO 226/243.

⁸⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 January 1943, No 71, FO 226/243.

bill further, he seized on the opportunity presented by Churchill's visit to Cairo⁸⁷, to batter Sir Alexander Cadogan⁸⁸ and the Prime Minister himself with personal representations and lengthy notes about the difficulties of his position. Spears desperately wanted to secure Foreign Office compliance that all Levant matters should be settled locally and not referred to London.⁸⁹ In conversation, Cadogan pointed out that the French could hardly be prevented from raising matters in London if they wished, though he promised to watch out for misuse of this channel. Spears, whose opinion of Cadogan was anyway not very high⁹⁰, adjudged the meeting "inconclusive".⁹¹

Hoping for more positive results, Spears took a letter to Cairo to be passed to Eden. This again bemoaned the fact that the difficulties of his task were intensified by constant Free French intervention in London. It went on to explain that the recent French complaint about his letter

⁸⁷ Churchill arrived in Cairo from the Casablanca conference (see below) on 26 January and stayed four days, before departing for talks with the Turks. He returned via Cairo on 1 February and left for Britain on 3 February, stopping off in North Africa.

⁸⁸ Sir Alexander Cadogan: Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, since January 1938. He had flown out to Cairo to join Churchill once the War Cabinet had succumbed to the Prime Minister's plans to visit Turkey.

⁸⁹ There was a general feeling amongst British officials in the Middle East that "the Foreign Office are a great deal softer with the Free French than we are here and will thus tend to give things away over our heads in so far as they will settle anything at all". Lascelles to Stirling, 13 January 1943, FO 226/243.

⁹⁰ In his memoirs Spears recorded that on a previous meeting on 23 August 1942 with Cadogan, he had been "astonished" to find how little knowledge or interest he had in the Middle East and thought him "really amazingly uninformed". Major General Sir Edward Spears, Fulfilment of a Mission, (London, 1977), p 217.

⁹¹ Notes for discussion with Sir A. Cadogan, 2 February 1943, FO 226/243.

had been based on "a complete travesty of the facts", and vividly illustrated "the danger of the National Committee's present power to bring up in London any question the French here may wish to press or oppose". In his own experience, the Departments with which he dealt were

apt to lose sight of the fact that the only action we ever undertake here is based upon the need to forward the war effort ... It is an incontrovertible fact that the French have not maintained as their essential guide the necessity of subordinating their own interests ... to the essential need of sacrificing everything to the war effort ... The Army, the Minister of State, everyone has displayed the patience of Job towards all these pretensions, with the only effect of rather increasing them. In our efforts to propitiate the French, believing this was the policy of His Majesty's Government, we ... have jeopardised our own position in the Arab world ... The pathetic thing is that the French are only weakening their own position by bullying the native populations and adopting a dictatorial attitude towards them.⁹²

Eden telegraphed Spears personally in an attempt to calm him. He explained that there had been no real complaint by the Committee as such and that it was "inevitable" that the French should occasionally raise matters concerning the Levant in London. Spears however, was not mollified. In further correspondence with Eden, he pointed out that he had hoped that the Office would have rejected the French "complaint" out of hand. His discussions with Helleu had revealed that the latter had no knowledge of the "complaint", and shared Spears's own view that it had been designed purely to cause trouble in London. The whole problem had occurred, Spears alleged, "because the principal French representative in these States [i.e. Helleu] is powerless in the hands of ill-intentioned subordinates...". Whilst he claimed to appreciate the Foreign Office need to maintain good relations with the Committee, Spears begged

⁹² Spears to Eden, 30 January 1943, FO 226/243.

that in future, neither he nor Casey be ignored on matters which were their direct responsibility.⁹³

Casey did in fact ask the Foreign Office for formal clarification of the position between the British Government and the French National Committee as to which matters were to be handled locally, and which were to be referred to London. The reply was of little help -- no formal agreement had ever been reached, but a statement by de Gaulle was dredged up and despatched both to the Minister of State and to Spears, to the effect that local questions were to be settled on the spot, whereas matters of major policy were to be dealt with in London.⁹⁴

A few days later Spears complained again. The French had proposed increases in pay for their *Troupes Spéciales*⁹⁵, which both he and the Army Commander had agreed were necessary. Spears however, proposed that the increases should be negotiated in the Levant and linked to reforms to improve the efficiency of the *Troupes Spéciales* and to advances in the all-important question of recruitment, which still remained unsolved. When he received only an interim response to this suggestion, Spears believed his representations had been ignored and complained to the Foreign Office:

I can only trust that [the] War Office ... will give greater weight to [the] recommendations of its

⁹³ Eden to Spears, 1 February 1943; Spears to Eden, 8 February 1943; both in FO 226/243.

⁹⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 6 February 1943; Foreign Office to Casey and Spears, 10 February 1943; both in E773/27/89, FO 371/35174.

⁹⁵ The *Troupes Spéciales* were Syrian and Lebanese nationals, trained and employed by the French.

principal representative in [the] Levant than the Foreign Office appears to have given mine.⁹⁶

For the Foreign Office, this was too much. As H. A. Caccia noted:

Eastern Department have long kept silent about the way [Spears] is carrying out his duties. But there are limits ... either Sir E. Spears is out to have a quarrel with the Foreign Office or is so overwrought by the difficulties of his post that he needs a rest and a change of scene. If these are really Sir E. Spears' presumptions, it is plainly impossible to do business with him.⁹⁷

Cadogan admitted that Spears was "a trial", but warned that "while he remains where he is, we must try not to get too worked up about him".⁹⁸ A curt reply assured Spears that there was every intention of giving due weight both to his views and those of the Army Commander. It further requested that in future, he work on the assumption that

proper consultation takes place between the Government Departments concerned, and that we, no less than they, are out to help you.⁹⁹

In the meantime, Spears had become so frustrated by the lack of progress on the recruitment issue that on 13 February, he again suggested a direct approach to the local

⁹⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 5 February 1943, E756/125/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 9 February 1943, E820/125/89; both in FO 371/35198; Spears to Foreign Office, 13 February 1943, E1001/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁹⁷ Minute by H. A. Caccia, 15 February 1943, E1001/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁹⁸ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 15 February 1943, E1001/27/89, FO 371/35175.

⁹⁹ Foreign Office to Spears, 16 February 1943, E1001/27/89, FO 371/35175.

governments. He was sternly informed by the Foreign Office that

any such action would be a direct challenge to the whole French position in [the] Levant States and an encroachment on their legal position as the territorial Power in those States; it would inevitably have repercussions far beyond that area.¹⁰⁰

In another conciliatory letter, Eden tried to lay the matter to rest once and for all. He wrote:

I do fully sympathise with ... the difficulties of your situation, but the very conditions of that situation are bound to expose you to a certain degree of embarrassment and trouble. I can only promise that we here will bear your difficulties in mind and do our best to minimise them.

He tried to assure Spears that the French practically never raised Levant matters in London and that the Foreign Office anyway preferred that as many issues as possible be handled locally. The Foreign Office telegram of 23 January to which Spears had taken such exception and which had served to trigger off all these complaints "was neither intended nor couched as a rebuke. It was, in fact, a routine enquiry over a very mild representation by the Fighting French on a correspondence of which we had no knowledge at all..." Spears gratefully acknowledged Eden's letter which had "greatly encouraged" him.¹⁰¹

vi) The Establishment Hits Back

¹⁰⁰ Foreign Office to Spears, 15 February 1943, E884/27/89, FO 371/35198.

¹⁰¹ Eden to Spears, 19 February 1943; Spears to Eden, 4 March 1943; both in FO 226/243.

It seemed that Spears had been "greatly encouraged" but in the wrong direction, for early in March, a lengthy memorandum from the British Minister arrived on Eden's desk. It had been forwarded by Casey, who described it as a "forthright, hard-hitting memorandum written under the cumulative stress of eighteen months of frustration", with which he substantially agreed. Casey did admit however, that Spears tended "to see the picture very largely from the local point of view" and left out of account "the difficulties with which you are faced in London in your general relations with the Fighting French".¹⁰²

Spears had in fact written the memorandum on 14 February to give vent to his annoyance with French behaviour in the Levant. He complained bitterly about the French failure to behave as Allies. Stemming from their all-consuming desire to maintain and increase their hold on the Levant, they had pursued "the most narrow and selfish policy conceivable", and sought to diminish "by every means in their power such prestige as we might derive from our military occupation of the country". Those Levant nationals suspected of even the slightest pro-British tendencies had been persecuted with a "petty and minute malevolence" matched only by the vindictiveness shown towards French nationals suspected of "a similar heresy".¹⁰³

Nor did the memorandum finish here. It went on to describe how the British policy of attempting to draw the maximum resources from the Levant for the war effort had been hindered and impeded by the French. Catroux, Spears alleged, had played the best game of all, proving to be "a master at procrastination, as adept at postponement [and] a

¹⁰² Casey to Foreign Office, 8 March 1943, E2488/27/89, FO 371/35177.

¹⁰³ Spears memorandum, 14 February 1943, E2488/27/89, FO 371/35177.

pioneer in the art of sophistry". Worst of all though, Catroux and his clique "the Maffia" [sic], somehow evoked "mysterious support in London". As a result, all British enthusiasm and initiative on the spot had been damped down and discouraged by the feeling that, disposing of these "mysterious powers and influence", Catroux and his cronies would "always in the end, have their way".

Spears went on to reveal the full extent of his embittered feelings towards the Free French and de Gaulle. The French were purely concerned "with the object of creating by any means ... a French organisation capable of gaining by bluff and manoeuvring, all that France has lost by pusillanimity and lack of true patriotism". De Gaulle himself had been "built up on a pedestal, every stone of which is a retreat, a lack of firmness on our part. The measure of the man today, and his danger, is the measure of our weakness towards him". The crux of the whole matter was, Spears admonished, the fact that London's overriding preoccupation was to do anything for a peaceful life:

We here could also have perfect relations with the French and our intercourse could be one long idyll -- on one condition: that we gave way to them on every point, thereby sacrificing British interests and those of the British taxpayer ... It may be noted that the French generally give way with no lasting ill-will, when we are in a position to display real firmness. The worst situations always result from a lack of resolution on our part, or when the French can hope to use one British authority against another.¹⁰⁴

Somewhat stunned by this bitter attack, Peterson minuted:

We have recently had more than enough of General Spears's private representations ... Indeed, the indulgence ... extended to this tiresome M.P., who is quite unsuited to hold a diplomatic post, must

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

remain in glaring contrast to the complete lack of consideration shown in recent years to mere professional diplomats holding posts of at least equal difficulty.¹⁰⁵

In fact, Peterson claimed, the major difficulty in the Levant stemmed from Spears's own capacity "for overnight volte-faces". Certainly this denunciation of Catroux in particular, was in complete contrast with other recent telegrams "indicating one of his recurring honeymoons with General Catroux".¹⁰⁶

Yet before the Department had had chance to recover from the impact of this first attack by Spears, he had launched another, provoked by largely the same issues. Spears had sought to take advantage of Catroux's presence in the Levant to broach the vexed topic of recruitment with him. Though the Committee had already rejected proposals on the subject, Catroux had nonetheless promised to recommend them again. Spears jubilantly telegraphed the Foreign Office, requesting that the matter be re-opened with the Committee in London. He suggested that if the Committee remained intractable, he should then be granted permission to approach the local governments direct, without further recourse to the French.¹⁰⁷ Peterson did actually present a memorandum to Massigli¹⁰⁸ on the matter on 3 March.¹⁰⁹ True to his promise, Catroux had also taken up the cudgels and informed Spears of

¹⁰⁵ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 19 March 1943, E2488/27/89, FO 371/35177.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 March 1943, E1235/27/89, FO 371/35198.

¹⁰⁸ René Massigli: appointed National Commissioner for Foreign Affairs on 8 February 1943. For further details see below.

¹⁰⁹ Aide-mémoire to French National Committee, 3 March 1943, E1235/27/89, FO 371/35198.

"a further violent passage with de Gaulle", during which he had threatened to resign unless given a free reign over recruitment.¹¹⁰ He told Spears that de Gaulle had finally conceded, commenting that the Foreign Office memorandum had put the matter in a new light.¹¹¹ Dejean confirmed on 10 March that the matter of recruitment was "en bonne voie" and that Catroux had indeed been authorised to proceed.¹¹²

Yet matters did not move quickly enough: on 17 March, Casey forwarded a letter to the Foreign Office from General Wilson, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces, who noted that the question of recruitment was still outstanding. Wilson's letter pointed out that Syria and Lebanon could easily supply ten thousand men, thereby releasing an almost equivalent number of British soldiers for active service. Only French opposition was delaying matters and he had observed:

At this juncture, when every effort is being made to bring the war to a successful conclusion in the shortest possible time, it seems incredible that [the] Fighting French should act as a drag on our exertions to achieve this.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Eden recorded that Catroux had subsequently told him that "the only way to deal with [de Gaulle] was "par la méthode de menaces". When he had been in Syria, General Catroux had been asked recently by us to agree to the raising of certain levies of which we had need. He at once agreed *en principe* and referred the matter home. General de Gaulle had expostulated with such vehemence that General Catroux had told him to find another representative in Syria, with the result that General de Gaulle had made no more difficulty. He said that he had recently offered his resignation once every three weeks". See Eden to Peake, 3 April 1943, Z4644/5/G, No 235, FO 954/8.

¹¹¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 6 March 1943, E1360/27/89, FO 371/35198.

¹¹² Foreign Office note, 11 March 1943, E1360/27/89, FO 371/35198.

¹¹³ Casey to Foreign Office, 17 March 1943, PREM 3 422/14.

"Pray advise how the screw can be put on best to make the F[ighting] F[rench] comply", minuted Churchill when he saw this letter.¹¹⁴ Orme Sargent replied that the screw, in the form of the Foreign Office memorandum, had already been applied, and its efficacy had even been acknowledged by Spears.¹¹⁵ Spears was however, increasingly frustrated, for regardless of assurances in London, Catroux had still not received a formal sanction to proceed.¹¹⁶ Tired of the continual French obstruction, Spears once again mentioned the possibility of a direct approach to the local governments, and when again cautioned by the Department, he let fly and found himself embroiled in yet another major row, in the course of which, he vented much of his spleen against the Foreign Office itself.

In a lengthy letter, Spears levelled some very serious charges against the Foreign Office. He accused certain of its members of consciously thwarting the Army and the war effort "because of a pusillanimous attitude and an ingrained desire to appease". He argued that all along, he had treated the recruitment question as one "of most real and vital military urgency" and declared his contempt for

any British official who, in a matter vitally affecting the safety of British armed forces ... refuses even to discuss ... a carefully reasoned argument designed to show that we have a legal right to insist on something which those armed forces sorely need.

¹¹⁴ Minute by Churchill, 18 March 1943, PREM 3 422/14.

¹¹⁵ Note by Sir Orme Sargent, 19 March 1943, PREM 3 422/14. Orme Sargent had been Deputy Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office since September 1939; he became Permanent Under Secretary of State in 1946 until 1949.

¹¹⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 March 1943, E1689/27/89, FO 371/35198.

The success so far achieved in the matter of recruitment was, he maintained, due entirely to "the persistence of those on the spot in the face of London's cold hostility". De Gaulle's statement that the Foreign Office memorandum had thrown a different light on the matter, was "obvious nonsense"; to Spears it was obvious that the General clearly "did not feel strongly enough to overrule Catroux". Spears complained that "in the none too easy task of keeping the British end up in the Levant States", the only factor which could be relied upon with any degree of certainty was "an unhelpful and unsympathetic attitude on the part of the Foreign Office". He continued at length:

We who are quite close to the more direct and simple problems of the war, feel sometimes galled beyond endurance when the French, who have done nothing but oppose us (until Catroux's change of heart) are constantly supported in London ... we know we can deal with them quite adequately and by our own means ... what I am quite certain of ... is that the obstructive attitude of the National Committee -- and of Catroux as long as he remained their faithful servant -- in regard to the Levant States, has been due more than anything to the knowledge that if they do take up a disputed question in London, they will generally find the Foreign Office only too anxious to take their side and will ... always be able to bully their way through ... we have never had a dispute with the French here that did not arise directly or indirectly out of the conflict between our legitimate needs and their selfishly parochial outlook ... I have dealt with the French, not unsuccessfully, all my life, and I know that with the necessary firmness, one can always get one's way in the end -- and do so without permanent sore feelings.¹¹⁷

Under such relentless attack, Foreign Office tempers had worn extremely thin. In a note to Eden which ended by recommending a health report on Spears, Caccia pointed out that Spears's letter raised two issues. The first and comparatively minor question of recruitment had, since the

¹¹⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 2 April 1943, E2346/27/89, FO 371/35177.

despatch of Spears's letter, been solved. Spears himself had received written confirmation of the Committee's concurrence and the matter had been set in motion.¹¹⁸ As Caccia tried to explain, Foreign Office concern throughout had merely been to ensure that the arguments used to support the request for recruitment had been "consonant with, and not in violation of, our existing agreements with the Fighting French". In contrast, Spears had been "reluctant to accept this advice and continued to advocate ... that we should appeal over the heads of the French to the local governments".¹¹⁹ Eden subsequently made it quite plain to Spears by letter that he was disappointed to receive yet another complaint against the Office from him. When it was realised that Spears had been in serious difficulties over the recruitment issue, "we did our best to come to your rescue and Peterson saw Massigli ... and left a strongly worded memorandum with him". As Spears had himself acknowledged the result of this, Eden stated that he felt unable to join in the tribute Spears had paid himself for success in the recruitment matter "without including the efforts of the Foreign Office".¹²⁰

The second issue which Spears had brought to the fore was, as Caccia pointed out, the more major one of general policy pursued towards the French, particularly with regard to the Levant States. In his letter, Eden reminded Spears

¹¹⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 April 1943, E2071/125/89, FO 371/35198; Weekly Political Summary, No 56, 28 April 1943, E2484/27/89, FO 371/35177. Various French and British personnel had finally been appointed to a joint Recruitment Commission which was due to commence work on 15 April. In his Weekly Report on 28 April, Spears recorded Syrian and Lebanese agreement to the scheme.

¹¹⁹ Minute by H. A. Caccia, 16 April 1943, E2346/27/89, FO 371/35177.

¹²⁰ Eden to Spears, 21 April 1943, E2346/27/89, FO 371/35177.

that the Department could do no right as far as he [Spears] was concerned:

If we see the French over Levantine questions, we are allowing the French to intrigue with us: if we do not see them, we are being insufficiently firm ... I quite realise that the Fighting French are ... no more easy to handle in the Levant States than ... anywhere else. You on your side must realise that the prevailing wind, so far as all French are concerned, blows from North Africa and that the handling of Syrian questions here, or even sometimes the leaving of them in abeyance, is dictated by considerations which are quite outside the scope of the Eastern Department.¹²¹

Caccia had himself already despatched a letter to Lascelles¹²² in which he attempted a more detailed explanation of the difficulties which faced the Eastern Department. Levant policy had to be formulated not only with continual reference to the various legal agreements between Britain and the Fighting French, but also to general policy towards France and the French as a whole. As he went on to explain:

The consequence is, that in the general war interest, we, as the Cinderella of the party, are apt to have to give way. For instance if de Gaulle is behaving badly, we are told that it would be highly undesirable for us to impede French unity by staging a first class row in the Levant. *Per contra*, if we are already in the throes of one of our periodic rows with the General, we are told that we must not pour oil on the already burning fires.¹²³

Officials in London well understood the irritation experienced at always being forced to play the minor rôle,

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² D. W. Lascelles: First Secretary in Beirut.

¹²³ Caccia to Lascelles, 20 April 1943, E2284/27/89, FO 371/35176.

as they had played it so often themselves. But Caccia warned, "it is nonetheless necessary and it boils down to the fact that ... we have to treat the French as allies". If French unity was achieved, Caccia thought it unlikely that the French in North Africa would be any more relaxed about the Levant than they had been to date:

They have a rooted suspicion that we intend to turn them out of the Levant States and that suspicion will continue to cloud their vision.

Furthermore, in an area of such traditional disagreement and misunderstanding, there were those, Caccia hinted obliquely, whose hobby it was "to cultivate the apples of discord".¹²⁴

It was hoped in the Foreign Office that these communications would bring about a realisation amongst British officials in the Levant that Departmental officials worked under considerable constraints too and that they also had to toe the line in the interests of higher policy. But the general effect of these all too frequent altercations with Spears was evident. On 11 May, Massigli visited Sir Maurice Peterson to complain of the "great and unnecessary excitement" being displayed by Spears and his officials over the approaching elections. Reporting the interview, Peterson admitted that he did not know what to do with the complaint:

Unfortunately, the terms on which we are with Sir Edward Spears do not permit of us giving him a friendly word of advice and if we ask for an explanation, we will draw down a counterblast which will reverberate through Downing Street.¹²⁵

Such, then, was the appalling state of relations between the Foreign Office and its representative in the Levant.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 11 May 1943, E2759/27/89, FO 371/35177.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRESSURE FOR UNITY

i) The Unwilling Bride

In addition to the long-running battle with the French to make good their promises to the Levant States, the Foreign Office had embarked on another major struggle to bring de Gaulle and Giraud together in some form of united French movement. Eden was adamant that the Foreign Office was "straining every nerve to get [an] agreement between de Gaulle and Giraud".¹ Though the Prime Minister had not hesitated to attack de Gaulle in a Secret Session in the House of Commons on 10 December 1942², he led the way forward just over two weeks later by advising Roosevelt that he favoured an early meeting between Giraud and de Gaulle "before rivalries crystallise".³ Additionally, in Cabinet on 4 January, he stressed the need for "an early clarification" of the political situation in North Africa⁴, where he had

¹ Eden to Vansittart, 8 January 1943, FO 954/8.

² Churchill had been somewhat embarrassed by the American espousal of Darlan in North Africa, which had aroused considerable criticism in Britain. The Prime Minister had sought to defend their action by pointing out that in war "it is not always possible to have everything go exactly as one likes" and arguing that under the prevailing circumstances, Eisenhower had been right to invest authority in Darlan. Attempting to deflect attention from American deeds, Churchill had pointed out that de Gaulle was far from "an unfaltering friend of Britain"; he had catalogued some of de Gaulle's less friendly acts and warned his listeners against placing all their hopes and confidence in him, still less the destiny of France. Martin Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill, 1941-1945, Road to Victory, Vol VII, (London, 1986), pp 274-75.

³ Churchill to Roosevelt, 28 December 1942, quoted in M. Gilbert, *op cit*, p 283.

⁴ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 6.00pm, Monday, 4 January 1943, CAB 65/33.

recently secured the appointment of Harold Macmillan as British Minister Resident at Allied Force Headquarters.⁵

Churchill undoubtedly saw in the North African situation an ideal opportunity to clip de Gaulle's wings once and for all, though his previous experience at trying to limit de Gaulle's powers, which resulted in the formation of the National Committee, ought to have taught him not to underestimate the General.⁶ Though not averse to Giraud personally, de Gaulle was concerned to "keep his hands clean" and was therefore reluctant to associate with some of the tarnished Vichy personnel Giraud had inherited and showed no signs of shedding. Believing that Giraud ought to rally to the Free French and not *vice versa*, he was particularly angered at the general expectation that he would shortly settle down and play second fiddle to Giraud, and showed little willingness to co-operate.⁷

The matter of an agreement between de Gaulle and Giraud acquired a certain degree of urgency however, once Churchill had formed the definite intention of arranging a "marriage" between the two. He himself proposed to officiate at Anfa near Casablanca, where he was shortly due to meet Roosevelt.⁸

⁵ See H. Macmillan, The Blast of War, (London, 1967), pp 215-219. Macmillan's status was to be approximately equal to that of the Minister of State in Cairo. He was to be directly responsible to Churchill for political affairs in the Mediterranean theatre.

⁶ Churchill had seen the creation of a council as the best means of controlling de Gaulle; the Committee which eventually emerged however, had greatly disappointed the Prime Minister's expectations. See Kersaudy, Churchill and De Gaulle, (London, 1981), pp 161-67.

⁷ Eden to Peake, 12 January 1943, Z676/30/69G; Peake to Foreign Office, 14 January 1943, Z697/30/69G; Peake to Foreign Office, 14 January 1943, Z698/30/69G; all in FO 371/36170.

⁸ Churchill, Roosevelt and their respective Chiefs of Staff were due to meet for the "Symbol" or Casablanca conference to discuss future strategy. Stalin was also to

Though considerable doubts were expressed by the Foreign Office as to the wisdom of this proposal, Churchill persisted. Having obtained a promise from Roosevelt to produce Giraud, Churchill duly issued a summons to de Gaulle from Casablanca.⁹ Much to the Prime Minister's discomfiture, and despite strong pressure from Eden, de Gaulle politely declined the invitation. He informed Eden that he had already made several fruitless overtures to Giraud, suggesting the union of all French forces under some form of provisional central authority. The replies he had received from Giraud had been vague and non-committal and had offered little encouragement. De Gaulle argued that anyway he preferred the idea of simple, direct talks with Giraud as "best designed to bring about a really useful arrangement", rather than the "atmosphere of an exalted Allied forum".¹⁰

Churchill was deeply indignant at the General's "folly" in "missing such a wonderful opportunity"¹¹. He immediately despatched another telegram to the Frenchman in an attempt to force him to change his mind. Where persuasion had failed, a direct threat was employed: de Gaulle was informed

have been present but felt unable to leave Russia at such a crucial time, just as the Germans were suffering reverses. The conference resulted in a decision to concentrate on the extinction of Hitler as a priority; a cross-Channel offensive was abandoned in favour of a Mediterranean strategy focused on Sicily; nonetheless, the build-up of Allied troops in Britain for a cross-Channel operation at some future date was to be accelerated.

⁹ WM (43) 9th Conclusions, Confidential Annex, 18 January 1943, CAB 65/37. Churchill's invitation was passed to de Gaulle by Eden and Cadogan on 17 January.

¹⁰ *ibid.* See also Minutes of Eden-de Gaulle conversation, 17 January 1943, FO 954/8. De Gaulle told Eden that at such a meeting of Allies, he might be forced into compromises he did not want to make, and Oliver Harvey noted that the Frenchman "clearly suspected that he would be "muniched" ". J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 18 January, p 210.

¹¹ Macmillan, The Blast of War, pp 246-47.

that should he maintain his refusal, the British attitude towards the Free French Committee would have to be reviewed. Churchill authorised Eden and the Cabinet to alter the telegram if necessary, though he stressed that its seriousness must not be impaired in any way. In fact, Churchill clearly advocated "knocking [de Gaulle] about pretty hard".¹²

Though several amendments were made to Churchill's original telegram, the final version left de Gaulle in no doubt that the consequences of his refusal to visit Casablanca at the Prime Minister's request, would be "gravely prejudicial" to the future of the Fighting French movement.¹³ For once the General realised that he could not defy both Churchill and Roosevelt with impunity, and after consultation with the Committee, telegraphed a bitter acceptance. He reached Casablanca on 22 January, where Churchill informed him bluntly

that there must be an arrangement and that it was the duty of any Frenchman who became an obstacle to French unity or to the relations between the various French sections and the two great Allies, to efface himself...¹⁴

De Gaulle had all along been concerned that he would be pressured into compromise at Casablanca and this made him all the more determined to hold his ground, even though he appreciated that much was at stake. Churchill and Roosevelt soon realised that though "the Bride" had been forced to the

¹² WM (43) 11th Conclusions, Confidential Annex, 19 January 1943, CAB 65/37; W. S. Churchill, The Second World War, The Hinge of Fate, Vol IV, (London, 1951), p 610.

¹³ WM (43) 11 Conclusions, Confidential Annex, 19 January 1943, CAB 65/37.

¹⁴ WM (43) 12th Conclusions, Confidential Annex, 20 January 1943, CAB 65/37. For a fuller account of this meeting, see François Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 248-49.

altar, he could not be made to say "I do". A series of difficult meetings ensued, but despite the indefatigable efforts of all concerned to find a suitable formula to unite the two Generals, de Gaulle remained obdurate. He continued to insist that various leading Vichy officials be dismissed and was determined that in any unified French movement, he should fulfil the rôle of political or civil leader, while Giraud assumed that of military commander.

Negotiations remained deadlocked and time ran out before de Gaulle's signature could be obtained to a communiqué which Roosevelt and Churchill had drafted. A veneer of success was lent to the proceedings when "partly by chicanery and partly by pressure", a photograph was hastily staged of Giraud and de Gaulle shaking hands in "a kind of public truce", whilst Roosevelt and Churchill looked on benevolently. A more anodyne communiqué was subsequently published, written by de Gaulle with Giraud's consent.¹⁵ "Besides a good photograph", Macmillan later reflected, "all that we obtained was a communiqué stating the obvious: that Frenchmen should unite to fight beside the Allies against the Axis".¹⁶

Most observers realised that Casablanca was something of an "unproclaimed victory" for de Gaulle: he had successfully confronted the combined forces of Roosevelt and Churchill and emerged victorious with his independent leadership of Fighting France intact. But it was also something of a Pyrrhic victory, for de Gaulle's defiant behaviour served only to increase the considerable suspicions and hostility which both the President and the Prime Minister already harboured towards him. Roosevelt, as was revealed

¹⁵ H. Macmillan, The Blast of War, p 256; H. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 26 January 1943, pp 6-11.

¹⁶ H. Macmillan, War Diaries, see Footnote 20, p 10.

subsequently by the so-called Anfa memorandum¹⁷, happily forgot de Gaulle, whether inadvertently or otherwise, and invested Giraud with sole authority for all French affairs, until forced to recant by Churchill. Even despite coming to de Gaulle's rescue thus, it was noted that at their final meeting, Churchill had been "in a white fury over de Gaulle's stubbornness".¹⁸ More diplomatically, Macmillan recalls that Churchill had been "disappointed by de Gaulle's attitude", and left Casablanca "with a certain sense of disillusion about the French problem".¹⁹

ii) Fuelling the Flames

Whatever rancour Churchill already felt towards de Gaulle after Casablanca can only have been compounded by an encounter with Spears early in February at Cairo before he journeyed to Adana.²⁰ Recalling his conversation with Churchill, Spears confessed that "with some slight exaggeration, I said in spite of everything, my fundamental

¹⁷ At a private meeting, Giraud had presented Roosevelt with a memorandum drafted by one of his supporters, out of which emerged two documents: one concerned the rearmament of the French forces, the other recognised Giraud as civil and military Commander-in-Chief and designated him as trustee of French sovereignty when France was liberated. Roosevelt signed both without consulting Churchill and when this was revealed, Churchill returned to Algiers to force Roosevelt to rectify matters. See Macmillan, The Blast of War, pp 256-60.

¹⁸ R. Murphy, Diplomat Among Warriors, (New York, 1964) p 175, cited in Kersaudy, op cit, p 254-55.

¹⁹ Macmillan, The Blast of War, p 255.

²⁰ Spears recorded that he had a long talk with the Prime Minister on a drive between the Cairo Embassy and the Casey villa at Mena, "a few words with him on the lawn after lunch and a few more next morning when I went to see him off on the plane". Record of conversation with Churchill, Tuesday, 2 February 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

feeling toward the French nation had not altered". Churchill retorted that his own feeling had altered, and that he found the French "either defeatist or arrogant and [that] de Gaulle was the worst of the lot".

Spears proceeded to seize what he must have regarded as a heaven-sent opportunity to fuel the flames of the Prime Minister's wrath by regaling him with stories of how the French "short-circuit [Casey] by referring everything to London and how London defeats all our efforts by listening to all their complaints ... I told him also of the unbearable weakness displayed by Peterson ... towards the Free French." Spears tried to explain to Churchill his belief in the existence of a Mafia amongst the Free French in Beirut and London, but was interrupted by the Prime Minister, who "asked the exact meaning of a Mafia and wanted to know whether it was not an organisation to kill?" At Churchill's request, Spears provided him with a lengthy note outlining the major problems with the French and showed no compunction in warning Churchill that the general thrust of his note "might lead to difficulties with Anthony"; the Prime Minister kindly reassured him that "he and Anthony were as one person"²¹, though on French matters this was manifestly not the case.

Spears's note concentrated in the main on attacking two French officials in particular, Blanchet²² and Boegner²³, both

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Blanchet: Chef de Cabinet Militaire. Spears claimed that Blanchet had been "planted" by the Vichy authorities and had consistently used his key position to complicate and embitter Anglo-French relations in the Levant. He claimed moreover, that security officials possessed "photostat copies of intercepted correspondence between Blanchet and an important Vichy agent at Ankara". He continued that unfortunately, the correspondence was "too cautiously worded to be quite conclusive". See Note for the Prime Minister, 2 February 1943, FO 226/243.

former employees at the Vichy Embassy at Ankara, who, despite their relatively junior rank, had "acquired an almost complete control over the administrative machine". (Spears recorded that he did not cite the names of the corresponding English mafia, as he knew Churchill's papers were often widely circulated and "this was too dangerous"). It described how Helleu himself had admitted that there was "a veritable maffia [sic] in Beirut and a corresponding maffia in the French National Committee in London"²⁴, and that both aided and abetted each other and were doing their utmost "to hamper the Allied war effort and wreck Anglo-French relations". Spears was convinced that Helleu was right and was "not exaggerating the power for evil of the two groups"; in his own experience the London group always seemed able to count on "a most sympathetic hearing from both the Foreign Office and the Treasury", rendering his own position "anomalous and intolerable". "Even in matters where we are on the strongest possible ground from the point of view of the war effort", Spears lamented, "I cannot count on even the minimum support from London".²⁵ Spears did his utmost to get this point across to the Prime Minister in conversation. He recorded that he had informed Churchill that he had gradually come to the conclusion "that it was impossible to do a good job under the Foreign Office ... Our

²³ Boegner: Spears described Boegner as "consistently and maliciously anti-British, and he is known to have been personally responsible, by wilful misrepresentation and all-round obstruction, for many of the difficulties which have been experienced in our negotiations with the French in the Levant". *ibid.*

²⁴ Helleu had mentioned Gaston Palewski, Chef de Cabinet to de Gaulle, 1942-46, René Plevin, Commissioner for Colonies, 1943-44, and André Diethelm, Commissioner for Production and Trade, 1943, as the "principal members" of the London "maffia".

²⁵ Note for the Prime Minister, 2 February 1943, FO 226/243.

real difficulty in the Levant was not merely lack of support but actual opposition at home".²⁶

Churchill seems to have taken little notice of Spears's diatribe against the Foreign Office; his complaints about the French however, had considerably more impact as the Prime Minister was still seething with rage over de Gaulle's behaviour at Casablanca. Indeed, when Churchill finally returned to London, it was observed that he was "even more anti-de Gaulle than when he left" and was even speaking in terms of "breaking him".²⁷ A warning from the King²⁸ not to be too hasty with de Gaulle seemed to have little effect on him, and at a meeting on 9 February with Massigli²⁹, the newly appointed Gaullist Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Churchill spoke "his whole mind" about de Gaulle.³⁰ His views were essentially those he had expressed in the Secret Session two months before. He would continue to recognise and fulfil Britain's obligation to de Gaulle, provided the latter played his part. He was however, "no longer prepared to deal with de Gaulle personally, so long as he claimed or acted as though he possessed supreme authority over the Fighting French movement". Churchill pronounced that he did not want de Gaulle "setting up as dictator" in Britain, and that he would deal with him only as "the mouthpiece of the

²⁶ Record of conversation with Churchill, 2 February 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

²⁷ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 9 February 1943, p 218.

²⁸ J. Wheeler-Bennett, King George VI, (London, 1958), p 560, cited in Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 260.

²⁹ René Massigli: distinguished French diplomat; serving as French Ambassador to Turkey at the outbreak of the war until recalled by the Vichy administration; rallied to de Gaulle late in 1942, and succeeded M. René Plevin as Commissioner for Foreign Affairs to the French National Committee on 8 February 1943.

³⁰ Minute by W. Strang, 10 February 1943, Z2310/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

National Committee", which he expected to exercise control over the General.³¹

iii) "The Monster of Hampstead"

Matters did not improve in respect of the Churchill-de Gaulle relationship. The Prime Minister was forced to retire to his sick-bed for almost two weeks after his return from Casablanca, but de Gaulle neither made an effort to try and redeem himself, nor believed he had any cause to do so. Rather, he tended to go out of his way to cause further annoyance. At a formal lunch, he tactlessly remarked to some French parachutists that as a politician, he was frequently obliged to say the opposite of what he thought and felt: hence, whilst broadcasting on the BBC, he pretended to be a good friend of Britain in order to create a favourable impression abroad and to keep the Resistance going; in reality however, England was France's hereditary enemy, a fact which should never be forgotten. Unfortunately, de Gaulle's remarks reached Eden via a Special Branch report³², but worse still, it was reported that a young journalist, Alastair Forbes³³, had passed Morton³⁴ a written account of the incident for Churchill's perusal.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Mansion House (Special Branch) Report to Eden, 15 February 1943, Z2539/27/89, FO 371/36047.

³³ Alastair Forbes was described by the Foreign Office as "one of the many self-constituted advisers of the Prime Minister on French affairs"; he was alleged to be an "ardent anti-Gaullist", though not in any pro-Vichy sense, but rather because of the dictatorial ambitions of de Gaulle. See Z2539/148/17 and Z2540/148/17, both in FO 371/36047.

³⁴ Major Desmond Morton: Personal Assistant to Churchill, 1940-46.

Eden was originally inclined not to attach too much importance to the report, but hasty investigations revealed that "on the whole ... de Gaulle did say what he is alleged to have said ... or something very like it". On the French side, Dejean tried to dismiss the story, ascribing it to "that liqueur brandy feeling" which occasionally afflicted the General. Peake too, tried to write it off as "half baked and rather second rate Machiavelli, quite unworthy of a grown man"; he admitted however, that it was characteristic of those "defects of de Gaulle's mind ... which ... will effectually prevent his playing any great part after the war". Nonetheless, Peake warned sensibly that he doubted "the wisdom of adding fuel to the flames of the Prime Minister's wrath against the General".³⁵ The Foreign Office saw little chance of suppressing the report and the "explosion" which would undoubtedly result, and hoped instead, to divert Churchill's attention to a more favourable public statement de Gaulle had recently made.³⁶ Fortunately, the affair did seem to blow over.

The Churchill-de Gaulle relationship had always been marred and occasionally seriously threatened by its tempestuous nature. In the past, the Levant had been a continual source of antagonism, either in generating the conflict or else in aggravating it. In conversation with Churchill on 2 February, Spears had tried to impress upon the Prime Minister that although "Syria was now considered a backwater ... it was in fact, a link in the whole French set-up which could not be disregarded, and what happened there affected the whole. One of the mistakes London was

³⁵ Peake to Strang, 16 February 1943, Z2540/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

³⁶ Minute by W. Strang, 16 February 1943, Z2540/148/17G, FO 371/36047. The statement in question had been printed in the journal "France" on 15 February 1943 under the title "Un Hommage du Général de Gaulle à l'Angleterre".

making was to consider Syria *in vacuo*".³⁷ In this assessment Spears was only partly correct: London was indeed trying to treat the Levant *in vacuo*, at least as far as relations with the French were concerned. This was not in error however, but by design, as the knock-on effect of events in or concerning the Levant did tend to reverberate throughout the diplomatic world, affecting London and Algiers particularly severely, and especially the precarious relationship between Churchill (and Roosevelt) on the one side and de Gaulle on the other.

Unfortunately for the Foreign Office, which struggled to maintain an equilibrium, the Prime Minister was insufficiently isolated from various minor Levantine incidents which continued to reach his ear and greatly increased his ire against de Gaulle and all things French.³⁸ Spears had long alleged that the French were notoriously inefficient in their methods of propaganda distribution. He had complained to Helleu that propaganda was "a weapon of war just as was a piece of field artillery", any interference with which "would be treated in exactly the same way as would the sabotage of a twenty-five pounder".³⁹ He subsequently discovered and duly reported that a quantity of hand mirrors, backed with photographs of the King and Queen, Churchill and the Union Jack, and allocated to the French for distribution, had been dissembled in the Bureau de la Presse, where the original photographs had been

³⁷ Record of conversation with Churchill, 2 February 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

³⁸ In conversation with Spears on 2 February, Churchill had stressed that Spears should write to him direct, whenever he felt like it; on occasion, this direct line of contact with the Prime Minister was to prove invaluable to Spears, though a considerable source of annoyance to the Foreign Office. Record of conversation with Churchill, 2 February 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

³⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 9 January 1943, E1323/28/89, FO 371/35197.

replaced by others of de Gaulle and Catroux. Churchill minuted on the telegram "The de Gaulle touch", and even Eden on this occasion felt himself unable to defend the French action. He minuted in reply: "Unhappily typical. I begin to dislike all Frenchmen as mean and vindictive creatures".⁴⁰ Only the Ministry of Information took a more circumspect view: it was considered that the French had "a good case, however ill they handled it, for objecting to the distribution of objects decorated solely with the portraits of Anglo-Saxon dignitaries".⁴¹

Complicating an already awkward situation, the Foreign Office had just received, via Peake, de Gaulle's request for transport to go on an extended round tour, lasting a month or so, of Free French territories, both in Central and North Africa and the Levant. Such a protracted tour would inevitably prove a major set-back to hopes for an early settlement between Giraud and de Gaulle, for which the Foreign Office was continuing to press. Moreover, it was thought that de Gaulle's presence in the Levant would almost certainly prejudice the course of the elections there. Memories of the summer of 1942⁴² still prevailed in Foreign Office minds, when officials had battled with Churchill to overcome his objections to the Levant visit which de Gaulle then proposed; the Foreign Office had been victorious, only subsequently to witness a complete vindication of Prime

⁴⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 February 1943; Minute by Churchill, 26 February 1943; Minute by Eden, 27 February 1943; all in PREM 3 422/14.

⁴¹ Ministry of Information to Spears, 3 March 1943, E1323/28/89, FO 371/35197.

⁴² De Gaulle had visited the Levant during August and September 1942. For a full account of the visit see: A. B. Gaunson, The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940-45, (London, 1987), pp 95-100; A. Susser, Western Power Rivalry and its Interaction with Local Politics in the Levant, 1941-1946, pp 228-235, (University of Tel Aviv Ph.D. thesis, 1986); Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 191-201.

Ministerial views. As Caccia recorded, de Gaulle's last Levant sojourn "could scarcely have been more unfortunate from our or from the general point of view. There is little prospect that any other result would follow a further visit since the same causes of irritation remain".⁴³

It was a safe bet that under the circumstances, Churchill would not favour another visit; consequently, the Foreign Office deemed it best to inform Massigli that it was "undesirable in the interests of ... relations with the Fighting French and ... the tranquillity of the Levant States that [de Gaulle] should visit Syria at this moment".⁴⁴ Wisely, Peake had already tried to steer Massigli in this direction; Eden also saw him to impress upon him the British preference for de Gaulle to remain in Britain. He reminded him that at present the Syrian situation was "in many respects, better than it had ever been", that Spears and Catroux were getting on well, and that de Gaulle might shortly be required to take crucial decisions regarding his relationship with Giraud.⁴⁵

In fact, rumours were already circulating in the Middle East about de Gaulle's intentions to visit, much to Spears's alarm. He urged the Foreign Office to do

everything possible ... to dissuade him from visiting the Levant States. His mere presence in the offing would seriously upset the local populations ... and if he intends to be here "to see the

⁴³ Minute by H. A. Caccia, 19 February 1943, Z845/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁴⁴ Peake to Eden, 16 February 1943, Z845/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁴⁵ Eden to Peake, 23 February 1943, Z2577/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

elections through", the effect will be positively disastrous.⁴⁶

By now, Churchill too had been alerted and intervened from his sick-bed:

This fellow is wanting to get off on an Anglophobe jehad. He will stir up the utmost mischief wherever he goes. He promised me faithfully last time that he would not misbehave, but as soon as he got to Cairo, he insulted everyone British and caused the utmost trouble in Syria. I think he should be made to stay here where we have at least some control over him. I should be prepared to use force.⁴⁷

When the King wrote to Churchill on 22 February, divulging his own continued concern about the political situation in North Africa, he asked whether anything might be done "to make the two sides come together". Churchill replied the same day, making no effort to conceal his embittered feelings and betraying his fundamental misgivings about de Gaulle: he confessed to being extremely worried about the possible "irruption" of de Gaulle or his agents on to the scene in North Africa, where they would cause "nothing but trouble". He continued:

De Gaulle is hostile to this country, and I put far more confidence in Giraud ... It is entirely [de Gaulle's] fault that a good arrangement was not made between the two French functions [sic] ... He now wishes to go on a tour around his dominions, *mes fiefs* as he calls them. I have vetoed this, as he would simply make mischief and spread Anglophobia wherever he went.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 25 February 1943, Z2645/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁴⁷ Minute by Churchill, M72/3, 19 February 1943, Z2301/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁴⁸ Gilbert, *op cit*, pp 345-346.

Meanwhile, on 24 February, de Gaulle, anxious for an early departure⁴⁹, and apparently oblivious of the tide of strong objections his proposed tour was raising, pressed Peake for news. The latter, not wishing to jeopardise any strategy Massigli might have formulated for dealing with his chief, avoided the issue⁵⁰. He commented later that the General had reminded him of "nothing so much as a tiger who, having feasted, has the taste of raw meat still in his mouth and knows exactly where the next meal is coming from".⁵¹ The image evidently did not disturb Churchill who reminded Eden: "I presume it is quite clearly settled he is not to be allowed to go and that force, if necessary, will be used to restrain him".⁵²

Massigli did eventually manage to persuade de Gaulle to shorten his proposed trip, but the General obstinately refused to exclude Syria from his itinerary, though he promised not to make any speeches or public utterances there. On 2 March therefore, Peake was obliged to try his own hand at dissuading de Gaulle. Predictably de Gaulle reacted badly. He considered it an unbearable affront to be informed by the British that his proposed visit to Syria, a territory in *de facto* control of the National Committee, was inopportune. He asked Peake whether he was a prisoner in Britain and demanded an official reply to his request within twenty four hours, warning him in advance, that a negative response might produce consequences "of the gravest kind".

⁴⁹ On 25 February, de Gaulle wrote to Catroux in Beirut that he expected to be in Cairo by 8 March, and hoped to spend two days in Syria. See Charles de Gaulle, Mémoires de Guerre, L'Unité, 1942-44, (Paris, 1956), pp 449.

⁵⁰ Peake to Foreign Office, 24 February 1943, Z2618/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁵¹ Peake to Foreign Office, 24 February 1943, Z2619/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

⁵² Minute by Churchill, 25 February 1943, Z2618/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

When Peake asked whether this constituted an ultimatum, de Gaulle left him to draw his own conclusions and requested that he leave.⁵³

On 3 March, the War Cabinet was informed of the circumstances; it agreed that Peake should officially inform Massigli that "the present moment [was] not well chosen for an extended visit of the kind now contemplated" and that special security measures should be considered to ensure that de Gaulle did not leave under his own steam.⁵⁴ The following day Peake duly informed Massigli. An extremely difficult situation now obtained, for as was observed, de Gaulle was "always ready to be insulted ... [and] chooses to think that an intolerable humiliation has been put upon him". Massigli, desperately casting about for any possible solution had warned Peake that the General was "in his most dangerous mood". According to a note by Strang, de Gaulle considered he had two options: one, a public declaration that he was being held prisoner, the other, resignation.⁵⁵

It had been suggested as a possible compromise that de Gaulle should take up an invitation from General Eisenhower to visit North Africa, but by now Churchill was adamant that "the Monster of Hampstead"⁵⁶ should not escape Britain at all. As he minuted to Eden, in North Africa, de Gaulle's potential for trouble was doubled: he would hamper prospects

⁵³ Peake to Foreign Office, 2 March 1943, Z2301/51/17, FO 371/36013; J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 3 March 1943, pp 225-26.

⁵⁴ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 12.15pm, Wednesday, 3 March 1943, CAB 65/33.

⁵⁵ Peake to Foreign Office, 3 March 1943, Z2935/51/17G; Minute by W. Strang, Z2934/51/17G; both in FO 371/36013.

⁵⁶ Whilst living in London, de Gaulle resided in Hampstead, though the headquarters of his movement was at Carlton Gardens. See N. Nicolson (Ed), Harold Nicolson, Diaries and Letters, 1939-45, (London, 1967), p 211.

of a French union, and he would expose Britain to American reproaches that he was hindering their North African policy:

I think the United States would take it as an unfriendly act if we let this man loose in the world at the present time ... I beg you on no account to allow our relations with the United States to be spoiled through our supposed patronage of this man who is also our bitter foe⁵⁷ and whose accession to power in France would be a British disaster of the first magnitude.⁵⁸

Even before Eden had opportunity to respond, Churchill had dashed off another minute:

I emphasise again to avoid any chance of mistake, that we cannot let this man out of the country on any pretext or for any destination, because the moment he is free from our control, he will go wherever he pleases.⁵⁹

As Harvey noted, poor Eden was sandwiched "between the hammer and the anvil". Harvey was himself convinced that it was in Britain's best interests to work with de Gaulle, even though he admitted that he was "a most bloody man in his obstinacy, vanity, ignorance and lack of diplomacy". Yet Churchill was "passionately persuaded that de G. [sic] is our enemy, that he will work against us now and even after, and that he means to bedevil Anglo-American relations".⁶⁰ Eden quickly reassured Churchill that there was no chance of

⁵⁷ Harvey commented in his diary about this minute: "The old boy is in a rage again with de G. He wishes force used if necessary to prevent his leaving the country to visit Syria, and Africa, declares that he is our "foe". What nonsense!". J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 28 February 1943, p 224.

⁵⁸ Minute by Churchill, M81/3, 27 February 1943, Z2301/51/17, FO 371/36013.

⁵⁹ Minute by Churchill, M86/3, 28 February 1943, Z2933/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁶⁰ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 3 March, p 225.

de Gaulle leaving Britain and even sympathised with his concern about the Frenchman: he himself had never dealt "with anyone with whom it was more difficult to do business" and he quite willingly believed that he was "an anglophobe", for many good Frenchmen were. However, Eden could not join unreservedly in Churchill's denunciation of de Gaulle for, "whatever his faults, and they are serious", there were two good things to be said in his favour. The first was that he was "unlikely, now or hereafter, to collaborate with the Germans..."⁶¹ Secondly, de Gaulle was "a more vital and dynamic personality than anyone else who has come to the front". Furthermore, Gaullists, for the most part were "in the good republican and democratic tradition", and Eden believed, looked forward to co-operating with Britain, whereas Giraudist elements were "at best, uncertain".⁶²

It is clear therefore that de Gaulle's behaviour was having an increasingly harmful effect on Churchill's attitude towards him. After the Casablanca charade, he had effortlessly succeeded in adding to the Prime Minister's annoyance, and Churchill was only restrained from rash action by the valiant efforts of Eden, reinforced by the Cabinet. Furthermore, it served to emphasise the difference of outlook between the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary. Churchill was quite clear in which direction and in which order his priorities lay. Ever mindful of Britain's transatlantic alliance, he was well aware of Roosevelt's personal animosity towards de Gaulle. Once he realised de Gaulle's capacity to create discord in his relationship with

⁶¹ Eden's minute revealed that he feared the extent to which the "Nazi virus" had penetrated the French and its implications for Britain's future. Britain had a good deal to fear from the prospect of a post-war France "which in its heart of hearts will look to Germany rather than to ourselves. The Americans may look with equanimity on such a prospect, but we cannot do so".

⁶² Minute by Eden, 2 March 1943, Z2933/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

the President and all he stood for, he preferred to sacrifice de Gaulle rather than risk that possibility. Eden appreciated the crucial importance of America to Britain both during the war and afterwards; however, he was not prepared to discount France or de Gaulle either, seeing the imperative need to foster a strong relationship with France for the future security of Western Europe.⁶³

Eden's stance as champion of de Gaulle was sustained only with difficulty when matters outwardly as straightforward as the proposed tour developed into major political wrangles. The seriousness of the incident is revealed in a paper written by R. L. Speaight.⁶⁴ It was anticipated that de Gaulle might respond to the refusal to allow him to undertake his tour by denouncing Britain. The paper set about preparing for that event and providing material with which to justify a British break with de Gaulle. It emphasised his frequent failure to behave as an ally, by committing acts detrimental to the war effort and his attempts to create bad blood between Britain and America. It alleged that he was far more interested in strengthening his own personal position than in working to defeat the Axis, and this was "especially apparent in Syria".

The paper in fact drew heavily on the catalogue of Gaullist misdeeds in the Levant; it described de Gaulle's efforts "to prevent collaboration between the British and the French and to strengthen his hold on the Levant States in defiance of his undertakings..." He had tried to prevent elections and to gain supreme military control of the area himself; he preferred to retain inefficient Vichyphil French

⁶³ See Earl of Avon, The Eden Memoirs. The Reckoning, (London, 1965) pp 250, 347, 387, 397-398, 402.

⁶⁴ R. L. Speaight: Acting First Secretary, French Department.

officials than to replace them with British men; whenever he visited the area, he had caused trouble between the British and the French; in addition, he behaved like a dictator and his despotic rule of the Free French movement and his reluctance to co-operate with Giraud was a serious obstacle to eventual French unity. On reading the paper Eden minuted:

This is pretty tough stuff. Though I have more reason than most of my colleagues to complain of de Gaulle, I hope that we shall never have to use it.⁶⁵

For the time being however, the situation was saved: the negative reply to de Gaulle had not produced quite the catastrophic effect feared. Massigli meanwhile had suggested a possible compromise; he proposed that de Gaulle should be permitted to travel to Tripoli to oversee the regrouping of his forces. De Gaulle would be persuaded to give a written pledge not to prolong the journey; if he broke the pledge, Massigli and the entire Committee would resign. Massigli assured Morton that in this case he was certain that de Gaulle would stick to the letter and spirit of the agreement. Churchill however, thought this "no compromise" and stuck to his guns with Eden's full support.⁶⁶ De Gaulle's reactions remained uncertain and it was still feared that somehow, he might manage an escape: Speaight minuted however: "All the necessary security measures have already been taken to prevent de Gaulle leaving the country".⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Foreign Office paper by R. L. Speaight, entitled "Guidance for Press and BBC in event of break with de Gaulle", 5 March 1943, Z3162/665/17G, FO 371/36065; Minute by Eden, 7 March 1943, Z3162/665/17G, FO 371/36065.

⁶⁶ Note by D. Morton, 5 March 1943; Minute by Churchill, M126/3, 5 March 1943; Minute by Eden, PM 43/50, 10 March 1943; all in Z3272/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

⁶⁷ Minute by R. L. Speaight, 13 March 1943, Z3272/51/17G, FO 371/36013.

Eden set off for the United States on 11 March and Harvey worried that in his absence, Churchill might take desperate action against de Gaulle; it would be fatal, he believed personally, "to touch de Gaulle or to try to remove him. It would be burning Joan of Arc all over again".⁶⁸ A weekend of "extreme tension" at Carlton Gardens ensued, during which de Gaulle threatened "dramatic counter-measures" including abdication. Peake finally reported however, that wiser counsels had prevailed. At a meeting on Wednesday 10 March, André Philip⁶⁹ had argued with de Gaulle that a break with Britain would bring confusion and despair to the French masses. This seemed to have some effect on de Gaulle, who was now fortunately taking a much less aggressive stance. He informed Catroux on the same day that his trip had had to be postponed, principally because of British government opposition.⁷⁰ Peake later noted, with considerable relief, that de Gaulle seemed to have decided to ignore the British refusal to allow him to leave the country.⁷¹

iv) Reading the Banns

Meanwhile, in North Africa the long-awaited "wedding" between Giraud and de Gaulle was taking some arranging. Joint Anglo-American pressure had persuaded Giraud to launch the North African "New Deal", which basically abolished all

⁶⁸ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 11 March 1943, p 227.

⁶⁹ André Philip: Commissioner for the Interior in London on the French National Committee.

⁷⁰ De Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, p 451.

⁷¹ Peake to Foreign Office, 12 March 1943, Z3326/665/17G, FO 371/36065.

Vichy legislation.⁷² On 24 March, Catroux duly arrived from the Levant to head de Gaulle's mission and negotiations began in earnest. Problems soon occurred, when against Catroux's advice, de Gaulle decided to take up an invitation from Eisenhower to visit North Africa himself. As this was considered most untimely, a reply was finally "concocted", informing him that a visit would be unwise just as the Tunisian campaign was reaching a most critical stage and fully occupying everyone's attentions.⁷³ Inevitably, de Gaulle took umbrage and retaliated by publishing a communiqué, implying that he had thereby been prevented from achieving union with Giraud; this caused annoyance to Americans and British alike.⁷⁴ Catroux flew to London on 8 April to calm the situation and returned some ten days later to resume negotiations. The situation grew increasingly difficult: as support for de Gaulle mounted, both in France and the Empire, the General was prepared to accept no less than a position of complete equality with Giraud; Giraud, on the other hand, lacking a similar ground swell of support but encouraged by his American backing, was suffering delusions of grandeur, and sought to retain a pre-eminent position. Macmillan stepped in, however, with a vehement appeal to Giraud; he warned him that people "all over the world, including France, were becoming bored with the battle of memoranda" and simply wanted union. The appeal did the

⁷² For a more detailed account see Macmillan, The Blast of War, 1939-45, p 306-307.

⁷³ After the Allied invasion of North Africa, the Germans had occupied Tunisia. Early Anglo-American efforts to defeat them failed and by the end of 1942, the German troops there were massively strengthened by the arrival of reinforcements and by linkage with Rommel's retreating forces. The Tunisian bridgehead established by the Germans was not eliminated until May 1943.

⁷⁴ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 2, 3 and 6 April 1943, pp 55-58. See also Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 268-269 on the refusal to allow de Gaulle to visit North Africa.

trick and Giraud resolved to send a friendly invitation to de Gaulle for talks at some "quiet spot" in North Africa.⁷⁵

Things now hinged on de Gaulle's response, which was not long in coming. Despite a visit from Churchill on 30 April who urged him to accept Giraud's invitation⁷⁶, de Gaulle delivered a speech on 4 May which constituted an open attack on Giraud and, as Macmillan observed, "fairly put the cat among the pigeons".⁷⁷ On 10 May, de Gaulle wrote a letter to Giraud which was not much better. Giraud postured, Catroux spoke of resignation and once again, Murphy and Macmillan joined forces with Monnet to devise a suitable reply to de Gaulle which might save the day. If de Gaulle would accept the principle of collective responsibility and that a provisional government should be formed after the liberation of France, Giraud finally proposed the immediate formation of a Central Executive Committee over which the two Generals would preside in turn, collectively responsible and of a limited life.⁷⁸

Macmillan (and Eisenhower, as a later conversation revealed) had now become convinced that it was "absolutely essential" to settle the dispute. Realising that this offer was probably the furthest Giraud would go, and anticipating

⁷⁵ Macmillan, War Diaries, Note of conversation with General Giraud, 26 April 1943, pp 68-72; Entry for 27 April 1943, p 72; Macmillan, The Blast of War, pp 316-317; J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 29 April 1943, p 252.

⁷⁶ See Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 271.

⁷⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 5 May 1943, p 80. Jean Monnet (former member of the British Supply Council in Washington; persuaded by Roosevelt to go to Algiers to assist Giraud) likened the speech to those "that Hitler made before the Czecho-Slovakian affair", quoted by A. Horne, Macmillan, 1894-1956, Vol I, (London, 1988), p 182.

⁷⁸ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 5 and 16 May 1943, p 80 and p 84; Text of General Giraud's reply to General de Gaulle, 17 May 1943, p 84-86.

that for de Gaulle, this would probably not be far enough, Macmillan considered that there seemed little hope of bringing off any union "without a great deal of pressure from His Majesty's Government, even to the point of threatening to denounce our agreements with [de Gaulle] and cut off his enormous subsidies".⁷⁹ On 21 May therefore, Catroux and Macmillan both flew to London, one hoping to press de Gaulle to respond favourably to Giraud, the other hoping to induce his government to take the necessary "firm stand" with the General.⁸⁰

Yet just as Macmillan arrived, advocating that rhetorical threats be uttered about withdrawing support from de Gaulle unless he proved more amenable, three telegrams reached London from Churchill in Washington⁸¹, urging an actual break with the General. Living virtually in Roosevelt's pocket and seeing him at all hours, Churchill had fallen increasingly under his influence; he had previously warned Eden of the intensity of feeling⁸² he was encountering against de Gaulle, but by 21 May, he telegraphed that a "very stern situation" was developing. Churchill had decided that the General had "hopelessly

⁷⁹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 19 May 1943, pp 86-87.

⁸⁰ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 19 and 21 May 1943, pp 86-87 and 92.

⁸¹ Churchill had begun his voyage to the United States on 4 May; he arrived on 10 May and in Washington on 11 May, the Trident Conference began, during which it was decided that a cross-Channel offensive should begin no later than 1 May 1944. Churchill also attempted to press the Americans to agree to invade Italy once the invasion of Sicily had been completed.

⁸² As Macmillan later described, Roosevelt, Hull and many other State Department officials and American military men "had an antipathy to de Gaulle and his movement which amounted in some cases to a phobia...". Macmillan, War Diaries, Extract from memorandum on the F.C.N.L.'s road to recognition, pp 118-19.

missed his market in North Africa" and cared only for his own personal career. He requested the Cabinet to consider urgently "whether we should not now eliminate de Gaulle as a political force?". He proposed ceasing both subsidies to and relations with the French National Committee while it retained any connection with de Gaulle; moreover, he professed to be quite willing to defend this policy to Parliament. He pointed out that in view of the "absolutely vital interest which we have in preserving good relations with the United States", it seemed "most questionable that we should allow this marplot and mischief maker to continue the harm he is doing".⁸³

Churchill forwarded to the Cabinet a veritable arsenal of telegrams of American origin, to support his arguments. In one, which he had received while still aboard the Queen Mary, Roosevelt had inveighed against the Bride's "well nigh intolerable" course and attitude, and informed Churchill that more and more people were realising that the disturbances de Gaulle caused, were being financed partly, if not wholly, by British funds. Roosevelt alleged that de Gaulle had "the Messianic complex" and falsely believed that he had the full support of most French people; in the President's opinion, he had thus far played only a minimal rôle in the war effort, whereas Giraud had made a real contribution. Roosevelt professed to be more and more disturbed by de Gaulle's machinations and believed that there ought to be a radical reorganisation of the French Committee.⁸⁴ Indeed, extensive correspondence had occurred between the State Department and Roosevelt on all the worst aspects of the de Gaulle problem and in the interests of winning Churchill over to his way of thinking, Roosevelt

⁸³ Churchill to Attlee and Eden, 21 May 1943, Z6026/148/17G, FO 371/36037.

⁸⁴ Roosevelt to Churchill, 8 May 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol II, pp 111-12.

made this American chronicle of suspicion and intrigue available to him.⁸⁵ Churchill was a willing convert: he informed Attlee and Eden that he was now convinced that de Gaulle should be told that Britain no longer considered her previous agreements with the Free French as valid.

The War Cabinet met at 9.00pm on Sunday 23 May to discuss the Prime Minister's bombshell. Heavy emphasis was laid upon how close to an agreement Giraud and de Gaulle now were, which the Chancellor of the Exchequer⁸⁶ confirmed with information available to him from private sources. It was pointed out that one of the most obvious objections to abandoning de Gaulle was the trouble that 80,000 odd aggrieved Fighting French troops might cause in strategically important parts of the world; likewise, the First Lord of the Admiralty⁸⁷ admitted that a rupture with de Gaulle would certainly cause some temporary difficulties and inconvenience amongst naval ranks. Furthermore, the point was raised that to break with de Gaulle directly after the Prime Minister's American trip would doubtless arouse speculation that American pressure was behind the move. The Cabinet, which was far less susceptible than Churchill to the American barrage, thought it important to realise that American policy makers were only just waking up to the fact that in supporting Giraud, they had backed the wrong horse and that this probably accounted for the pressure now being mounted to oust de Gaulle. It was unanimously agreed that a break with de Gaulle would be extremely difficult to justify now that an agreement seemed so near, and would be better

⁸⁵ For copies of this correspondence, see Z6026/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

⁸⁶ The Chancellor of the Exchequer was Sir Kingsley Wood who died in September 1943, and was replaced by Sir John Anderson.

⁸⁷ First Lord of the Admiralty was the Right Honourable A. V. Alexander.

warranted should de Gaulle continue to make trouble after union had been achieved.

Much care and effort were consequently expended on the reply to Churchill. Eden registered his annoyance that although the de Gaulle problem was evidently "rankling" the Americans a good deal, he had received no such indication from the American Embassy.⁸⁸ More directly, Churchill was bluntly told that the Cabinet did not consider that the policy he so strongly recommended was "practicable". Anglo-American policy, blessed by both Churchill and Roosevelt at Anfa, had been geared towards "marrying" de Gaulle and Giraud for the past four months. To split with de Gaulle when union was just around the corner seemed sheer folly.

It was pointed out to Churchill that the American documents supplied could "hardly be said to have been written by unbiased and objective observers"; in complete contrast to Roosevelt's assertions, evidence suggested that de Gaulle's personal position within France was strong and growing stronger and moreover, it was his name that mattered.⁸⁹ It was felt that even if Britain renounced de Gaulle, the present members of the National Committee were unlikely to disavow him and the effect on the Resistance would be shattering, making the various elements more and more likely to gravitate towards Russia for support. It was also quite possible that de Gaulle would become something of

⁸⁸ Churchill took this point up subsequently with Eden, warning him that the American documents he had received, were given him by Roosevelt "in the course of intimate and friendly discussion and must therefore be considered privileges in the highest degree". He ordered Eden that on no account were they to be used as the basis of a complaint against Ambassador Winant. Churchill to Eden, 24 May 1943, Z6169/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

⁸⁹ De Gaulle's position had been greatly strengthened by the creation on 15 May, of the Conseil National de la Résistance, and the unequivocal declaration of support for de Gaulle by its leader, Jean Moulin.

a national martyr, and that Britain and America would be accused of interference in French internal affairs and of the desire to create an Anglo-American protectorate of France when it was eventually liberated.

A lengthy second telegram carefully refuted point by point each accusation the Americans had levelled at de Gaulle. A third telegram outlined the considerable number of agreements Britain would be required to invalidate if she did break with de Gaulle and the serious embarrassment that this would cause to the Allied war effort:

Indeed, an impossible situation would be created unless steps could be taken in advance to ensure that some other French authority was able and willing to take over these commitments which the National Committee has entered into with us.

The telegram continued:

We are sorry not to be more helpful but we are convinced that the Americans are wrong ... and advocate a line which would not be understood here, with possible evil consequences to Anglo-American relations.⁹⁰

Fortunately for de Gaulle, who by now had been persuaded to accept Giraud's offer, Churchill was halted in his tracks by this admonition from the Cabinet. Though disgruntled, the Prime Minister was determined not to give in. He replied on 24 May:

It is a new fact to me that de Gaulle is about to meet Giraud, and I agree that we should await the results of their meeting ... I have no intention of marring my relations with the President by arguing in the sense of your various telegrams ... I have given you my warnings of the dangers to Anglo-

⁹⁰ Attlee and Eden to Churchill, 23 May 1943, Z6026/148/17G, FO 371/36047; Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 9.00pm, Sunday, 23 May 1943, CAB 65/34.

American unity inherent in your championship of de Gaulle.⁹¹

Churchill believed that Britain was receiving "indispensable help" from America, and affirmed that he would be "very sorry to become responsible for breaking up this harmony for the sake of a Frenchman who is a bitter foe of Britain and may well bring civil war upon France".⁹² For the moment however, Churchill did not press his views any further.

v) The Bride and Bridegroom Embrace

During his visit to London between 22 and 27 May, Macmillan had undoubtedly proved invaluable to the Foreign Office in helping to combat the Prime Minister's renewed inclination to dispense with de Gaulle. Furthermore, it had at last been arranged that de Gaulle should fly to Algiers on 30 May, for negotiations with Giraud. On his return to Algiers with Catroux, Macmillan landed at Gibraltar and was surprised to encounter the Prime Minister's party there. Instead of returning directly to London, the Prime Minister had decided to follow up his Washington conversations with a visit to North Africa to convince Eisenhower that "nothing less than Rome" would be satisfactory as the next strategic phase of the war.⁹³ Predictably, Churchill immediately apprised Macmillan of "all the difficulties which he had had in Washington -- daily and almost hourly attacks by the President and other Americans upon de Gaulle". Nonetheless, Macmillan thought that the Prime Minister seemed "relieved"

⁹¹ Churchill to Attlee and Eden, 24 May 1943, Z6026/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ See Gilbert, *op cit*, p 414. Kersaudy points out that the possibility of union between Giraud and de Gaulle had also irresistibly drawn Churchill. See Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 281.

that the negotiations between the two French camps were now "going better than he had expected".⁹⁴ Indeed, Churchill subsequently sent for Eden, commenting that he was "better fitted to be best-man at the Giraud-de Gaulle wedding" than himself.⁹⁵ This still did not prevent Churchill however, from continuing to express his grave doubts about de Gaulle in private conversation.⁹⁶

De Gaulle himself arrived in Algiers as arranged on 30 May, and when Eden arrived, only a day later, negotiations between the French factions⁹⁷ were already foundering. The situation was complex: both Giraud and de Gaulle were desperate to protect and maintain their own positions and principles. Giraud wanted to maintain his military rôle as Commander-in-Chief as well as his political function as co-President, whereas de Gaulle claimed that this was unconstitutional. The latter stubbornly refused to relent, insisting that the military command should be answerable to the executive committee and that certain former Vichy officials should resign their posts. The point came, by 2 June, where Massigli and Catroux confessed to Macmillan that

⁹⁴ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 4 June 1943, p 94.

⁹⁵ Churchill to Attlee and Eden, 29 May 1943, CAB 120/86. Churchill added the comment that Eden would be "conscious of the atmosphere and in touch with the actors in what may easily be a serious drama".

⁹⁶ See Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 281-82. Kersaudy has published an uncensored version of Murphy's report of his conversation on 30 May, with Churchill, Macmillan and Admiral Cunningham, in which Churchill mentioned that "in his opinion, de Gaulle [was] fully capable of a putsch", and that "he had no illusions about de Gaulle's thirst for personal power".

⁹⁷ Apart from Giraud and de Gaulle, the main personalities involved were: for de Gaulle, Catroux, Philip and Massigli; for Giraud, General Georges and Monnet.

they were ready to break with him.⁹⁸ Macmillan and Murphy supplied constant encouragement and advice, and a final meeting on 3 June paid off when, at lunch, Macmillan received the news that "the seven French stars had met and formed themselves into a definite constellation", namely the Comité Français de la Libération Nationale. The Committee had been formed under the joint presidency of Giraud and de Gaulle to exercise French sovereignty and to oversee the French war effort everywhere.⁹⁹ Churchill, returning from an inspection tour of the Tunisian battle-fields, informed Roosevelt on 4 June: "the Bride and Bridegroom have at last physically embraced ... I will not attempt to mar the domestic bliss by any intrusions of my own".¹⁰⁰

Roosevelt however, was determined not to let Churchill off the hook so easily. Instead of accepting events, he called for a vigorous Anglo-American effort against de Gaulle and ended: "Best of luck in getting rid of our mutual headache".¹⁰¹ Churchill was indeed hoist by his own petard, but did his level best to struggle free. He explained to Roosevelt his conviction that the new Committee was "a body with collective responsibility" with which Britain and America could "safely work" and within which de Gaulle

⁹⁸ For a more detailed account of the complex negotiations between Giraud and de Gaulle, see the following: Macmillan, War Diaries, pp 94-110; Macmillan, The Blast of War, pp 306-40; Catroux, *op cit*, pp 340-72; Alastair Horne, Macmillan, 1894-1956, Vol I, (London, 1988) pp 179-87; B. Ledwidge, De Gaulle, (London, 1982), pp 145-51.

⁹⁹ See Macmillan, War Diaries, p 108-109, for the text of the proclamation issued by the French Committee on 3 June.

¹⁰⁰ Churchill to Roosevelt, 4 June 1943, quoted in Gilbert, *op cit*, p 425. Massigli had told Macmillan on 3 June that at the end of the meeting of the French, de Gaulle had embraced Giraud. See Macmillan, War Diaries, Record of conversation (with Massigli), 3 June 1943, pp 107-108.

¹⁰¹ Cited in B. Ledwidge, *op cit*, p 152.

should prove more manageable; should he prove "violent or unreasonable", he would be in a minority of five to two, and possibly "completely isolated". Moreover, he claimed that the establishment of the Committee ended Britain's own official connection with de Gaulle as the leader of Fighting France.¹⁰²

Churchill may have believed that he had thus wriggled free; the Foreign Office, however, was sceptical. Butler thought that American hostility towards de Gaulle seemed "almost implacable", and the only thing which might placate it was "a serious and sustained attempt by de Gaulle himself to do so". This seemed so very unlikely, that it was

difficult not to foresee a long period of Franco-American friction and of more or less latent American feeling that it was the Foreign Office that produced the situation by maintaining de Gaulle and pressing for a French union that they knew would give the new French anti-American Hitler great opportunities to secure a commanding position.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gilbert, *op cit*, pp 426-28; Ledwidge, *op cit*, p 152. In a statement to the House of Commons on 8 June, in which Churchill emphasised the "intimacy and strength" of the ties uniting Britain and America, he announced his intentions of transferring all subsidies to the newly-established CFLN. Macmillan delivered a note to that effect to Massigli on 17 June, commenting subsequently in a letter to Churchill, that in his opinion, the effect could only be salutary for "Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also". Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 17 June 1943, p 125.

¹⁰³ Minute by N. Butler, 27 May 1943, Z6026/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

CHAPTER THREE

TROUBLED TIMES AHEAD

i) Counting The Cost Of Marriage

The ramifications of any eventual de Gaulle-Giraud agreement were indeed bound to be far-reaching and none realised this more acutely than Spears. He had long suspected that the French were postponing elections in the Levant until the situation in North Africa had clarified; any union which came about was bound to make them feel that their position had been strengthened, and make them more inclined to throw their weight about. What Spears had not expected, and which therefore came as a very grave shock, was a tentative Treasury allusion, early in May, to the possible creation of a franc bloc to include Syria and the Lebanon, now that the prospect of a unified French empire seemed more likely.¹

The Treasury had telegraphed Lawson, (Financial adviser to the Spears Mission), for his own most secret information, to warn him of the possibility of developments in the near future, should de Gaulle and Giraud agree upon a unified French movement. The telegram continued:

This would probably result in the adjustment of the Fighting French franc rate to 200 to £ and the creation of a French bloc outside the sterling area, comprising the whole French Empire, together with Syria and Lebanon.²

¹ Treasury to Lawson, (Financial Adviser to the Spears Mission), 1 May 1943, E2077/18/89, FO 371/35168. Syria and the Lebanon had been linked to the sterling area since the British and Free French invasion in 1941.

² *ibid.*

Spears, who was horrified at the very thought of such a scheme, marshalled all his arguments into a telegram on 4 May, with the intent of nipping it in the bud. In particular, he predicted serious financial instability in the Levant, spelling out dire effects on British prestige and military security there.³

In these opinions he was strongly supported by Casey, who "fully endorsed ... Spears' comments and his appreciation of the unfortunate consequences of the policy which the Treasury appears to be contemplating".⁴ Casey had long been engaged in a fierce battle against inflation, which, by early 1943, had reached serious proportions.⁵ Though the problem was grave throughout the Middle East, in Syria and Lebanon, Anglo-French military expenditure of almost £28 million per annum combined with a growing scarcity of goods to create a particularly severe situation, which the local governments were ill-equipped and even less inclined to tackle, being too preoccupied with the forthcoming elections. Casey had in fact, only recently returned from the Levant where a special study of the problem was being undertaken by Treasury representatives in conjunction with a French financial expert. A report had been produced, a copy of which had been despatched to the Foreign Office, outlining the various remedial measures necessary to try and check inflation before the situation became dangerous.⁶

³ Spears to Foreign Office, 4 May 1943, E2565/18/89, FO 371/35168.

⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 4 May 1943, E2565/18/89, FO 371/35168; Casey to Foreign Office, 6 May 1943, E2633/18/89, FO 371/35169.

⁵ See Lord Casey, Personal Experience, 1939-46, (London, 1962), pp 134-137; Spears to Treasury, 9 January 1943, E208/18/89, FO 371/35168.

⁶ Lloyd to Waley, 18 March 1943, E1614/18/89, FO 371/35168; Casey to Foreign Office, 6 May 1943, E2634/18/89 and Report entitled "Inflation in the Levant and the

In their joint efforts to destroy the suggestion of a franc bloc, Spears and Casey argued that to renege on the promises of 1941 would constitute a breach of faith and greatly harm British prestige not only in the Levant but throughout the Middle East. Syrian and Lebanese inclusion in the sterling area had been regarded by those countries as the cement around the British guarantee of Levant independence; reversion to a franc bloc could hardly be justified as a "war measure" and would imply to the Levant peoples that they were still to be regarded "as some sort of annex to the French Empire". Britain would be accused of conniving at the restoration and perpetuation of one of the most hated aspects of French rule, the economic exploitation of the Levant. From bitter experience, the Levant population lacked faith in the French currency and the creation of a franc bloc would cause a flight from currency into commodities with drastic inflationary consequences. Both Spears and Casey also drew attention to the detrimental effect of Syrian and Lebanese association in a franc bloc on any movement towards closer economic union between Arab states.⁷

The Foreign Office thought that Spears had not only over-reacted, but that he had done so prematurely. The Treasury was still only exploring possibilities, and, Eyres minuted, was fully aware of the likely repercussions in the Levant of Syrian and Lebanese inclusion in a franc bloc as well as the likelihood of strong French opposition to any

measures necessary to combat it", written by R. Busson, E. M. H. Lloyd, W. W. Lawson and H. Thomas, E2906/18/89; both in FO 371/35169.

⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 4 May 1943, E2565/18/89, FO 371/35168; Casey to Foreign Office, 6 May 1943, E2633/18/89, FO 371/35169.

possibility that Syria and the Lebanon might be excluded.⁸ As Eyres commented:

Nothing will ever cure [the French] of their suspicions of our intentions in Syria and they would regard a proposal to retain Syria in the sterling area as sure proof of our intentions to oust them from the Levant.⁹

A note from Fraser¹⁰ to Peterson revealed that the Treasury fully realised that in raising the matter of Syrian and Lebanese membership of a franc bloc, they were also raising "a matter of prime political importance", namely the relationship of Syria and Lebanon with France. Although the subject obviously needed to be faced up to, "probably sooner rather than later", the Treasury conveniently preferred not to trespass on this particularly dangerous piece of Foreign Office territory, and thought it unwise to do so, especially over the question of Syrian and Lebanese attachment to a particular currency. Nonetheless, the Treasury trotted out assorted arguments and explanations designed to resolve the anxieties of Spears and Casey, and to demonstrate that the franc bloc would not have the disastrous results anticipated by them. It was pointed out that the Syrian pound would still be linked to sterling at a fixed rate and could only be altered by agreement. Although a slight devaluation of the franc and the Syrian pound would occur, as the inflated Syrian pound stood too high anyway, such depreciation would be beneficial and of no real consequence. The change in the relationship of Syria and the Lebanon to the sterling area, the Treasury argued, would be "technical and a matter of form" and therefore hardly noticeable. If properly

⁸ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 5 May 1943, E2565/18/89, FO 371/35168.

⁹ Minutes by H. M. Eyres, 8 May 1943 and by Sir M. Peterson, 10 May 1943, E2633/18/89, FO 371/35169.

¹⁰ W. L. Fraser: Temporary Principal Assistant Secretary in the Treasury.

explained, the new measures should cause relatively little concern and there would certainly be no grounds for Syria and the Lebanon to claim that Britain had broken faith with them. Indeed, the Treasury viewed the consequences of excluding the Levant from the franc bloc with more trepidation than the consequences of their inclusion, since not only would French suspicions be aroused, but Britain would lay herself open to accusations that she was seeking to take advantage of France's temporary weakness.¹¹

Eyres quite agreed with the Treasury arguments and submitted his own view that in 1941, there had been no suggestion that the Syrian pound would be permanently linked to sterling. Syria and Lebanon had been admitted to the sterling area not as independent states, but as mandated territories under *de facto* control of Fighting France. They could therefore have "no legitimate grievance" if they were subsequently included in a franc bloc. Eyres concluded firmly that in view of the French suspicions that would be aroused if Britain sought to exclude Syria and Lebanon from the franc bloc, "we must accept the position that the Syrian pound will have to follow the franc and that we must take the risks described by Sir E. Spears".¹²

Accordingly, all the Treasury arguments were assembled in a telegram to Casey and Spears which carefully stressed that any new French organisation which did emerge in North Africa was likely to be "less amenable to British influence than the present National Committee in London" and "at least equally intransigent on any point which may affect the maintenance of the French position in the Levant States".

¹¹ Note from Fraser to Sir M. Peterson, 11 May 1943, E2873/18/89, FO 371/35169.

¹² Minute by H. M. Eyres, 12 May 1943, E2873/18/89, FO 371/35169.

The French were sure to press strongly for Syrian and Lebanese inclusion in a franc bloc and

to contest their views would be to raise in a most acute form the whole question of the relations of Syria and the Lebanon with France, and from the point of view of our relations with the new Giraud-de Gaulle administration, it would be preferable not to bring to head such a delicate political issue over membership of the sterling area.

It went on to underline that if the matter were brought to a head,

the question will sooner or later arise whether His Majesty's Government are determined not only to refuse to allow Syria and Lebanon to belong to a franc bloc, but to retain them in the sterling bloc and whether His Majesty's Government are prepared (probably without American support or approval) to risk a major political dispute with the French on this issue at the very moment, *ex hypothesi*, at which the French are united among themselves, and such as may prejudice the war effort?¹³

Casey and Spears had no hesitation in answering this unfortunate question with a resounding "Yes". Both immediately fired off telegrams to the Foreign Office, reasserting and reinforcing their previous objections, on which the Treasury arguments had had no impact whatsoever. Casey warned against presenting the States with a *fait accompli* and advised that no switch should occur without consulting the States and obtaining their agreement. However much it might be argued that the changes contemplated were only technical, the Levant peoples viewed sterling as "their only solid rock", and the psychological and political effects of inclusion in a franc bloc would be considerable. Furthermore, he contended, although in 1941 nothing was ever said about the Levant States remaining permanently in the

¹³ Foreign Office to Casey and Spears, 23 May 1943, E2873/18/89, FO 371/35169.

sterling area, it had been promised that they would do so "whilst hostilities last". "The Arabs", Casey alleged, "always lend willing ears to tales of our aptitude to break political promises and the effect of what would be regarded as a breach of faith on our part might well be far-reaching throughout the Middle East". Casey even believed that rumours of the proposed transfer might already have reached the Levant and have been responsible for the recent sharp rise in the price of gold.¹⁴

Similarly, Spears could not agree with the Treasury that the unfortunate consequences he had predicted might be avoided, and he continued to warn of "calamitous political effects" and "chaos" in the commercial markets.¹⁵ Whereas earlier the Foreign Office had dismissed the Spears-Casey predictions in favour of the Treasury arguments, Eyres confessed that it now seemed "difficult to ignore these Cassandra-like prophecies". Yet equally, he realised, there seemed little hope of ever convincing the French. For the time being however, it was decided, (and Spears and Casey were informed accordingly), that the matter should be put aside, at least until wider issues had been resolved.¹⁶

ii) Deteriorating Relations

In late May, Spears divulged to Wadsworth that he had advised Casey two weeks previously that

whatever the outcome of the current de Gaulle-Giraud negotiations ... we might expect more trouble in

¹⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 1 June 1943, E3210/18/89, FO 371/35169.

¹⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 5 June 1943, E3256/18/89, FO 371/35169.

¹⁶ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 7 June 1943, E3210/18/89, FO 371/35169.

Lebanon and Syria; for, if unity should result, the French would probably wish to take over fuller military and naval responsibilities, and if not, de Gaulle would again concentrate more attention on these countries.¹⁷

In fact, well before French union was realised, Spears believed he had had a foretaste of the trouble to come. On 20 May, without prior consultation with any relevant British authority, Admiral Auboyneau¹⁸, who was visiting the Levant, had broadcast an address on Radio Levant in which he referred to the increasingly important rôle the French navy intended to play in the Middle Eastern theatre. More specifically, he announced that reinforcements would shortly arrive to enable France gradually to resume responsibility for the defence of Syria and the Lebanon which she still had a mandate to protect. He concluded that the Levant States "might rest assured that France and her navy continued to watch over them".¹⁹

Spears was incensed at what he considered a "flagrant attempt to confront [Britain] with a fait accompli in the publicity line". Auboyneau, "otherwise courtesy itself", had raised the spectre of overall French command in the Levant. Spears was convinced that the Admiral must have acted on direct instructions from de Gaulle, as the stunt seemed so typical of the General's methods. Auboyneau's statement was obviously a mere prelude to a French bid for operational control of the two main Levant ports of Beirut and Tripoli. Spears informed London of his suspicions, complaining that publication of the speech in the local press had caused

¹⁷ Wadsworth to Hull, 24 May 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol. IV, p 972.

¹⁸ Admiral Auboyneau: in March 1943, on the dismissal of Muselier, Philippe Auboyneau had become Commander in Chief of the French Navy.

¹⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 May 1943, E2971/27/89, FO 371/35177.

great consternation amongst port employees, and might trigger off more general unrest. A conversation with the Commodore for the Levant Area confirmed Spears' suspicions. The Commodore had already warned the Commander-in-Chief that that Auboyneau was about to broach the subject of French operational control of the Levant ports and registered his own protest that "the least concession which might lead to the present accepted British control being upset ... would be a tragedy".²⁰ Spears used the Commodore's arguments to back up his own protest and warned the Foreign Office not to allow itself to be "jockeyed into a position in which the Allied war interests have to be sacrificed to Fighting French *amour propre*".²¹

With little faith in the likelihood of a sufficiently firm response from the Foreign Office, Spears informed Casey of his misgivings: Beirut and Tripoli were vital military and civilian supply bases which Britain had controlled since 1941; for them to pass to the French would create untold difficulties and would be "nothing short of disaster". The war effort would suffer merely "to gratify French prestige".²² As Spears probably desired, Casey informed Churchill in a letter that there was

no doubt that a concerted drive by the Free French is in progress in Syria and the Lebanon to diminish our influence there and to increase their own. Admiral Auboyneau wants to take over control of

²⁰ Commodore Levant Area to Commander-in-Chief, Middle East and GOC 9th Army, 18 May 1943, WO 201/989A.

²¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 May 1943, E2980/27/89, FO 371/35177.

²² Spears to Casey, 22 May 1943, E2979/27/89, FO 371/35177. Amongst other things, Spears claimed that both Norwegian and Greek navies used the ports and would refuse to accept orders from the Fighting French. Furthermore, the effect on British prestige vis-à-vis Turkey would be bad.

Syrian and Lebanese ports (Beirut and Tripoli) from the Royal Navy.²³

Preliminary Admiralty reactions however, were that Auboyneau had said "nothing very surprising or extraordinary"; he had not actually asked for operational control -- "all that is pure surmise".²⁴ The Foreign Office professed to be pleased that at last the French seemed to want to play a larger part in the war. After further discussions with the Admiralty, it was concluded that Auboyneau's remarks were really "fairly harmless". Nonetheless, however dismissive the two departments were of Auboyneau's remarks, a firm decision was taken by both the Foreign Office and the Admiralty that should the French ever request operational control, it was to be firmly resisted on the grounds that it would be harmful to the war effort.²⁵ This view was explained to Auboyneau by Casey on 28 May, apparently without problem.²⁶

Nonetheless, other incidents continued to occur which only served to increase British suspicions that once de Gaulle had consolidated his position as head of a united French movement, a more intransigent policy would be adopted by the French and trouble was to be expected in the Levant. Since Catroux's departure in late March, there had been a

²³ Casey to Churchill, 29 March 1943, PREM 3 305/10. Casey also mentioned a French attempt to oust Britain from the joint cereal collection scheme, and the proposal to move the Levant States out of the sterling area and into a franc bloc. "These three matters", he continued "are causing Spears and me a great deal of anxiety".

²⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 24 May 1943, E2980/27/89, FO 371/35177. Hankey had been serving in the Middle East but was transferred to the Foreign Office on 31 March 1943.

²⁵ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 27 May 1943, E3053/27/89, FO 371/35177.

²⁶ Casey to Foreign Office, 28 May 1943, E3121/27/89, FO 371/35177.

marked deterioration in relations with the French at all levels. Circumstances were particularly bad at Deir ez Zor in Syria, where trouble had long been brewing over the overtly unco-operative behaviour of the Délégué Adjoint, Colonel Alessandri. The situation had been sufficiently bad to merit a meeting on 25 March between General Wilson and Général Catroux.²⁷ Matters continued to worsen however: on 27 March, Brigadier R. K. Jago²⁸ reported that Alessandri had vowed to protect the interests and privileges of France "foot by foot and with his life". The Frenchman had commented that whilst there were certain agreements with Britain with which he would honourably comply, he strongly objected to the British "arrogation of powers, interests, details ... etc. not specifically granted by these agreements". One of Alessandri's main faults, so Jago alleged, was his tendency to make frequent "almost frivolous verbal complaints" against British officers to Major Gunn, the British Political Liaison Officer. A recent series had focused on remarks a British officer was alleged to have made which reflected gravely on the honour of French women. The remarks had all been made within earshot of French officers, but worst of all, each had been accompanied by "un clignement d'oeil". Jago admitted that if the allegations were true, then the remarks had been "stupid and tactless", but even so, he hardly thought they merited a démarche by Alessandri. He could only conclude that Alessandri was "a man of narrow outlook who pays no attention to the implications of a world-wide war".²⁹

²⁷ Holmes to Catroux, 21 March 1943; Notes on meeting between Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces, General Wilson and Général Catroux, 25 March 1943; both in WO 201/989A.

²⁸ Brigadier R. K. Jago: representative of the Ninth Army in the Jezireh region..

²⁹ Jago to Holmes, 27 March 1943, WO 201/989A.

Just after Catroux's departure for Algiers, the situation escalated when Alessandri challenged the validity of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements governing Anglo-French relations and respective functions in the Levant. Most significantly, he claimed that his forces were numerically superior and he should therefore have overall military responsibility for the area. This the British would not concede, but Gunn found it impossible to persuade Alessandri that the British were not carrying out a systematic campaign against France; he reported that he had become "even more convinced" that the Frenchman would make no attempt to cooperate in the spirit required.³⁰

On Saturday, 10 April, at a joint Anglo-French meeting at the Résidence des Pins³¹, it was decided that Alessandri should be relieved of his post.³² In fact, he was sent on a fortnight's leave which was subsequently prolonged indefinitely. When Jago was informed of this some two weeks later, he was instructed that under no circumstances should he convey the impression of having scored off the French, and, at Humblot's³³ specific request, he was also obliged to take a fortnight's leave.³⁴ To cement the deal, Holmes wrote to Helleu, as he had undertaken to do so, detailing Alessandri's worst transgressions. These he claimed, had made it apparent to all, even the Syrians, that there was a

³⁰ H. Gunn to R. K. Jago, 6 April 1943, Note 142/P/E/2, WO 201/989A.

³¹ The Résidence des Pins was the official residence of the French Délégué Général in Beirut. The meeting was attended by Helleu, Général Humblot, Général Bapst, Spears, General Holmes and Brigadier Oliver.

³² Note: Decisions at Meeting, Résidence des Pins, Beirut, Saturday 10 April 1943, WO 201/989A.

³³ Général Humblot: Commander of French troops in the Levant.

³⁴ Telegram to Brigadier R. K. Jago, 23 April 1943, WO 201/989A.

rift in Anglo-French relations in the area.³⁵ Together with his intolerable attitude towards the existing system of control, Holmes was forced to conclude that Colonel Alessandri had "deliberately set out to ruin Anglo-French relations in the Jezireh".³⁶

Considerable effort was made by the British to start on a good footing with Lanusse, Alessandri's replacement. Jago welcomed him on arrival and later paid him a courtesy call. Yet from these meetings alone, Jago concluded that Anglo-French relations in the area still had no chance of success. Lanusse had declared that his instructions were unclear and required clarification; he had furthermore refused to accept that any operations which he undertook required Jago's prior consent, though he at least promised that he would consult him beforehand. Lanusse had made plain his belief that no differences existed between Britain and France at a military level, "but that the whole of the Franco-British troubles in Syria stemmed from British officers in the O.C.P."³⁷ and British Political Officers deliberately acting against the interests of France". Depressingly, Jago saw little hope of satisfactory co-operation.³⁸

Indeed, relations between the British and French representatives at Deir ez Zor were provoking sufficient concern to warrant another meeting between Holmes and Helleu on 18 June. The latter promised that Lanusse would be ordered to obey his instructions to the letter and to adopt a courteous attitude towards Gunn, though he also angled for

³⁵ General W. G. Holmes to Helleu, 30 April 1943, 9A/11/ADC, WO 201/989A.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ O.C.P.: Office des Céréales Panifiables, a joint Anglo-French organisation set up to administer the wheat collection scheme.

³⁸ Jago to Holmes, 1 June 1943, WO 201/989A

Gunn's replacement.³⁹ Despite these promises, Lanusse remained obstructive and Jago informed Holmes on 21 June that it was plain that he really objected to the very existence of a British Political Liaison Officer at all. Real co-operation with the French seemed almost impossible, but Jago recorded that he felt obliged "to avoid an impasse at all costs and to pretend the thing works, knowing in fact, that it does not and cannot work, because our partners do not acknowledge the principles which we consider inherent in our association".⁴⁰ British disillusionment grew as Helleu and Chataigneau⁴¹ completely evaded discussion about Deir ez Zor, and General Humblot, who was touring the area supposedly to undertake an impartial investigation of the matter, failed to consult either Jago or Gunn. Lanusse continued his discourtesies and remained intransigent about his instructions, even alleging that he had de Gaulle's personal backing, a claim which Lascelles considered "might well be true".⁴² Matters were eased somewhat when Lanusse was summoned to Beirut and apparently reprimanded; as a result of this, he undertook henceforth to maintain a polite façade with Gunn. Gunn was now in fact the problem: he had become so obsessed with his grievances as to present an obstacle to the improvement of relations. Lascelles suggested that he ought to be replaced and Spears agreed.⁴³ When the French shortly followed suit by replacing Lanusse with Cassin and

³⁹ Record of a conversation between Army Commander and M. Helleu, 10.30am, 18 June 1943, by W. G. Holmes, WO 201/989A.

⁴⁰ Jago to Holmes, 21 June 1943, 8D 319, WO 201/989A.

⁴¹ Yves Chataigneau: Secrétaire Général de la Délégation Générale.

⁴² Lascelles to Foreign Office, 26 June 1943, E3702/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴³ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 9 July 1943, E4007/27/89, FO 371/35178.

Belmont⁴⁴, relations between Britain and France in the area were given an entirely clean sheet.

iii) The MokkaDEM Affair

These problems at Deir ez Zor might well have been overlooked had it not been for major difficulties with the French in another sphere. On 21 April, Rashid MokkaDEM, an influential Tripoli notable and renowned gangster and smuggler, and several of his gang, were arrested by the British and charged with having suborned British military personnel to smuggle narcotics. Unfortunately however, MokkaDEM was also Tripoli's most prominent "French" candidate in the forthcoming elections and the French viewed his arrest as a deliberate British ploy to ensure the success of his main rival, Abd al Hamid al Karami. When MokkaDEM was duly surrendered to the French for trial, the British were informed that French law had no article for subornment and therefore MokkaDEM would only be tried on the charge of smuggling, the penalty for which would be negligible. The French did promise that the subornment charge would be taken into account and that MokkaDEM would not be permitted to stand for election, though all British requests for MokkaDEM's deportation were refused. Confirming worst British fears, MokkaDEM was completely acquitted on 21 June and put into "protective custody" by the French. British personnel sent to rearrest him were warned that any attempt to do so would be resisted by force; instead, they

⁴⁴ Cassin had recently rallied from Kabul, where he was known to have done good work for the Allied cause; Belmont had in fact recently been in trouble for his exceptionally pro-British attitude. Lascelles to Foreign Office, 21 July 1943, E4254/27/89, FO 371/35179.

had to content themselves with mounting a guard on the prison in which he was housed.⁴⁵

At a meeting on 22 June, Holmes appealed for a retrial but Helleu refused. The latter confessed that French behaviour was dictated largely by matters of electoral prestige and insisted that MokkaDEM should be allowed to return to Tripoli, where he would be kept under house arrest and handed over after the elections. Helleu threatened that otherwise he would retaliate by arresting Camille Chamoun⁴⁶, a notoriously "British" candidate, and warned that any attempt to arrest MokkaDEM would be considered "an act of extreme gravity, liable to cause serious prejudice to Anglo-French relations".⁴⁷ Lascelles thought that Helleu's threat to arrest Chamoun, "a perfectly innocent and very popular man", revealed "in the clearest possible light the French attitude towards the elections and local French mentality in general"; it also constituted a predicament, for British inability to protect Chamoun would disastrously affect her prestige and quickly dissipate the current healthy election atmosphere.⁴⁸

Faced with such a dilemma, Holmes considered he had little option but to succumb to the French. By 24 June however, the French had raised their demands: Helleu wrote to Holmes⁴⁹ not only insisting that MokkaDEM be permitted to

⁴⁵ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 23 June 1943, E3632/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁴⁶ Camille Chamoun was a Maronite deputy of outspoken nationalist sympathies.

⁴⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 23 June 1943, E3632/1639/89 and E3633/1639/89, both in FO 371/35210.

⁴⁸ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 23 June 1943, E3632/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁴⁹ Helleu to Holmes, 23 June 1943, contained in Lascelles to Foreign Office, 28 June 1943, E3939/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

return to Tripoli but also to resume his candidature. Lascelles felt sure that the letter had been drafted by Boegner, "the worst member of the whole French administration"; certain passages however, (and one in particular which alleged that numerous British agents in the Levant were engaged in activities "dénudée de tout caractère militaire", and were authorised to intervene "dans des questions politiques qui, aux termes des accords en vigueur, devraient être du seul ressort de l'autorité française et des gouvernements locaux") were so "extremely offensive" as to suggest strongly a telegram from de Gaulle.⁵⁰

In reply, Holmes had firmly refuted the French allegations. He wrote that he was "well aware that a few of the natives of these States -- and for that matter, some Frenchmen also -- entertain the fantastic suspicions of British motives to which you refer". He assured Helleu that he was "completely satisfied ... that such suspicions are not shared by Levantine public opinion as a whole".⁵¹ He stressed the gravity of Mekkadem's offences from the point of view of military security and denied that the population of Tripoli believed Mekkadem's arrest to be inspired by political motives as the whole town appeared to be genuinely delighted by the news.⁵² Lascelles urged London to give Holmes the fullest support, as to concede to Helleu's demands would undermine the British General's military authority and would so damage British prestige as to make the forthcoming elections "an ugly farce".⁵³

⁵⁰ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 24 June 1943, E3670/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁵¹ Holmes to Helleu, 24 June 1943, contained in Lascelles to Foreign Office, 28 June 1943, E3939/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 24 June 1943, E3670/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

Much concern had already been expressed within the Foreign Office about the potential for trouble which the Mokka-dem affair seemed to contain, more so when Lascelles subsequently reported that French troops had been on "alerte" since 22 June, and had orders to open fire in case of trouble with Britain.⁵⁴ After consultation on 25 June with Spears who was in London, it was decided that no matter what, Mokka-dem ought to be handed over to Britain or else tried for subornment.⁵⁵ While the Foreign Office had been deliberating however, events had moved on. Helleu had written again to Holmes, protesting at the police guard outside Mokka-dem's prison, which he felt indicated "an unpleasant lack of trust" in him, and had refused to engage in any further discussions until it was withdrawn. Holmes, accompanied by Lascelles, met Helleu and yielded completely to his new terms: he agreed to remove the guard and to permit his election candidature, though he was still to remain under close surveillance. Helleu, for his part, agreed that if Mokka-dem was elected, Britain could apply to the Lebanese government for his deportation; if he was not elected, then application could be made to the French.

In a subsequent attempt to defend Holmes's submission, Lascelles explained that as the French seemed to regard the candidature of Mokka-dem as absolutely essential to their prestige, Holmes had agreed to Helleu's terms "as a reluctant sacrifice of his military rights to the requirements of inter-Allied relations". The situation was far from satisfactory either from the military security point of view or for British prestige, for, as Lascelles observed, "concessions have had to be made to an attitude

⁵⁴ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 26 June 1943, No 368, E3700/27/89, FO 371/35210.

⁵⁵ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 25 June 1943, E3670/1639/89, FO 35210.

which subordinates Allied co-operation in the war effort to a thoroughly disreputable electioneering policy"; Helleu was now "entirely under the influence of his own bad men ... and as the French are showing their fangs in a number of other ways, doubtless at the insistence of Algiers, our moderation in this case may encourage them to further intransigence".⁵⁶ The Mokkadem case therefore, combined with the troubled state of affairs at Deir ez Zor, forced Lascelles to conclude that the situation was deteriorating as part of a general French policy; most of all, he suspected that de Gaulle, in his recently strengthened rôle in Algiers was inspiring the increasingly assertive and perverse French behaviour.⁵⁷

iv) The Bride Asserts Himself

Just prior to the formation of the CFLN, Macmillan reassured de Gaulle that as time passed, he would be able, "without straining the law or acting in any way unconstitutionally, [to] obtain for himself and for those who were with him, the reality of power".⁵⁸ In fact, de Gaulle needed no such assurance for "a commanding position" was his main objective, and one which he lost no time in single-mindedly setting out to attain. By 7 June, the Committee had voted to double its size, and in so doing, de Gaulle's position had been much strengthened.⁵⁹ Nonetheless,

⁵⁶ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 26 June 1943, No 368, E3700/1639, FO 371/35210.

⁵⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 28 June 1943, E3723/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁵⁸ Macmillan, War Diaries, Record of conversation, 2 June 1943, pp 104-106.

⁵⁹ The new members of the Committee were Diethelm (Economic Affairs), Tixier (Labour), Pleven (Colonies), all of whom were de Gaulle's nominees. Giraud's nominees were Mayer (Transport), Abadie (Justice), Couve de Murville (Finance). Bonnet was something of a neutral. Of the

Macmillan attempted to reassure the Prime Minister that de Gaulle would find it as difficult to control the larger Committee; he stressed that the civilian elements of the Committee were banding together to ensure that it asserted its proper constitutional authority.⁶⁰ The important issue of command of the French forces still remained outstanding and over this, as Macmillan recorded, there was "a bit of a flurry".⁶¹ It was Giraud's intention to remain both Commander-in-Chief and co-President of the Committee. De Gaulle however, declared this unconstitutional and aimed to create the post of Commissioner for National Defence to which the High Command would be responsible. De Gaulle also resented the initial tendency of the Committee to behave as a debating assembly rather than as an executive machine. Consequently, he wrote to Giraud on 9 June voicing these complaints; he stated that he would be failing in his duty to continue his association with the Committee as it presently functioned, and asked that he no longer be considered as either a member or President of the Committee.⁶²

original seven members of the Committee, Monnet had long since realised Giraud's political ineptitude, and effectively supported de Gaulle (General Georges, the only person on whom Giraud could rely, complained to Macmillan that Monnet tended to side with de Gaulle when he owed his nomination to Giraud) (Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 10 June 1943, p 116); Couve de Murville and Bonnet were soon to do the same.

⁶⁰ Macmillan to Churchill, 25 June 1943, FO 954/8.

⁶¹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 8 June 1943, p 112.

⁶² For the text of de Gaulle's letter, see FO 892/168. Various motives have been ascribed to de Gaulle's action. Catroux comments that the letter was not really one of resignation, but by stating that he could not accept the conditions under which the Committee was presently operating, he forced the matter out into the open. Catroux, *op cit*, p 376. Murphy thought at the time that there was "a certain amount of bluff" in de Gaulle's action. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 10 June 1943, p 115. Crawley asserts that de Gaulle's action was a strategic move on his behalf. As the arrival in Algiers of his nominees, Pleven, Diethelm

Macmillan, who had sensed "the rumblings of a storm", saw Giraud and General Georges shortly after their receipt of de Gaulle's letter. Both seemed "delighted" by this sudden turn of events and "the possibility of getting rid of de Gaulle once and for all". Giraud proposed to accept the letter immediately but a horrified Macmillan warned that de Gaulle's resignation would have "very grave" results; he pointed out that the disintegration of the union after only eight days in existence would be worse than if it had never come to fruition at all, and strongly advised against any hasty reaction.⁶³ Macmillan's major preoccupation was now to ensure that the Committee did not expire prematurely. As the crisis "slumbered", he urged the various personalities concerned to consider their next steps carefully; in particular, he exhorted de Gaulle to be patient and to adopt a more friendly attitude towards his colleagues; thereby, Macmillan "felt sure that he would get his way on every point on which it was right that he should do so".⁶⁴

Unfortunately, Macmillan was having to contend with "a lot of complicated telegrams" from Churchill, who was evidently not reconciled to the situation as it stood. (Eisenhower too, was similarly being plagued with telegrams from Roosevelt). Churchill had left Algiers still parrying Roosevelt's calls to finish de Gaulle off. He had justified his sudden support for the CFLN by explaining to Roosevelt

and Tixier, had been delayed, he decided to stop the Committee from functioning until their arrival, when he would be absolutely certain of a majority. A. Crawley, de Gaulle, (London, 1969), p 205.

⁶³ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 9 and 10 June 1943, pp 112-118.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, Entries for 10 and 11 June 1943, pp 117-119.

that it would restrict de Gaulle and keep him in check.⁶⁵ Within days however, the Prime Minister was confronted with the fact that, far from being controlled by the Committee, de Gaulle controlled it. Adding insult to injury, one of the Committee's first acts was to ask Britain, through Macmillan, for formal recognition. Though Macmillan had warned de Gaulle that this would inevitably take time Churchill's informal reply had, in fact, been swift: "There can be no question of our giving recognition until we know what it is we have to recognise. See Matthew, chapter vii, verse 16".⁶⁶

Indeed, as more news trickled in of de Gaulle's latest exploits, Churchill's irritation only increased, making the chances of an early recognition more remote than ever. He continued to be "violently anti de G.", noted Harvey, and was "annoyed with the pro-de G. turn of the news from North Africa".⁶⁷ The Prime Minister was particularly concerned by the unswerving support for de Gaulle demonstrated by most sections of the British press. On 12 June, he drafted a circular for the press in which he alleged that de Gaulle was neither a reliable nor a trustworthy friend of Britain; he had "undoubtedly Fascist and dictatorial tendencies" as

⁶⁵ As long ago as February, Churchill had been explaining to Roosevelt that "there should be substituted for de Gaulle de Gaulle in Council, i.e. put him in Commission". Churchill to Roosevelt, 12 February 1943, FO 954/8.

⁶⁶ The Biblical reference read: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?". Macmillan flippantly replied with a reference to Revelations, chapter ii, verses 2-4: "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars. And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love". Macmillan, Blast of War, pp 343-344.

⁶⁷ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 5 June 1943, p 264.

was proven by his present struggle for "complete mastery" of the Committee. The best that could be hoped for was that he would settle down to "loyal teamwork" within the Committee. He exhorted British journalists "to preserve an attitude of coolness and impartiality" when dealing with French quarrels, and to "do their best to prevent them becoming an impediment to the vigorous conduct of the war".⁶⁸ The subsequent appearance of an uncredited article in the Observer on 13 June, heavily critical of de Gaulle, was not evidence of the sycophancy of British journalists -- the article had in fact been penned by the Prime Minister himself.⁶⁹

Though by 14 June Macmillan believed that de Gaulle had been persuaded to stay with the Committee, (if he had ever had any real intention of leaving it), Churchill remained "wild" about North African events, and, Harvey believed, "would do anything now to blacken de G."⁷⁰ The Prime Minister fully concurred with Roosevelt that de Gaulle should not be permitted to gain control of the French Army and bombarded Macmillan with "a stream of angry telegrams" about the matter, which the Foreign Office did their best to attenuate. This arbitrary interference in foreign affairs was bitterly resented, both by Eden and Macmillan, who battled valiantly against Roosevelt's influence on the Prime Minister.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Circular to the press, 12 June 1943, W. S. Churchill, PREM 3 121/1.

⁶⁹ Kersaudy, *op cit*, p 287; Ledwidge, *op cit*, p 153.

⁷⁰ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 14 June 1943, p 266.

⁷¹ Harvey believed Churchill had been so successful in winning Roosevelt over to British plans regarding war strategy that he felt "bound, in return, to accept the latter's French policy". J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 14 June 1943, p 267.

Yet Roosevelt was not the only person exerting an influence on Churchill. Of the interested parties keenly surveying events in North Africa, Spears was still one of the most vigilant. He had frequently complained that he was inadequately informed about the situation there; the Eastern Department however, had seen a positive advantage in not letting him have "too many spicy details" which might lead him to "misleading deductions", and had replied that he need have no fear of being left out of the picture.⁷² In certain matters though, Spears was quick to draw his own conclusions: on 8 June, Helleu had made a press statement June on his appointment as Délégué Général. Stimulated not only by his new-found authority but by the recent events in North Africa, he had asserted that France's temporary defeat could not prevent her maintaining her historic position in the Levant, and only made her feel her responsibility to the Levant peoples more keenly. Such remarks, Spears commented, were "hardly of a nature to reassure the Levant populations as to the future rôle of France in these States".⁷³ In another speech on 18 June, Helleu developed the same themes and claimed that France was now "in a position to speak loudly and firmly to obtain the respect of her rights...". Spears thought it was "obvious that this is now the official French line and equally obvious that it will be resented by the people here". Hankey minuted unsympathetically:

It is also obvious that we don't (and can't) object, as long as our policy remains that the French may keep their predominant position in Syria.⁷⁴

⁷² Spears to Foreign Office, 7 April 1943; Minute by R. L. Speaight, 15 April 1943; Foreign Office to Spears, 16 April 1943. All in Z4433/148/17G, FO 371/36047.

⁷³ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 June 1943, E3324/27/89, FO 371/35177.

⁷⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 19 June 1943; Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 June 1943; both in E3526/27/89, FO 371/35177.

As de Gaulle moved swiftly to assert himself over the ineffectual Giraud, Spears had been horrified to learn not only that he was "struggling for complete mastery in North Africa, but also that he may be successful". He immediately dashed off a letter to London about the matter, specifically requesting that it be shown to Churchill. Surely it was true, Spears protested incredulously, that de Gaulle "could not achieve this aim if both we and the Americans were opposed to it, and equally true that it would be altogether inimical to the interests of both of us?" Though conceding that the military and political repercussions of de Gaulle's success in North Africa were outside his domain, Spears believed, and this was "very much" his concern, that de Gaulle

would undoubtedly attempt, before long, to exploit his new position to our disadvantage in the Levant States.

Moreover, Spears thought it quite likely that de Gaulle

would try to restore the full mandatory position here in fact, though not in name. This would have a most adverse effect on our relations with the Arab world and would be a calamity from the point of view of impending elections. He might also ... bring French troops to the Levant in sufficient numbers to enable him to reassert, in an acute form, claim to French Command, and this would be most unsatisfactory from the point of view of military operations ... Moreover, could he not maintain -- echoing to some extent the Prime Minister's words -- that events in North Africa had created an entirely new situation superseding that in which our former agreements were concluded? At the risk of appearing to trespass outside my own sphere, I venture therefore to urge that the moral of all this is to prevent de Gaulle from achieving mastery in North Africa -- which we and the Americans can do by judicious pressure applied in time.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 June 1943, PREM 3 422/14.

The Foreign Office believed it already had a difficult enough task in struggling against presidential influence on Churchill and could well have done without such interventions from Spears. Typically, however, Spears waded in with a diatribe against de Gaulle, just at a time when Churchill was seething against him. The views Spears expressed however, coincided so closely with Churchill's own that they served to fan the flames of his wrath. Churchill warmly welcomed the letter and endorsed its sentiments: he recommended that it be passed to Macmillan for his perusal. Its reception in Algiers was less than friendly: Roger Makins commented that the letter was "spiteful"; Macmillan wrote only three words on his copy: "Et tu Brute".⁷⁶

v) Divorce Proposed

The situation became more serious, when Churchill received "a hysterical diatribe against de G."⁷⁷ from Roosevelt, who had just learned, amongst other things, about the enlargement of the Committee and who believed that Giraud had been tricked by de Gaulle.⁷⁸ In his telegram, Roosevelt claimed that he was "fed up" with the "secret personal and political machinations" of the Committee, and saw no possibility of working with de Gaulle. He was "absolutely convinced" that the General was impeding the war effort, menacing forthcoming military operations and, given his dislike of both Britain and America, that he would not hesitate to double-cross them both. To forestall this, Roosevelt thought that Britain and America, "standing

⁷⁶ Minutes by R. Makins and H. Macmillan, 24 June 1943, FO 660/36.

⁷⁷ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 18 June 1943, pp 267-68.

⁷⁸ Halifax (Washington) to Foreign Office, 17 June 1943, Z6991/68/17, FO 371/36032.

shoulder to shoulder, identically and simultaneously through this miserable mess", should act together and divorce themselves from de Gaulle.⁷⁹ As a first step, Roosevelt proposed that any further meetings of the Committee should be deferred, and warned Eisenhower to expect a possible break with de Gaulle.

In Algiers, Eisenhower and Macmillan were ruefully comparing the latest batch of telegrams and instructions from their respective chiefs, and effectively colluding against them.⁸⁰ The paramount aim of both Roosevelt and Churchill was to prevent de Gaulle from obtaining total control of the French Army. Given their complete lack of confidence in de Gaulle and the immense Allied military commitment in North Africa, Macmillan sympathised with their concern, but thought their objective might best be achieved "by the velvet glove, even if it conceals the iron hand".⁸¹ Eisenhower, who had himself become completely disenchanted with Giraud, was alarmed at Roosevelt's unswerving support for him and his tendency "to intervene on grounds of military security to obtain political ends".⁸² It was decided that Eisenhower should see Giraud and de Gaulle on 19 June and try to impress upon them the Allied preference for Giraud to remain Commander-in-Chief of the French forces, as long as Allied military operations were being conducted from

⁷⁹ Roosevelt to Churchill, 17 June 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

⁸⁰ Macmillan, The Blast of War, p 347. Oliver Harvey paid tribute to both Macmillan and Eisenhower, who he believed were showing "great wisdom and skill" in handling this affair. He commented: "They realise that de G. can cause far more military insecurity if he breaks with the Committee than if he can be kept in it", which was indeed a fair representation of Macmillan's views. J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 23 June 1943, pp 268-69.

⁸¹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 18 June 1943, p 126.

⁸² J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 23 June 1943, pp 268-269.

North and West Africa. Such intervention, though generally admitted to be blatant interference with French sovereignty, was to be characterised as of a military and temporary nature and to be justified on the grounds of the Allied military commitment, in the hope of making it more palatable to the French.⁸³

Eisenhower met de Gaulle and Giraud on the appointed day and put to them "a very watered-down version of the actual "instructions" coming from the White House and Number 10".⁸⁴ De Gaulle however, insisted that the matter was one for the whole Committee to debate, which it duly did on 21 June. The Committee asserted itself by refusing to meekly submit to the Allied demand. Instead, a compromise was proposed, which "although fundamentally unsatisfactory, met the immediate difficulty".⁸⁵ A military Committee⁸⁶ was established, making Giraud Commander-in-Chief of North and West Africa, and de Gaulle Commander-in-Chief of the rest of the Empire. Although "rather clumsy", the compromise fulfilled a variety of functions: as Macmillan explained, it gave de Gaulle nominally equal status with Giraud, whilst preventing him from gaining complete control of the French Army as Roosevelt and Churchill feared; it also provided a single organisation through which the fusion of all French forces might ultimately occur. Most of all, it provided a breathing space, during which the conception of French union might be

⁸³ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 16 and 19 June 1943, pp 124-27; J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 21 June 1943, p 268. In a statement to the House of Commons on 1 July, Churchill stressed that Allied intervention had been necessary purely for military reasons.

⁸⁴ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 30 July 1943, p 171.

⁸⁵ Macmillan, Blast of War, p 350.

⁸⁶ The military Committee consisted of Generals Giraud and de Gaulle as Commanders-in-Chief, and Generals Juin and de Larminat as respective Chiefs of Staff.

nurtured until it had become too strong to be overthrown.⁸⁷ "With many growls", Churchill grudgingly agreed to give the new arrangement a chance, and was even persuaded to recommend the scheme to Roosevelt, who acquiesced with similar reluctance.⁸⁸ For the moment, both Allied leaders succumbed to the force of events, but it was plain that neither was reconciled to the situation as it stood.

As the question of Britain's relations with de Gaulle yet again hung precariously in the balance, matters cannot have been helped by the advent of Spears in London, "intriguing and spreading poison".⁸⁹ Spears and Casey spent part of their first weekend in Britain at Chequers in the company of Churchill. Though anyway much preoccupied by French affairs, Churchill's own hostility, doubts and suspicions must have been reinforced by his conversations with Spears on this matter. After his weekend meeting with Spears on 27 June, Churchill instructed the Foreign Office to prepare a paper outlining his personal relations with de Gaulle, emphasising "the sequence of events which changed our first attitude of warm welcome to de Gaulle into one of a wholly different character". Significantly, Morton pointed out, in transmitting the instructions, that his own view, shared by Spears, was "that the turning point really came immediately after the Syrian armistice", a view from which the eventual Foreign Office paper did not dissent.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 22 June 1943, p 131.

⁸⁸ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 23 June 1943, pp 268-69; Ledwidge, *op cit*, p 156.

⁸⁹ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 6 July 1943, p 271.

⁹⁰ Morton to Strang, 28 June 1943; Outline of Relations between His Majesty's Government and General de Gaulle, June 1940-June 1943, 7 July 1943; both in Z7763/665/17, FO 371/36065. (Also in PREM 3 121/5). Morton's view was no doubt formed by a conversation he had had with de Gaulle less than a year previously. De Gaulle had mentioned the fact that since June 1941 in Syria, the British and the Free French

Furthermore, Spears had seized his opportunity with the Prime Minister to relate at length the entire Mokka-dem story. Churchill had been "deeply indignant"⁹¹ about it and on Monday, 28 June, minuted:

This is a very serious situation and seems to require a decided policy from us. There is no doubt that the Army Commander gave in because he was doubtful of support from home. It seems also certain that de Gaulle is revenging himself upon us in Syria. In my opinion, we should have a complete show-down about Syria, both with the Committee of Liberation in Algiers and on the spot.⁹²

When the matter was later discussed in the War Cabinet however, calmer counsels prevailed and Eden was able to take the lead in proposing that the matter be raised in diplomatic fashion with the Committee in Algiers; this less bellicose suggestion met with general approval.⁹³

Despite the suspicions of those in the Middle East, the Foreign Office had no evidence that de Gaulle had interested himself in the Mokka-dem affair and doubted that General

had found themselves at loggerheads in a theatre in which they had always been in conflict. This was one of the main problems which, de Gaulle claimed, had "gravely compromised the good relations between the French National Committee and the British government". See Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 212-13. The Foreign Office paper concurred that "the first serious rift" stemmed from the Syrian armistice.

⁹¹ The Prime Minister's Directive, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁹² Minute by Churchill, 28 June 1943, E3700/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁹³ Conclusions of War Cabinet meeting, 28 June 1943, 5.30pm, CAB 65/34. In a diary entry for 29 June, Spears wrote: "Casey told me that at the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, who had obviously been moved by what I said, took a very strong line, much more so than emerges from the minutes, and it was this that led to the strong telegram to Macmillan". Diary Entry for 29 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

Holmes had given in to the French merely because he was doubtful of support from London; it was thought that he had done so simply to avoid an armed clash with the French over something about which they evidently felt very strongly. Reviewing events subsequently, Beckett submitted that this was only one instance in many of Britain finding herself in danger of having her bluff called. Strong action had been threatened to obtain Mokka-dem's arrest, but when there was a chance that this might lead to an open clash between British and French forces, the Army Commander finally revealed that he was not prepared to risk serious trouble and had backed down.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the most serious aspect of the matter remained that the French were protecting a person known to have suborned Allied troops; once elected, Mokka-dem would enjoy immunity from arrest during Parliamentary sessions, and it therefore seemed crucial that Holmes should continue to press the French to try Mokka-dem for subornment or to hand him over to the British. As Hankey observed: "We can't have people left at liberty to suborn our troops as much as they like. In Levantine conditions, there's no knowing where it would end".⁹⁵

From Cairo it was reported that the Commander-in-Chief had suggested that French refusal to deal adequately with Mokka-dem be publicised.⁹⁶ This idea however, was given a mixed reception. Baxter⁹⁷ saw no reason why British journalists should not visit the Levant, though no organised press campaign should be taken against the French without Eden's prior approval. Hankey disapproved of the possibility

⁹⁴ Minute by W. E. Beckett, 9 July 1943, E3933/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁹⁵ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 9 July 1943, E3933/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁹⁶ Lord Moyne (Deputy Minister of State) to Casey, 28 June 1943, E3720/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁹⁷ C. W. Baxter: Counsellor to Eastern Department.

of a concerted anti-French press campaign, which would only add to tension in Syria and increase French intransigence both in the Levant and in Algiers, where the situation was already fraught with difficulty. Although the presence of British journalists in the Levant might induce the French to curb their interference in the elections, the fear was also expressed that if Syrian and Lebanese Parliaments emerged from the elections which were too independent, and possibly even unruly, and refused to co-operate with the French, this would be contrary to Britain's own best interests and "might well end in our having to suppress them to preserve order in an area where disorder would vitally prejudice our interests".⁹⁸ The Ministry of Information saw no objection to publicity about the election campaign, nor a visit by British correspondents to the Levant, but also stipulated that there should be no appearance of an anti-French campaign.

True to form, Spears eagerly espoused the idea; he heartily approved of the idea of journalists visiting the Levant "to get the story of French misdeeds, which may be published to the world, as the best means of stopping them".⁹⁹ He later proposed that the British press might publish articles which might then be reprinted locally to prove British interest in fair and proper elections, though the Foreign Office had to insist that the article he initially submitted for approval was less specific about French interference in the elections.¹⁰⁰ It was finally decided that whilst British journalists should be encouraged

⁹⁸ Minutes by C. W. Baxter and R. M. A. Hankey, 29 June 1943, E3720/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁹⁹ Diary Entry for 29 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC. Spears had already broached this with the Prime Minister who had thought "the idea of turning the light of publicity on French action ... a good one".

¹⁰⁰ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 13 July 1943, E4082/27/89, FO 371/35179.

to visit the Levant, no organised press campaign should be launched against the French without Eden's specific approval.¹⁰¹

Following the Cabinet decision to raise the Mokka-dem case with the French at Algiers, Peterson had been instructed to prepare a general indictment of the French.¹⁰² In what Spears conceded was "quite a strong telegram"¹⁰³, Macmillan was subsequently informed that he should remonstrate with the French, using the Mokka-dem case as "illustrating a continued line of conduct towards ourselves on the part of their Administration in the Levant ... which we are no longer disposed to tolerate". The French should be informed that Britain was purely concerned with the military security of the Levant and in view of the part she had played in wresting Syria and Lebanon from Vichy control, believed she had a right to expect "the last word" in such matters at least for the duration of the war.¹⁰⁴ Reminding the French additionally of the "flamboyant speeches" of Auboyneau, Macmillan should express dissatisfaction at the manifest lack of co-operation the two instances revealed. Britain wanted "a change of attitude on the part of the French" and some proof of their willingness "to work with us

¹⁰¹ Ministry of Information to Foreign Office, 30 June 1943, E3817/27/89, FO 371/35178.

¹⁰² Conference with Minister of State, 29 June 1943, E4081/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

¹⁰³ Diary Entry for 29 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

¹⁰⁴ Lascelles telegraphed the Foreign Office, pointing out that he hoped this presumably ironic understatement would not fail to be appreciated as such by Algiers. Taking his cue from Lascelles, Churchill minuted Eden that there was some risk of the irony being missed, though Eden replied that he did not think there was any chance that it would escape either Macmillan or Massigli. Lascelles to Foreign Office, 2 July 1943; Minute by Churchill, M436/3, 3 July 1943; Minute by Eden, PM/43/205, 6 July 1943; all in FO 954/8.

instead of against us in the Levant". The establishment of the Committee of Liberation had aroused expectations of real improvements in this respect and Macmillan should somehow contrive to let the French know that British recognition of the Committee "would be adversely affected if French policy in the Levant continues along lines hitherto promised".¹⁰⁵

Obeying his instructions somewhat reluctantly¹⁰⁶, Macmillan, accompanied by General Wilson who was visiting Algiers, spoke to Massigli about the Mokka-dem case and tried to impress upon him how seriously Britain viewed the matter. When Massigli claimed that he had very little knowledge of the matter, Macmillan did not press him. He sought immediately to pass the buck to the Foreign Office, explaining that as Massigli was due imminently in London, it would be much easier for the Foreign Office to insist on and extract a settlement there, using the prospect of recognition of the Committee as a bribe.¹⁰⁷ To the consternation of the Foreign Office, Churchill had also been alerted to Massigli's visit and had already minuted to Eden that he wished to see him and "have it out with him".¹⁰⁸ A

¹⁰⁵ Note for Cabinet meeting by R. M. A. Hankey, 28 June 1943; Foreign Office to Macmillan, 1 July 1943, E3700/1639/89; both in FO 371/35210.

¹⁰⁶ Macmillan's disinclination to raise the matter with the French is revealed in a diary entry that he had been obliged by the Foreign Office to make an official démarche to the French "on a very dull question". See Diary Entry for 3 July 1943, Macmillan, War Diaries, p 140.

¹⁰⁷ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 4 July 1943, E3878/1639/89; Macmillan to Foreign Office, 6 July 1943, E3915/1639/89; both in FO 371/35210; Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 6 July 1943, p 142.

¹⁰⁸ Minute by Churchill, 4 July 1943, E3836/27/89, FO 371/35210.

worried Peterson minuted: "I only hope the Prime Minister does not make too much of this affair".¹⁰⁹

Two telegrams had been received in London, however, which threw a different light on circumstances. From Cairo, Lord Moyne cabled Casey that according to secret information he had received, "it appears that Helleu may hold genuine belief that our action against Mokka-dem was political".¹¹⁰ Furthermore, a message had arrived from General Wilson denying that General Holmes had succumbed to military pressure from the French. He also revealed that the so called French "alerte" had in fact been ordered by the Ninth Army in anticipation of enemy parachutists. Though Wilson claimed not to have been perturbed militarily by the Mokka-dem affair, he was forced to admit that the entire incident was symptomatic of the current French attitude of "suspicion, grudging co-operation and apparent determination to continually assert their influence and prestige by all means, however unpleasant". If this attitude persisted, he believed it to be "inevitable that further incidents will arise likely to affect our military position and I should welcome His Majesty's Government's support to avert this".¹¹¹ Lascelles in fact grudgingly admitted his error over the "alerte", but remained adamant that

it was undoubtedly the risk of a public physical clash with our allies on however small a scale ... that forced upon us the unsatisfactory compromise eventually reached. Whether one describes this simply as military pressure or political blackmail with the threat of force as its instrument, the

¹⁰⁹ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 6 July 1943, E3836/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

¹¹⁰ Lord Moyne to Casey, 30 June 1943, E3835/1639/89G, FO 371/35210.

¹¹¹ CIGS (War Office) to Secretary Of State (Foreign Office), Personal message from Commander-in Chief, Middle East, General Wilson, 2 July 1943, E3837/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

conclusions to be drawn from the incident are ...
equally grave.¹¹²

The Foreign Office concluded that Mr. Lascelles had "dramatised" the situation, for there had been "no question of the French firing on us".¹¹³ There was a good deal of annoyance over the error. Peterson thought the confusion "intolerable", especially just after Spears had assured him "that his liaison mission was the most efficient organisation in the Middle East".¹¹⁴ For Hankey, the whole incident was

typical of a most unsatisfactory state of affairs -- a fantastic degree of rivalry, dislike and suspicion between French and British authorities in Syria. The French think we are trying to get them out of Syria. They are perfectly right. It may not be the policy of the Foreign Office but every Englishman in the Middle East makes it his aim as anyone can see by going there. And the French meanwhile are guilty of a pretty shocking state of misgovernment in Syria which we cannot tolerate without interference. It is most difficult to see any method of solving this vicious circle".¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, the offending Mokka-dem had been secretly conveyed to Tripoli where the French continued to resist handing him over to the British.¹¹⁶ They argued that as he was only one of a number of smugglers and suborners, the special drive the British had instituted against him

¹¹² Lascelles to Foreign Office, 3 July 1943, E3636/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

¹¹³ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 2 July 1943, E3837/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

¹¹⁴ Note for Secretary of State by Sir M. Peterson, 5 July 1943, E3899/27/89, FO 371/35178.

¹¹⁵ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 4 July 1943, E3836/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

¹¹⁶ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 29 June 1943, E3758/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

indicated the existence of ulterior political motives. Despite repeated attempts to explain to them that MokkaDEM's sins were considerably more serious than those of other local criminals, the French refused to budge. In London there was considerable exasperation that the French were behaving so very badly over the whole affair.¹¹⁷ Events did not augur well for Massigli's impending visit to London, nor for the chances of early recognition of the CFLN by the British government.

¹¹⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 7 July 1943; Minute by W. E. Beckett, 9 July 1943; both in E3933/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

CHAPTER FOUR

LONDON INTERLUDE

i) The Middle East War Council Resolutions

The dichotomic tendencies of British policy towards de Gaulle and the Free French were apparent not only in the increasing differences of opinion between Churchill, on the one hand, and Eden and the Cabinet on the other, but also in fundamental divergencies between Foreign Office officials in London and those on the spot in the Middle East. Typical of the problem was Lascelles's reaction to a paper by H. Beeley¹, entitled "Strategic Problems in the Near and Middle East". The paper took as its basic premise the fact that a fundamental objective of British policy was to maintain British power in the Middle East. It argued that the security of British interests in the region depended on the achievement and maintenance of a proper balance between military and political considerations. The paper foresaw Italian and French resentment once Britain had established her post-war position in the Middle East and suggested that the latter be dealt with by certain concessions to the French after the termination of the Syrian and Lebanese mandates.²

Lascelles was quick to point out that if the French succeeded in extracting treaties from the Levant States, they would themselves acquire a strategic grip on the States for at least twenty years. Otherwise, he saw no reason to compensate them for ceasing to control territories which he considered had never been theirs, which they had never had

¹ H. Beeley was a member of the Foreign Office Research Department, hereafter FORD.

² Strategic Problems in the Near and Middle East, by H. Beeley, FORD, 4 March 1943, E1635/506/65, FO 371/34956.

a good argument for controlling and the independence of which they had already proclaimed. When the time came to embark on such problems, Lascelles hoped that the British would not be haunted "by any obscure and illogical feeling at the back of our minds that the French have something owing to them in this part of the world".³

Such sentiments as these from relatively minor British officials in the Middle East had become all too familiar to Foreign Office officials, who tended to treat them with a pinch of salt. There was cause for more concern however, when similar views were propounded by the higher échelons of the British establishment in the Middle East. One such occasion arose as a result of a meeting of the Middle East War Council (MEWC)⁴. The Council sat in Cairo between 10 and 13 May, to discuss the developing political situation in the Middle East and Britain's rôle in shaping it. Casey subsequently forwarded its resolutions and various supporting memoranda to Eden on 20 May, along with a letter to Churchill, suggesting that he [Casey] ought perhaps to return to London for consultations.⁵

When the resolutions arrived in early June, they created considerable consternation at the Foreign Office. Russian machinations apart, and notwithstanding the possibility of economic disorder and collapse, the Council had decided that the main danger to peace and stability in the Middle East

³ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 4 May 1943, E2758/506/65, FO 371/34958.

⁴ The Middle East War Council consisted of the senior British military and political representatives accredited to countries in the region, and was chaired by the Minister of State.

⁵ Resolutions of the Middle East War Council, Cairo, 10-13 May 1943; Casey to Churchill, 20 May 1943; all in PREM 3 305/8. Almost a month later, Casey suggested that Spears accompany him on his visit to London, and the suggestion was accepted.

and to Britain's future rôle there, stemmed most significantly from the presence in the area of "discordant elements", namely the Jews in Palestine and the French in the Levant.⁶ It was considered that these elements, singly or combined, might create sufficient hostility among Middle Eastern people to jeopardise Britain's position there.

In particular, the continued presence of France in the Levant States was adjudged by the Council "incompatible" with British political and military interests in the Middle East, "as well as with the peaceful development and well-being of the Arab countries". The bad record of the French and their manifest reluctance to make Levant independence a reality made them unpopular and caused resentment amongst Arab states. Their political and military influence hindered moves towards Arab Federation with which His Majesty's Government had declared itself sympathetic. Moreover, they had proved obstructive when their every act should have been geared towards helping to win the war.

Looking towards the future, it had been decided that strategically, the Middle East would undoubtedly remain "a major British interest". Given this, the Council thought it "most unwise" to encourage an "unco-operative and unreliable foreign Power", whose continued presence there might well spark off a revolt and represented a "permanent danger". A survey of existing British commitments to the French had been undertaken and convinced the Council that during the war at least, any attempt to evict the French from the Levant would be difficult. In the present circumstances therefore, the Council advocated a series of stop-gap measures: it recommended the strengthening of Syrian and Lebanese independence in every way possible. French obstructive tactics over Levant independence should be

⁶ Interestingly, the members of the Middle East War Council did not consider that Britain herself was a "discordant element" in the Middle East.

prevented or circumvented and every effort should be made to discourage the signature of treaties between the French and the Levant States. Furthermore, on grounds of "war necessity", British prestige should be enhanced and reinforced by insistence on the existing rights of the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. Britain should also "scrupulously observe" her various pledges to the Levant States and avoid giving grounds for suspicion that she did not intend to honour them. This policy was believed by the Council to be "fully justified" as

the French have made and are making no sincere attempt to carry out the provisions of the mandate or the spirit of their undertaking to the two States and, far from co-operating with us ... have pursued a self-interested policy which has often resulted in impeding the war effort.⁷

A separate memorandum written by Sir Harold MacMichael⁸ was equally damning of the French:

In my view, France must go from the Levant. Her record is a bad one, her name is hated, the future of her empire seems precarious; and even if France remains a Great Power, whatever her form of government, maybe she will consider readjustments and compensation elsewhere.⁹

The paper went on to speculate that as a last resort, if it were considered that France would have to retain something of her status in the Levant, she might be associated on a board of high control with Great Britain and America, though

⁷ Resolutions of the Middle East War Council, Cairo, 10-13 May 1943, plus a supporting memorandum on Syria and Palestine, E3234/2551/65, FO 371 34975.

⁸ Sir Harold MacMichael: British High Commissioner for Palestine and Transjordan, 1938-1944.

⁹ The Problem of Palestine and the Levant States, Note by the High Commissioner for Palestine, 9 May 1943, E3577/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

there seemed little hope, from past experience, that she would prove collaborative.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the Foreign Office reaction to these papers was strong and unequivocal. Hankey stated the obvious: "There is a profound difference of approach between the authorities in the Middle East and in England to the question of the French presence in Syria". It was, he continued,

the hope, avowed or unavowed, of all the British experts in the Middle East ... that as a result of the war, the French will be eliminated from Syria and that the Arab countries can then be united in some form of loose federation under our leadership.¹¹

Though the MEWC resolutions had stopped short of actually stating this, it was nonetheless, Hankey thought, "the philosophy at the bottom of it all". In complete contrast, London officials had always taken care not to take advantage of a weakened France, for the simple reason that this would have a "deplorable effect" on French opinion and the war effort alike. Indeed, it was felt that this was where the Council's resolutions fell down badly: the policy the MEWC had recommended, Hankey pointed out, would inevitably lead to a renewal and a great increase in Anglo-French tension, yet the resolutions lacked "any consideration of the adverse effect on French opinion in North Africa and elsewhere"¹², and simply did not offer sufficient advantage to compare with the whole-hearted association of the French people in

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 5 June 1943, E3234/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

¹² A marginal note by Eden at this point in Hankey's minute read: "I agree. Moreover, this policy conflicts with our own published pledges".

the war and especially during the liberation of France at some future date.

Even without the French in the Levant, Hankey alleged, there was little hope of any practical Arab contribution to the war effort, still less of Arab federation. Additionally, Britain was likely to encounter considerable Arab hostility in the future in view of her Palestine policy. He could not deny that the French were, as the resolutions stated, "a discordant element" and that there would be "undeniable advantages in their elimination", but considerations of higher policy dictated a choice "between the goodwill of the French and the goodwill of the Arabs".

Hankey was nonetheless forced to concede that the emergence of independent local governments did seem the only way out of the present impasse in the Levant, and therefore, within limits, the MEWC resolutions would have to be followed. However, he warned that a "constant brake" would have to be applied from London, otherwise MEWC policy would cause "constant friction" with the French in Syria "and certainly poison our relations with the new administration in North Africa". Given the deep antipathy between Spears and the French, Hankey felt bound to record that this was probably inevitable whatever happened and whatever policy was pursued in London.¹³

Another more staunch defender of the French position in the Levant was Speaight, who minuted that it would be "disastrous" to try and achieve or even to prepare the way for the elimination of the French from the Levant States whilst France itself was occupied and represented only by a provisional authority. He felt that the new Committee would surely regard itself as the trustee and guardian of French interests and would be just as vigilant as the old Committee

¹³ *ibid.*

had been in that respect. The policy outlined by the MEWC would serve only to inflame suspicions the French already entertained that Britain and America were out to deprive France of her position as a great Power. It would undoubtedly cause a series of acute crises between London and Algiers, just as military operations in France were on the horizon and with serious consequences for any such campaign, not to mention the subsequent course of Anglo-French relations.¹⁴

For Peterson, the views of the MEWC represented only what he had come to expect from certain British representatives in the Middle East, though perhaps in an unusually extreme form. He expressed particular disappointment that Casey had "sold himself to Sir Edward Spears in the manner of Doctor Faustus", as this spelled trouble for the future. The removal of France from the Levant was an "exaggerated aim", whether it arose from "hatred of the French" or "excessive affection for the Arabs". Worst of all, it took no account of "postwar as opposed to wartime difficulties" and especially of the subsequent effect on Britain's position in Iraq and elsewhere.¹⁵

Similarly, Cadogan thought that to work for the withdrawal of the French from the Levant was, in view of existing British commitments to the French, out of the question and anyway unwise. He complained that Spears, contrary to what he seemed to believe, was "not the first man who has had to make the best of a difficult situation".¹⁶

¹⁴ Minute by R. L. Speaight, 6 June 1943, E3234/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

¹⁵ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 7 June 1943, E3234/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

¹⁶ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 7 June 1943, E3234/2551/65, FO 371/34975.

Commenting to Churchill, Eden conceded that the MEWC's resolutions did not make any definite proposals to evict the French from the Levant, but he feared that this was the background to their policy, which could only increase friction with the French. Moreover, as he pointed out:

Any deliberate attempt to evict the French from the Levant would be in conflict with our own publicised pledges. And, as we are inclined to think, with our own interests, both during and after the war.¹⁷

The verdict of the Foreign Office on the MEWC resolutions was unreservedly damning. It was evident therefore, that there was likely to be considerable conflict between the Foreign Office on the one hand, and its representatives in the Middle East on the other, over the policy to be pursued towards France in the Levant.

ii) Sterling Area Versus Franc Bloc

Yet one aspect of the MEWC resolutions created something of a rapprochement between the Foreign Office and Casey and Spears. The pair had battled so fiercely against the inclusion of Syria and Lebanon in a franc bloc that they caused an about-turn in Foreign Office thinking. After more thought to the question of the Levant States and the sterling bloc, it had been found difficult to divorce the question from more general political considerations. The war had proved the Middle East to be essentially an economic unit and there was a growing movement for some sort of federation or even unification of Arab countries. Hankey explained to Fraser at the Treasury that

In the circumstances, a good many people are toying with the idea of promoting some sort of Arab unity

¹⁷ Eden to Churchill, 10 June 1943, E3234/2551/65, FO 371/34975. Also in PREM 3 305/8.

in the economic field and diverting into this sphere a movement which will otherwise run to exaggerated and, incidentally, anti-British nationalism.¹⁸

The MEWC recommendations had also pressed for greater Arab economic union and in particular, the establishment of a currency union between Palestine, Transjordan and the Levant States. Hankey believed that the way ought to be left open for the realisation of such a project, though he knew that the transfer of Syria and Lebanon to the franc bloc would certainly endanger its chances of success. He also confessed that the Foreign Office was loath to carry the full weight of responsibility for ignoring and rejecting the "macabre warnings" of Casey and Spears about the dire effects on the Levant States economy of their inclusion in a franc bloc.¹⁹

Hence at a meeting on 11 June between Foreign Office, Treasury and Bank of England officials²⁰, discussion centred first on the crucial question of the French position in the Levant. As Waley put it:

If ... the French were not to have the predominant position in Syria, then it was natural that Syria should belong to the sterling area ... If on the other hand, it was decided that the French should continue to maintain their position in Syria, then it was, in the opinion of the Treasury, inevitable

¹⁸ Hankey to Fraser, 7 June 1943, E3270/18/89, FO 371/35169.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ The officials concerned were: Foreign Office: W. H. B. Mack, H. M. Eyres and R. M. A. Hankey; Treasury: Sir D. Waley, W. L. Fraser, and Rowe Dutton; Bank of England: Cobbold, Armstrong and Blaker. See Record of a meeting at the Treasury, 11 June 1943, to consider proposed transfer of Syria and Lebanon from sterling to franc bloc, E3843/18/89, FO 371/35169.

and unavoidable that Syria should belong to the franc bloc.²¹

Hankey advised that discussion should proceed on the assumption that France would maintain her position in the Levant. The Treasury and Bank of England representatives were unanimous in their view that it would be practically impossible to persuade the French to allow the Levant to remain in the sterling area and moreover, technically undesirable, as they believed that disaffected and defiant French banking officials might easily conspire to make Syria a serious and constant drain on sterling. However, the Foreign Office officials stubbornly argued that if the French retained a predominant position, they might be persuaded to yield over the Levant remaining in the sterling area until the war was over. It was finally decided that further discussions were necessary and each side retired to prepare for the next round.

Hankey remained adamant that somehow a compromise could be achieved. He had been encouraged by the fact that when he approached Pleven with the idea of Syria and Lebanon remaining in the sterling area, the Frenchman had not rejected the idea outright. He hoped that perhaps the Treasury officials might be able to convince French financial experts of the undesirability of including Syria and Lebanon in the franc bloc, which would be better than dealing with the question on a political level. He felt that an attempt should at least be made to persuade the French to allow the Levant States to remain in the sterling area, and thought that if American influence could somehow be mobilised, then there might be more of a chance. He feared however, that "the real stumbling block is likely to be the Bank of England. The Treasury anticipate having considerable

²¹ *ibid.*

difficulties with them, even if the French agree".²² At least on this issue, if on no other, the Foreign Office must have looked forward to the visit of Casey and Spears to London, to provide reinforcement to their arguments with the Treasury.²³

iii) The "Firm Of Casey And Spears" In England

Given the generally troubled state of relations between the Foreign Office and its representatives in the Levant, and the increasingly divergent policies which both were pursuing, the stage seemed set for a major show-down during the visit of Casey and Spears to the capital. When the pair arrived in London on 24 June for consultations, they hardly expected a warm welcome, at least not from the Foreign Office, and they were not disappointed. At his first meeting with Sir M. Peterson and Baxter on 25 June, Spears had found the former "cloaked with a hostility that will ... never disappear", and the latter "the wettest thing I have ever

²² Memorandum by R. M. A. Hankey on "Inclusion of Syria in Franc Bloc", E3843/18/89, FO 371/35169.

²³ In fact, during the summer, the Foreign Office, Casey and Spears were forced to back down in the face of insistence from the Treasury and the Bank of England that there were overwhelming arguments for the inclusion of the Levant States in the proposed franc bloc. Spears and Casey were reduced to fighting a rearguard action to ensure every possible guarantee and protection for the Levant States. It was feared that the French, due to their improved position in North Africa, might try to avoid negotiations with the States on the matter and merely present them with a fait accompli; equally, with the advent to power of strongly nationalist governments in Syria and Lebanon, and especially after the Lebanese crisis in November 1943, strong concern was expressed lest the governments refused to accept the closer association with France which their inclusion in the franc bloc implied. In early 1944 however, an Anglo-French Financial Agreement was eventually signed, which provided amongst other things, for the transfer of the States to the franc bloc. See extensive correspondence on FO 371/35169, 35170, 35171, 35172, 35173; also PREM 3 422/14 and CAB 104/191.

come across". He wrote in his diary disgustedly that there was "no question of even attempting to discuss the general situation in Syria". In contrast, a meeting later that day with Brendan Bracken was much more successful, for as Spears recorded: "He completely agreed with me as to the French situation and wants to have done with the French".²⁴

Sir Maurice Peterson had already grasped the general lines of thinking of Spears and Casey from the resolutions of the Middle East War Council; after reading certain papers which Casey had circulated and after conversation with Spears, his worst fears were confirmed. He penned a memorandum heavily criticising the policy embodied in the MEWC resolutions, for which he was convinced Spears and Casey had come to London to drum up support. He believed that the pair hoped to secure Arab acquiescence in some sort of British mandate for the entire post-war Middle East; they probably hoped to achieve this by evicting the French from the Levant and by somehow effecting a Palestine settlement which did not offend Arab sentiments. Peterson was convinced that this policy was not only unwise but wholly mistaken. To oust France from the Levant, apart from the untold consequences on Anglo-French relations, would create a void which the States themselves could not fill, and would create serious difficulties in neighbouring Arab states where Britain wanted to maintain military establishments.²⁵ If Britain filled the void herself, "we could hardly avoid

²⁴ Diary Entry, 25 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

²⁵ In his memoirs, Peterson develops this theme further. He states that his view of the matter was governed by the principle "that nature abhors a vacuum. If the French were swept away, a vacuum would exist. For there was no place, in Foreign Office policy at least, for the ambitions of those who wished to set Britain in the place of France. But if a vacuum once existed in the Levant States, stability in other parts of the Middle East might well be affected". See Sir Maurice Peterson, Both Sides of the Curtain, (London, 1950), p 237.

making patent to the whole Middle Eastern world the new and certainly most unwelcome régime which British military establishments must thenceforward be taken to represent". A much sounder line of policy, in Peterson's view, and one with which Eden expressed agreement, was rather to work for a reduction in the French position in the Levant to one corresponding to Britain's own position in Iraq; this would prove no obstacle to Arab federation, should it materialise, nor would it involve any derogation of newly-acquired Levant independence.²⁶

During their weekend at Chequers (see above), Casey and Spears had sought to enlist Churchill's support for their schemes. On 27 June, after lunch, Spears and Churchill ambled around the garden for about forty minutes, deep in conversation, during which Spears was disappointed to realise that he could not count on the Prime Minister's support in everything. He recorded afterwards:

The Prime Minister was quite unmoved by any argument to the effect that it would be difficult to develop the Middle East satisfactorily unless all the countries composing it accepted their directives from Great Britain.²⁷

Churchill remained fiercely loyal to the idea of a Jewish state and Spears noted that "he was strongly anti-Arab and would always be turning to the Raschid Ali rebellion as proof of Arab worthlessness". He would not moreover, "hear under any circumstances, [of] our taking the place of the French in the Levant" but thought the French might enjoy a position there similar to Britain's own in Iraq, "no more and no less". Spears observed that Churchill's main reason

²⁶ Memorandum by Sir M. Peterson on The Middle East and the post-war settlement, 25 June 1943; undated marginal minute by Eden; both in E3931/506/65, FO 371/34959.

²⁷ The Prime Minister's Directive, 27 June 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

for this was so that at the peace conference, Britain could truthfully say that she had fought the war for honour alone. The Prime Minister had certainly listened carefully however, to stories of "French malpractices", especially the Mokkadem affair.²⁸ He promised Spears "complete and absolute backing" in upholding Britain's position, though he warned him not to get involved "in major quarrels over small things"²⁹, advice which Spears would have done well to heed.

Fortified by his belief that the Prime Minister was "evidently through with de Gaulle and has a very poor opinion of the French generally"³⁰, Spears, assisted by Casey, prepared to take on the Foreign Office. In a meeting with Cadogan on 28 June, Casey initiated conversation on the need for a clear-cut definition of British policy in the Middle East, but discussion soon turned to relations with the French in the Levant. Hoping to seize the advantage, Spears had already referred pointedly to his private discussions with the Prime Minister on Syrian problems; he now declared that the Free French, in order to maintain their hold on Syria and the Lebanon, were determinedly pursuing a policy designed to secure completely subservient Chambers in both countries, which would, when the time arose, be stampeded into signing treaties of alliance with France. Casey pointed out that British efforts to protect Levantine independence merely caused constant friction with the French authorities, whilst Spears supplied examples of how the French whittled away at their pledges to the States, rendering them virtually worthless. The only options available seemed to be continual remonstrations with the

²⁸ Diary Entries, 26 and 27 June 1943, Box I, File II; The Prime Minister's Directive, 27 June 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

²⁹ The Prime Minister's Directive, 27 June 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

³⁰ *ibid.*

French on the spot when their policies conflicted with their pledges or else a "show-down" with the Committee in Algiers, which, Peterson commented, was justifiable only in very few circumstances. Concluding the meeting, Cadogan invited Spears to prepare an indictment of the French and their behaviour in the Levant, accompanied by suggestions of measures which might be applied to pressure them into mending their ways.³¹ Spears undoubtedly accepted with relish; in a sense, however, the rope had been provided with which he very nearly hanged himself.

iv) Spears's Indictment And The Foreign Office Critique

Spears's paper was ready by 5 July and a copy went to Churchill, for on 7 July he noted that the Prime Minister had said that he "would certainly read it and with pleasure".³² As Britain's relations with France had always and would always affect her actions in the Levant, the paper began by speculating on the character of France in the future. If the North African generals succeeded in coming to power in France, Spears anticipated the creation of a bourgeois, reactionary and imperialistic government, which would quickly forget Britain's rôle as France's saviour and engage in policies detrimental to her. From the point of view of Britain's interests in the Arab world, such a government would be "most undesirable". Alternately, the advent of a popularly-elected Leftist government would practically guarantee harmonious relations and would best suit Britain's own purposes: it would collaborate with Britain and faithfully execute its promises to the Levant States by sincerely encouraging and promoting their

³¹ Conferences with the Minister of State, 28 and 29 June 1943, E4081/2551/65, FO 371/34975; Diary Entries, 29 and 30 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

³² Diary Entry, 7 July 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

independence, thereby eliminating all differences with Britain.³³

De Gaulle figured in Spears's scenario only as "the hero" and leader of France by "popular clamour", who would easily be dispensed with: his participation in the French Committee of National Liberation would, in time, "dim his glory", while British disapproval "voiced no doubt by discreet propaganda" would "create doubt as to his position, which fundamentally depends on our backing". Eventually, Spears considered that "contact between this megalomaniac and popular leaders must inevitably lead to a clash which will in time, destroy him in the minds of the masses".³⁴

Despite treating the French promises of independence to the Levant as sacrosanct, Britain's own promises not to substitute herself for the French in the Levant seemed of little consequence to Spears. He claimed that it was so obvious that the Middle East would be of such great post-war importance militarily and politically for Britain that even the United States had conceded that it was an area of British responsibility. France however, had been a constant source of trouble to Britain there, and Spears went on to a detailed and comprehensive examination of her misdeeds, in which the Deir ez Zor and Makkadem cases featured prominently. He claimed that the Deir ez Zor affair was "but one incident in a long chain of incidents, all proving how the French hope to build up their shattered prestige by humiliating British officials before the natives".

He described the consistent French obstruction over recruitment, the elections, the Intérêt Communs, over almost

³³ Memorandum on Anglo-French Relations in Syria and the Lebanon, by Sir E. Spears, 5 July 1943, E3893/27/89, FO 371/35178.

³⁴ *ibid.* For those who had read Spears's telegram of 10 June, this line of thinking had ceased to shock.

every matter. They had failed to co-operate on the financial plane with the result that "the gravest abuses at the expense of the British taxpayer are constantly being perpetrated"; they had furthermore attempted to wrest control of the Levant from Britain in the military and naval spheres; they arbitrarily promulgated decrees to suit their own ends; they sent people to concentration camps on the slightest pretext, and a recent arrest in Beirut occurred because "the man in question "constantly expressed pro-Arab views" ". Intimidation of every form was rife in the election campaign and it was probable that no other country had a press "more completely muzzled than it is in the Levant today". French interest in winning the war was minimal and their "sole preoccupation ... is the maintenance of the French position and its maintenance indefinitely".³⁵

A major difficulty inherent in the situation, Spears explained, was that locally, Britain was regarded as having invested power in the Free French and therefore it was Britain which was "responsible for a state of affairs which is generally considered to be intolerable ... [and] for French behaviour which is proving itself more dictatorial every day, exceeding by far Vichy's unpleasant record". The weak Helleu was falling more and more under the sway of the extremists in his entourage and French claims, far from abating, were increasing. Spears fully shared and endorsed the belief that Britain was responsible; it was, he submitted, "incontrovertible" that the Free French were established in the Levant purely because of the British military conquest and their wide powers derived from the state of war under a delegation of military power from Britain.³⁶ Consequently, Spears urged that a threat to

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ This was a view which Spears had held for some considerable time. In a note dated 24 January, he had contemplated informing the Foreign Office "with a view to their letting the National Committee know ... that I find

withdraw these powers would be salutary, for it "might help to bring the French to reason". Similarly, as many Levant incidents constituted "an affront to the cause for which we are fighting", world publicity afforded to "some of the more disgraceful episodes of French rule" might succeed in curbing the worst aspects of French maladministration. Spears recommended finally that Britain should insist that the French should begin to make good their undertakings to the Levant States, that in the economic field, the French should be forced to accept British co-operation and that in the military field there should be no option but for the French to obey Britain.³⁷

Within the Foreign Office, Hankey could find no reason to question the accuracy of Spears's "generally depressing picture of French maladministration and misgovernment in the Levant". He even admitted that since Britain had financed the Free French, had assisted them militarily and guaranteed their promise of independence to the Levant States, she bore a certain degree of responsibility for the circumstances which prevailed. He, however, expressed considerable sympathy for the problems of the French. It was easy to see how French officials, determined to retain their posts, translated British insistence on the Levant's independence

the view amongst thinking Syrians and Lebanese of all kinds is crystallising round the point that the only legal authority in this country, outside that of the Levant Governments, is the British military authority as the occupying power, and that the French only exercise power by military delegation of the British". Lascelles replied that the Foreign Office had been told repeatedly "that the local populations believe us to be in control of the Free French and therefore blame us for the actions of the latter", but remarked that the Foreign Office would "jib very strongly indeed" at being asked to so inform the French Committee; he added "and indeed, it would be very difficult to do so, in my opinion, without seeming very provocative". Note by Spears, 24 January 1943; reply by D. W. Lascelles, 26 January 1943; both in FO 226/243.

³⁷ *ibid.*

into "the English wish to get us out". This was all the more understandable given the fact that the idea of French pre-eminence and privilege in the Levant had never gained acceptance among British officials on the spot:

Virtually every British official and a large proportion of British officers in the Middle East, as the French must know perfectly well, hope to see the French turned out...

It was little wonder therefore that the French in the Levant and even de Gaulle were "still firmly persuaded that His Majesty's Government harbour the intention of getting them out of Syria" and that all Spears' acts "increase the French fear that this is another move in a deep British game to get them out".³⁸

As for Spears's argument that French power in the Levant derived entirely from Britain, the view was expressed that the only "incontrovertible" thing about it was that its use

would produce an absolute first-class dispute with all Frenchmen of all parties, which should surely be avoided at all costs ... [and would] convince the French finally that [Britain] intended to replace them in the Levant.

Spears's suggestion that publicity be used to shame the French into better behaviour was equally dubious, for extensive press criticism of the French might backfire by encouraging Levant nationals to be unduly difficult and unco-operative, contrary to Britain's best interests. Overall, the Foreign Office recommended that Eden seize the advantage presented by the presence of Spears and Casey to get Syrian matters placed, once and for all, "on a new footing". With a change of Levant personnel on both British

³⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 8 July 1943, E3893/27/89, FO 371/35178.

and French sides, it was felt that "perhaps a change of feeling out there could also be engineered".³⁹

The Foreign Office however, had reckoned without Churchill, for whom Spears's "very powerful and able paper" had come as a revelation: he claimed that he had had "no idea that the French were behaving so tyrannically". He suggested that Spears's paper should be printed and circulated so that the whole Syrian matter could be discussed at a special Cabinet on 16 July. He requested that the Foreign Office draw up its own paper, as "we are probably all in agreement in principle about Syria, though no doubt there will be differences of emphasis".⁴⁰ Eden was "furious": this praise of the Spears paper "which was in flat disagreement with our Syrian policy" was for him "the last straw".⁴¹ He wrote his own memorandum on the Spears paper, which he too passed to Churchill. It declared that Spears's paper was based on defective premises which served "to invalidate it as a contribution to the formulation of foreign policy". Not only was it a false thesis that French powers in the Levant derived from Britain, but additionally, Spears had overrated Britain's own post-war interests in the Middle East as well as the certainty of American co-operation. Unless it was Britain's intention to deny the French a rôle in the post-war Middle East, then France's position in the Levant would have to be recognised and taken into account. Whilst Spears' actual recommendations could not be faulted, there was, Eden claimed,

a right and a wrong way of pursuing this policy and in our view, the right way is to demand French co-operation with us rather than to seek to impose our

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Minute by Churchill, M466/3, 12 July 1943, E3893/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴¹ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 13 July 1943, pp 273-274.

own co-operation ... We do not seek equal status with the French nor partnership in Syria. To pretend we do is to justify French suspicions of our intentions.

Rather pointedly, Eden mentioned that previous lack of progress in solving many of the Levant's more contentious problems, had not been due solely to French recalcitrance, but rather to

the continued absences and journeyings of prominent Frenchmen, the difficulties of adjusting our relations in the Levant to the rapid alternations of policy towards the Fighting French movement as a whole, and last but not least, to the insistence of our local authorities in the Middle East that difficult issues should be left for local settlement and that the French should not be encouraged to raise such questions in London.⁴²

Eden cleverly offered to circulate Spears' paper to the Cabinet, accompanied by his own critique; he politely suggested that the Prime Minister might, alternatively, prefer to allow him to sort the matter out with Spears, Casey and the French themselves.⁴³ Churchill had been well and truly out-manoeuvred and agreed that this latter alternative would be "much better" than burdening the Cabinet, but added defiantly:

I am quite clear that we are being knocked about unduly and unfairly by the French and that a stiffer line should be taken against them in Syria. I should like to feel that our officers there will be supported against insolent ill-usage by the French and that our Commander-in-Chief will not have to

⁴² Eden memorandum: Anglo-French Relations in Syria and Lebanon, 13 July 1943, E3893/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴³ Eden to Churchill, PM 43/226, 13 July 1943, PREM 3 422/13.

make ignominious compromises when he has overwhelming force at his disposal.⁴⁴

v) Meetings With Massigli

Advantage was therefore taken of the presence of Spears and Casey in London in the summer of 1943, to attempt to regulate Britain's general policy towards the French in the Levant and to make Spears and Casey toe the Foreign Office line more than they had hitherto managed. Additionally, their visit, which coincided in part with a visit by Massigli to London, provided an ideal opportunity to tackle the French about some of the more serious differences which had cropped up in the Levant. Unfortunately for poor Massigli, one of his first encounters was with Churchill, who received him on 7 July, in the presence of Casey and Spears. The Prime Minister proceeded to "read him a lecture on de Gaulle saying that he was not going to quarrel with the Americans because of [him] and saying that [he] was pursuing his own interests rather than those of the Allies or even the real ones of France".⁴⁵ Churchill stressed that Britain was not prepared to support any particular individual but would support the Committee provided it functioned collectively. He maintained that Britain wanted nothing out of the war, least of all Syria, where she recognised France's seniority, but where France would have to grant the same degree of freedom as Britain had granted to Iraq.

Perhaps realising that he was outnumbered, Massigli had only attempted a mild defence of de Gaulle and merely

⁴⁴ Minute by Churchill, M471/3, 15 July 1943, E3893/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴⁵ Diary Entry, 7 July 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

"approved everything" the Prime Minister said.⁴⁶ The Foreign Office however, knew nothing of this meeting until almost a week later, when Spears filed a copy of a report he had made of the meeting. They were were not pleased at having been kept in the dark. As Hankey minuted, "Number 10 should keep us better informed when representations of this force are made".⁴⁷ Interestingly, Spears only supplied the Foreign Office with a report of the meeting between Churchill and Massigli. Prior to Massigli's arrival, as his diary entry records, Spears had complained to the Prime Minister "about the lack of support [he] had received from the Foreign Office". Churchill had refused to be drawn however, and had interrupted Spears, telling him that he was "talking about quite small fry, that orders had been given to tighten up everything..."⁴⁸

The Foreign Office had arranged a meeting with the French for 14 July to cover a variety of Levant related subjects.⁴⁹ Eden subsequently informed Churchill that the

⁴⁶ *ibid*; see also Spears to Hankey, 13 July 1943, Extract from note made by Sir E. Spears of interview between the Prime Minister and Massigli, E4070/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴⁷ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 14 July 1943, E4070/27/89, FO 371/35178. Mack observed however: "I have always understood that the PM dislikes making records of this kind of conversation, his attitude being "I know what passed and that is all that matters". Major Morton told me this more than once". Minute by W. H. B. Mack, E4070/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴⁸ Diary Entry, 7 July 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁴⁹ Britain was represented by Eden, Cadogan, Casey, Spears and Peterson; the Free French representatives were Massigli, Viénot and Francfort. After consultation with Casey and Spears, Peterson had provided a list of subjects for discussion which included amongst other things, Mokka-dem, the Intérêts Communs, censorship and decrees. See Peterson à Massigli, 12 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol. 1005. (All French references refer to sources at the Ministre des Relations Extérieures, Quai d'Orsay, unless otherwise stated).

discussion had been "very frank" and "vigorous", and he was convinced that it had been beneficial. He had given Massigli "the fullest assurance that [Britain] had no desire to usurp the French position in the Levant", as he had thought it important "to allay French suspicions on this point, for the attitude of some of our people has without doubt fed them".⁵⁰

He further explained that during the course of the meeting, Spears and Casey had been invited to air their grievances openly to Massigli. They of course, had needed no second bidding. Casey claimed that he had repeatedly and insistently informed the French that Britain had no political ambitions in the Levant, yet he felt that they still did not believe this. The consequent atmosphere of distrust caused him "to spend almost more time over relations with the French than over all other problems put together".⁵¹ Spears too had chipped in with his contribution, pointing out that the French seemed incapable of grasping the urgency and severity of the financial situation in the Levant. Together, the pair worked through a battery of complaints against the French: their refusal to accept that Britain was supremely responsible for military security in the Levant, their arbitrary issuance of such numerous decrees that it was difficult to know the state of the law on any given question, their retention of the Intérêts Communs, their excessive censorship and numerous other lesser matters. In conclusion, Casey stated that these few issues were "only symptoms of the disease affecting Anglo-French relations" and he would be "infinitely grateful if M. Massigli could do anything to cure the complex itself".⁵²

⁵⁰ Eden to Churchill, PM/43/234, 16 July 1943, PREM 3 422/13.

⁵¹ Record of meeting with the French, 14 July 1943, E4423/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁵² *ibid.*

Massigli, for his part, was at a serious disadvantage in the negotiations as his staff were without information on most of the items for discussion on the agenda.⁵³ Of scant comfort to Massigli was the available information that Mokkadem was indeed an established trafficker of drugs and that "il n'y a aucun doute qu'il ait acheté des officiers britanniques pour se livrer au trafic des stupéfiants". Even despite the difficulty in finding honest election candidates in the Levant, it was admitted that "il est regrettable que notre choix se soit porté sur Mokkadem". Furthermore, though the French had continually alleged that British agents were interfering in the elections to secure a nationalist victory and to gain support for the cause of Arab confederacy, for the moment there was no concrete proof with which the British could be confronted; besides, it was ruefully admitted by the French at Carlton Gardens that the French authorities in the Middle East had a definite tendency to impute "un caractère politique à tous les incidents locaux".⁵⁴

Whether from expediency or not, Massigli was conciliatory throughout the meeting. Though he fully agreed with the necessity for friendly co-operation, he pointed out that the Levant situation was so hybrid that some incidents were no doubt inevitable. Though he realised that Mokkadem was no saint, he explained that the impression had undoubtedly been gained by the French authorities in Beirut, however mistakenly, that his arrest was politically inspired, and this had undoubtedly contributed to envenoming the affair. Massigli argued that Article IV of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements had made general security a

⁵³ Note par le Commissariat des Affaires Etrangères, 13 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁵⁴ Note pour l'Ambassadeur, 12 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1522.

French preserve. He alleged that military authorities, whether French or British, tended to ignore political considerations. Whilst he himself agreed that the needs of the Army should always be given careful consideration, he could not accept the principle that the Army's every whim should be granted. Massigli himself doubted Syrian and Lebanese ability to administer properly the Intérêts Communs. Furthermore, the British request for participation in censorship matters almost amounted to a *droit de regard* and would certainly have been more readily understood had the Levant been an active zone of operations. Nonetheless, Massigli undertook to look into all these matters further.⁵⁵

A second and "most confidential" meeting with Massigli occurred on 15 July, to discuss various personalities in the Levant. Spears had already complained to Viénot on 12 July about the activities of Dementque and Pruneaud (Délégués for Tripoli and S. Lebanon respectively)⁵⁶. Now he launched into an attack against his old enemies, MM. Blanchet and Boegner, who, he claimed, despatched telegrams in Helleu's name without his knowledge, and whose continued presence in the Levant quashed any hope of obtaining real co-operation from the French authorities there. Spears pointed out that from a conversation with Helleu months ago, it had been plain that he shared his views about the two concerned, whereupon the discussion switched to Helleu's own shortcomings.⁵⁷ Massigli evidently agreed that Helleu was a very weak and lazy man, who was "prepared to go to almost any lengths to avoid responsibility". The Deir ez Zor incident was broached and Spears explained its genesis to Massigli; he extolled

⁵⁵ Record of meeting with the French, 14 July 1943, E4423/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁵⁶ Entrevue Viénot/Spears, 12 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1522.

⁵⁷ Notes on meeting with Massigli, 15 July 1943, E4286/27/89, FO 371/35179.

the virtues of Jago and Gunn, but denounced Alessandri and claimed that Lanusse was even worse.

In preparation for these meetings, Massigli had pressed his staff for information about matters still outstanding with the British. Whereas he had attended the first of the meetings without information, by the second, he had received some feedback from the Levant. Beirut had complained particularly about insufficient allocations of newspaper and print from the British and speculated that political reasons were most probably behind this, as the British Press Attaché at the Legation had reputedly declared "que les britanniques n'étaient pas désireux de nous fournir du papier journal dont nous nous servirons pour faire de la propagande contre eux".⁵⁸ When Massigli brought up this complaint of his own, Spears hastened to explain that the British Army represented by far the largest foreign-speaking element in the Levant, yet was served by only one small sheet newspaper, whereas there was a surfeit of French newspapers. Unsupported stories such as this one were, he claimed, "the bane of the Levant" and he hoped that Massigli, now he realised the true position, would discourage them.

The main complaint which Helleu had passed to Massigli however, had been of a more general kind. He had reminded Massigli that, like his predecessors, he was continually up against "des difficultés provoquées par l'ingérence britannique". He had requested that Massigli tackle the British about "l'existence ici [i.e. Beirut] d'un organisme politique britannique tel que la Mission Spears", and about the multiplicity of British organisms in the Levant, which seemed to him not only superfluous "mais difficilement conciliable avec l'assurance de désintéressement et de non-intervention que nous avons reçue à plusieurs reprises du

⁵⁸ Beyrouth à Massigli, 12 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1522.

gouvernement britannique".⁵⁹ Spears however, leapt to defend his Mission and reported triumphantly that Massigli "seemed astonished when told how few political officers there actually were [in the Levant]".⁶⁰

vi) Massigli Proves His Mettle

It is evident that the Foreign Office had set great store on the formation of the Committee of Liberation at Algiers to evolve and improve French policy in the Levant. It is also evident that Massigli particularly was looked to as the instrument to effect that improvement. He had been appointed Commissaire des Affaires Etrangères on 5 February. As has been observed,

Cette date devait marquer le commencement d'une époque nouvelle dans l'histoire du ministre des Affaires étrangères pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale ... En effet, les services du Département étaient dès lors assumés par un diplomate [Massigli] ayant une longue expérience de l'administration centrale ainsi que des grands postes à l'étranger. Il jouissait d'un prestige unanimement reconnu et d'une autorité que nul ne contestait. Son esprit de décision, la rapidité et la sûreté de son jugement, son goût des tâches efficacement accomplies, son désir de faire face à tous les problèmes que devait affronter la France libre, le poussaient évidemment à ne pas se contenter des structures de fortune dont il héritait.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Notes on meeting with Massigli, 15 July 1943, E4286/27/89, FO 371/35179. Gaunson has calculated that in 1944, there were "a mere seventeen Political Officers scattered throughout the major towns of the Levant"; though the Spears Mission numbered almost a hundred or so staff, most of these were attached to the jointly run OCP. See Gaunson, *op cit*, p 155.

⁶¹ J. Baillon (Ed), Les Affaires Etrangères et le Corps Diplomatiques Français, Vol II, 1870-1980, (Paris, 1984), pp 569-570.

Great, perhaps excessive hopes had been placed on Massigli to iron out the problems of the Levant. His position in July 1943, as suppliant, seeking recognition for the Committee, seemed to the Foreign Office to create an ideal opportunity, given the troubled state of relations in the Levant, to extract a promise from him to promote changes there. Hence, when he visited Eden on 19 July, before returning to Algiers, the latter stressed "the need for a "new deal" in respect of the French attitude to us in Syria", where there were "too many people causing unnecessary difficulties for our authorities". Massigli hinted that, as in the past, faults existed on both sides, but assured Eden that it was his intention to do all he could to ensure full French co-operation and to get Anglo-French relations working smoothly.⁶²

It is questionable however, whether Eden or the Foreign Office mandarins realised quite what a struggle Massigli faced, though it was slowly dawning on Massigli himself. He had confided to Eden on 19 July that he was anxious to return to Algiers from where he had received one or two "troubling telegrams", and where the Committee, though gaining in strength, was still very vulnerable and lacking in political knowledge.⁶³ Despite his confident assurances to Eden about sorting out Levant problems, Massigli was soon to realise that he was dealing with something of a Pandora's box.

After his meetings in London, Massigli telegraphed to Algiers on 16 July and tried to explain the British side of things regarding the Mekkadem problem. It had become clear that Helleu was convinced that the Mekkadem affair was a political manoeuvre by British agents to prevent his

⁶² Conversation between Eden and Massigli, 19 July 1943, E4241/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁶³ *ibid.*

candidature and election.⁶⁴ Massigli stressed that the British had attached real importance to the Mokka-dem affair as they considered that the honour of their Army was at stake and they failed to comprehend why the French supported such a man. To Massigli, the British accusations about Mokka-dem seemed only too well-founded, and he, for his part, failed to see what advantage could be gained from associating French influence and prestige with such a type. He openly expressed his wish "qu'il faut possible de renoncer à la candidature Mokka-dem et même pour mettre fin à ses agissements, de prendre à son égard toutes mesures administratives possibles".⁶⁵

Encouragingly for the British, on the same day in Algiers it was reported from the Resident Minister's Office that Catroux had agreed that Mokka-dem should not be permitted to stand as an election candidate.⁶⁶ Lascelles similarly reported that in conversation, Helleu had mentioned seeing a telegram from Massigli to Algiers, strongly advising against Mokka-dem's candidature. However, when Lascelles mentioned that Britain would require custody of Mokka-dem, Helleu "looked uncomfortable but said that he would certainly comply".⁶⁷ The nub of the matter was, as Francfort⁶⁸ was prepared to confess, that the French had

⁶⁴ Note pour M. Pleven au sujet des élections libanaises et affaire Mokka-dem, 15 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁶⁵ Massigli à Alger, 16 Juillet 1943, No 422-4, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁶⁶ Algiers to Foreign Office, 19 July 1943, E4198/27/89, FO 371/35179. Macmillan was away in Tunis between 16 and 21 July.

⁶⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 22 July 1943, E4380/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁶⁸ Pierre Francfort: First Secretary at the London Delegation of the FCNL.

considered it too derogatory to their own prestige to hand Mokka-dem over to the British.⁶⁹

Massigli however, was already encountering difficulties with Algiers and especially de Gaulle who addressed him a stern rebuke on 17 July:

La déclaration de forme que Churchill a faite sur la position de la France au Levant ne nous rassure pas. Il ne semble pas que vous soyez dans de très bonnes conditions pour négocier à Londres, dans cette très grave matière, loin du Comité de la Libération et sans informations suffisantes. Vous estimerez certainement qu'il serait fâcheux que le général Catroux, qui a une connaissance exceptionnelle du sujet et qui est rentré de Syrie hier, ne pût être consulté à mesure de la négociation, ce qui est pratiquement impossible si celle-ci a lieu à Londres. Enfin, il semble difficile que nous entrions avec les Britanniques dans des conversations d'importance concernant les Etats du Levant sous mandat, aussi longtemps que le Gouvernement de Londres n'aura pas reconnu le Comité de la Libération.⁷⁰

Hence, de Gaulle not only made plain his displeasure that the negotiations were based in London but also effectively challenged Massigli's competence to deal with the British over Levant matters. In addition, he hinted strongly that such negotiations should perhaps have taken place at a price -- that of recognition of the Committee.

Unfortunately for the hopes of Massigli and the British, there was worse to come: the reply the Frenchman received from Algiers to his recommendation that perhaps the French ought to renounce Mokka-dem's candidature, was short and to the point:

⁶⁹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 28 July 1943, E4380/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁷⁰ De Gaulle à Massigli, 17 Juillet 1943, in de Gaulle, L'Unité, 1942-44, pp 516-17.

Le Général de Gaulle estime, d'accord avec le Général Catroux, que nous ne pouvons, sans dommage sérieux pour notre prestige, accepter de remettre Mokkadem aux Autorités britanniques. La position que nous avons prise précédemment à ce sujet ne peut donc être abandonnée.⁷¹

After his return to Algiers however, Massigli must have done everything in his power to change de Gaulle's mind, for on 4 August, Helleu informed Spears that Mokkadem was not to be allowed to stand for election, nor to participate in any way in the election campaign, and moreover, as soon as the Lebanese elections were over, he was to be handed to the British for deportation.⁷² This represented a considerable victory for Massigli. Foreign Office officials were delighted, though Sir Maurice Peterson advised caution and thought that Massigli's own confirmation should be awaited.⁷³

In the Levant, Spears was forced to complain to Helleu that French surveillance of Mokkadem was "farcical"; Helleu employed his usual tactics in any crisis and went into hiding⁷⁴, though he was eventually obliged to accept British participation in the surveillance.⁷⁵ Spears confirmed on 9

⁷¹ Alger à Massigli, 19 Juillet, No 391-92, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004. On 28 July, Sir Maurice Peterson pressed the French about Mokkadem and told them that Churchill was interesting himself in the affair. The French in London had received no further details however, though they telegraphed Algiers for permission to pass the contents of the above telegram to the British. Londres à Alger, 28 Juillet 1943, No 229, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁷² Spears to Foreign Office, 4 August 1943, E4581/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁷³ Minutes by H. M. Eyres, R. M. A. Hankey, and Sir M. Peterson, 5 August 1943, E4581/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁷⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 7 August 1943, E4658/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁷⁵ Weekly Political Summary, No 71, 11 August 1943, E4779/27/89, FO 371/35180.

August that, after a display of considerable firmness on his part, the French had at last agreed to all his demands about Makkadem⁷⁶; he was finally handed over to the British after the Lebanese elections on 16 September⁷⁷ and was subsequently deported to Cyprus.⁷⁸ It certainly seemed that at long last, the faith which the Foreign Office had placed in Massigli was paying dividends.

vii) Attempting To Shackle Spears

As the Foreign Office was so keen to avoid any discord with the French, it was inevitable that some thought should have been given to the possibility of removing from his post one of the main sources of friction, Sir Edward Spears. Feelers had been put out earlier in the year with a view to reorganising or even abolishing the Spears Mission.⁷⁹ It had been realised however, that such a proposal was likely to be strongly opposed and Cadogan thought it best not to wake "this sleeping dog -- it is almost sure to get a kick in the ribs from Algiers shortly".⁸⁰ Eden however, was far from

⁷⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 9 August 1943, E4687/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁷⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 18 September 1943, E5602/1639/89, FO 371/35210.

⁷⁸ Makkadem became fatally ill whilst on Cyprus; on 21 March 1944, he was returned to Tripoli and died a day later. See Weekly Political Summary, No 103, 22 March 1944, E2211/27/89, FO 371/40300.

⁷⁹ See E2160/2154/89 and E3242/2154/89 in FO 371/35213; also Diary Entry, 30 June 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC. Casey later told Spears that his advice had been sought about the possible closure of the Mission.

⁸⁰ Minute by Sir A. Cadogan, 8 June 1943, E3242/2154/89, FO 371/35213. Cadogan evidently expected the new French Committee at Algiers to campaign more aggressively for reform or abolition of the British set-up in the Levant. He was not to be disappointed for, in his conversations with the British in July, Massigli did complain about the proliferation of British political organisations and

satisfied with this approach and minuted: "I should much prefer to make a change in personalities before the kick comes ... I should dearly like to find something else for Sir E. Spears to do".⁸¹ Despite this bold suggestion, nothing appropriate had presented itself and Spears remained undisturbed at his post.⁸²

It is evident however, that after Spears's visit to London, Eden sought to restrict his activities by revising the instructions with which he had been issued in February 1942.⁸³ As Hankey had pointed out:

We have got to face the fact ... that either we must insist on keeping some control of our policy in Syria here or else Sir E. Spears is going to do all sorts of things which we may disapprove of and of which we shall only hear long after and which may have considerable effect on our relations with North Africa.⁸⁴

officials in the Levant.(See above)

⁸¹ Minute by Eden, 9 June 1943, E3242/2154/89, FO 371/35213.

⁸² Conversing with Churchill on 27 June, Spears was informed that "innumerable attempts" had been made to displace him, not least by Englishmen who knew how much the French hated him. Churchill claimed that he had always stood up for Spears. He had been very scathing about the sort of Englishman who got on with the French by always giving into them. In contrast, Spears was the only man he knew who stood up to them effectually "and did not hesitate to have a head on collision if needed ... [and] knew how to stop the rot in time". Churchill seems to have become a little melodramatic at this point as he warned Spears that "the French were so bitterly opposed to [him] that he would not wonder at their having [him] murdered". The Prime Minister's Directive, 27 June 1943, Box II, File VII, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁸³ Spears claims in Fulfilment of a Mission, p 165, that he had essentially written his instructions himself.

⁸⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 July 1943, E4229/2154/89, FO 371/35213.

Certainly Spears recorded in his diary that both he and Casey had independently arrived at the conclusion that the new instructions with which he was issued "were an attempt by the Department to handcuff me".⁸⁵ There was however, considerable pessimism about any attempt to restrain or reform Spears, as a minute by Sir M. Peterson reveals:

In truth, the leopard cannot change his spots and I have very little confidence in Sir E. Spears's ability either to understand or to carry out our intentions. At present he has been brought to pay lip service to the ruling that we are not to aim at throwing the French out of the Levant. But it is no more than lip-service and nobody ... can fail to be conscious of how [he] is certain to rub the French up the wrong way on every possible occasion.⁸⁶

Peterson expressed similar doubts about Casey and suggested that his brief ought also to be revised once the French Committee at Algiers was recognised. He recorded that "otherwise, we shall have two different French policies, one directed from London and the other from Cairo".⁸⁷ Officials in the French Department would have added Washington to the list and revised the figure to three.

Spears however, did not capitulate without a struggle, and succeeded in effecting some changes to the proposed revised instructions. He had objected particularly to a section which ordered him to "work for" the eventual conclusion of a treaty between France and the Levant, which for him savoured too much of combining with the French and throwing Britain's weight into the balance to extract a treaty from the States. He argued that the States would resent this, that the French did not expect it and would

⁸⁵ Diary Entry, 15 July 1943, Box I, File I, Spears Papers, MEC.

⁸⁶ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 21 July 1943, E4229/27/89. FO 371/35213.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

probably prefer as little British interference as possible. His instructions had furthermore restricted British intervention in local affairs to occasions when French action seemed to indicate that her pledges of independence to the Levant were not going to be implemented or to matters which strictly affected the war effort or military security. Spears thought he would be "continually hampered" by the attempt to interpret these words; as the Levant was no longer directly threatened by the enemy, he thought that in any dispute, "it might be advanced that nothing could possibly affect military security". As Hankey observed:

The whole trouble is that the Legation at Beirut have not considered themselves sufficiently "hampered" in the past by the interpretation of military security and on grounds of prestige ... they have been intervening in many questions in a manner going far beyond what the Foreign Office would wish, and this has naturally upset the French and reacted on our relations with them.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, the phrase in question was finally altered so as not to be too restrictive.

What Eden did seek to drive home to Spears was the fact that French powers in the Levant were not derived from the state of war. As the Ninth Army was not an occupying army, nor regarded as such by the British, the argument he had used was legally unsound and dangerous in that it risked a major dispute with the French. With the establishment of the CFLN in Algiers, it was considered

more than ever necessary that our policy in Syria should be considered in relation not only to our policy in the Middle East as a whole, but also to the French as a whole. It is essential that our interventions in Levant affairs should be so framed as not to give legitimate grounds to the French ... to consider them to be part of a plan to oust them

⁸⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 July 1943, E4229/2154/89, FO 371/35213.

from the Levant altogether ... or to whittle away and to encroach upon their position for reasons of our own. The French are all too prone to suspicions of this sort.⁸⁹

With considerable optimism, Eden stressed to Spears that he was counting on him "to see that everything is done to allay such suspicions locally so that Levant questions may not undesirably complicate our relations with the French and United States authorities in North Africa".⁹⁰

viii) Walking In Step With Roosevelt

Just as the Foreign Office had been vindicated in their reliance on Massigli, so too, it must have seemed to Massigli and all concerned, that their efforts to secure British recognition of the Algiers Committee were at last beginning to pay. A growing body of opinion had become convinced of the need for swift recognition of the new Committee. Macmillan lamented:

I only wish the United States and His Majesty's Government would give official recognition to the Committee. I do not seem to be able to get the true position understood at home -- or rather, I think they do understand but are unwilling to press Washington.⁹¹

Extracts from Harvey's diary show similar frustration, though chiefly directed towards the impercipient Churchill. He wrote:

... We must now formally recognise the new Committee. Yet this both the President and the Prime

⁸⁹ Eden to Spears, 27 July 1943, E4229/27/89, FO 371/35213.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 5 July 1943, p 141.

Minister are now jibbing at because it includes de G. They have got themselves into an absurd position ... If we recognise the Committee, we strengthen the civilian elements there and we may hope to reduce the influence of the generals, but this will mean converting the Prime Minister and getting him to tackle the President. I'm afraid however, the President, if not the Prime Minister, has ideas of keeping France in leading strings for a long time to come.⁹²

A few days later, he wrote:

Prime Minister is being unbelievably tiresome over the French. He is now seeking to prevent early recognition of the combined Committee as untimely. He is getting crazy on the subject.⁹³

Churchill's position was weakened however, when Algiers reported that Eisenhower was recommending immediate recognition to Washington.⁹⁴ "This is a great help", noted Harvey, "and has enabled us ... to get the Prime Minister to telegraph to Roosevelt the draft terms of recognition which we favour, if and when he is ready to proceed".⁹⁵ Churchill's telegram to Roosevelt expressed surprise at what seemed to be an American about-turn: "This is rather sudden", Churchill wrote. "I should like to know your reactions ... My chief desire in this business has been to keep in step with you".⁹⁶ Foreign Office hopes had been premature, however, and were soon dashed by a more characteristic reply from Roosevelt which was such as to encourage Churchill "to

⁹² J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 29 June 1943, p 270.

⁹³ *ibid*, Entry for 6 July 1943, p 271.

⁹⁴ Macmillan to Churchill, 6 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2; Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 6 July 1943, p 141; J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 7 July 1943, p 272.

⁹⁵ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 7 July 1943, p 272.

⁹⁶ Churchill to Roosevelt, T979/3, 8 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

say that nothing would induce him to recognise [the] Committee, coupled with a tirade against de Gaulle".⁹⁷

In addition to increasing pressure from the Foreign Office, Churchill faced a concerted and powerful lobbying campaign to such an extent that Harvey thought "we risk an explosion in the House of Commons and in the press over the shocking subservience of our French policy to America".⁹⁸ Yet the Prime Minister continued to hold out, maintaining that de Gaulle "could not be allowed to dominate [the] Committee and [that] he must see how things worked out before recognition was accorded". He even rashly threatened a possible break with Eden over the matter and warned his Foreign Secretary that though he (Eden) might have "much popular support", he (Churchill) "would fight vigorously to the death."⁹⁹

Macmillan had been extremely disappointed by the failure of most of the Cabinet to speak out in support of recognition. He nonetheless maintained his own campaign, considering it "absurd", "silly and ungracious" to withhold recognition, "since it weakens the conception of a constitutional committee with collective responsibility ... [and] merely plays into de Gaulle's hands".¹⁰⁰ At last however, the war of attrition finally began to take its toll on Churchill, especially when questions were asked, both in the House and by certain British diplomats abroad¹⁰¹, about the existence of a confidential memorandum by the Prime

⁹⁷ Avon, *op cit*, pp 397-98.

⁹⁸ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 13 July 1943, p 274.

⁹⁹ Avon, *op cit*, pp 397-98.

¹⁰⁰ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 14 July 1943, p 150.

¹⁰¹ Kelly (Buenos Aires) to Foreign Office, 15 July 1943, Z7763/665/17, FO 371/36065.

Minister on relations with de Gaulle.¹⁰² As the tide of opinion swept against him, and even the British Embassy in Washington criticised American policy as foolish and short-sighted, Churchill finally conceded that Britain ought to take steps to recognise the Committee.

To the delight of the Foreign Office, Churchill announced that he was even prepared to inform Roosevelt of his change of heart.¹⁰³ On 21 July he despatched a lengthy telegram to the President, informing him that something must be done about recognition, in view of the considerable pressure he faced, from the Foreign Office, from Cabinet colleagues and "from the force of circumstances". Churchill tried to play down the import of his suggestion by deriding the concept of recognition:

What does recognition mean? One can recognise a man as an Emperor or as a grocer. Recognition is meaningless without a defining formula.

Churchill explained that he had been trying for several months to establish a collective Committee with which to deal, instead of one which was totally subservient to de Gaulle, and that he felt this had largely been achieved by the present arrangement. To illustrate his point, he described to Roosevelt the negotiations which were currently

¹⁰² This was Churchill's Guidance to the Press of 12 June; a copy which the State Department had received was subsequently leaked to the press; on 14 July, the Washington Post carried an article by Ernest Lindley alleging the existence of such a document. On 22 July, Robert Boothby tabled a Parliamentary Question on the matter and received a reply from Churchill, taking full responsibility for the document, but informing him that he was not prepared to discuss the matter other than in Secret Session. See A. L. Funk, Charles de Gaulle. The Crucial Years, 1943-44, (Norman, 1959) pp 135-36.

¹⁰³ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 20 July 1943, p 278; Avon, *op cit*, Entry for 20 July, pp 398-99.

in progress in London with representatives of the new French Committee:

We are now discussing the problems of Syria (where there is much friction) with M. Massigli, and are getting a good deal of help from him ... General Catroux ... also shows a disposition to be helpful. He is a level-headed man and by no means in the pocket of de Gaulle. I am certain we shall have a smoother course in Syria, which is full of dangerous possibilities, by dealing with the Committee collectively than with de Gaulle personally ... Macmillan tells us repeatedly that the Committee is acquiring a collective authority and that de Gaulle is by no means its master. He tells us further that if the Committee breaks down, as it may do if left utterly without support, de Gaulle will become once again the sole personality in control of everything except the powers exercised by Giraud ... He [Macmillan] strongly recommends a measure of recognition.¹⁰⁴

Churchill asked Roosevelt whether he might consider subscribing to the British formula of recognition or whether he would object to Britain acting alone? "As you know", his telegram continued,

I have always taken the view that de Gaulle should be made to settle down to honest teamwork. I am no more enamoured of him than you are, but I would rather have him on the Committee than strutting about as a combination of Joan of Arc and Clemenceau ... I try above all things, to walk in step with you.¹⁰⁵

Macmillan was especially delighted by this "really wonderful telegram"; he thought it "witty, convincing, pleading, loyal -- all at once"; he was convinced that it had to have some effect on Roosevelt. Nonetheless, Macmillan

¹⁰⁴ Churchill to Roosevelt, T1077/3, 21 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* Macmillan mentions that seven drafts of this telegram were made before the final version was agreed upon. Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 21 July 1943, p 160.

considered that Churchill's "conversion" was all the more remarkable since Casey and Spears, "both passionately anti-de Gaulle", had been "pouring poison into the Prime Minister's ear in London for the last month".¹⁰⁶ Macmillan had been particularly perturbed to find the troublesome duo at Algiers when he returned from Tunis on 21 July. Although they were completely exhausted, "they were also raging against de Gaulle and everything French".¹⁰⁷ Their visit was especially disturbing as, that very day, Makins, who was deputising for Macmillan, had reported that there were signs of another storm brewing within the French Committee:

The principal cause is the unsettling effect of non-recognition of the Committee by the majority of the Allies. The impression that the Committee does not enjoy the British and American confidence creates strain inside the Committee and is deeply felt by all its members.¹⁰⁸

Though he had been obliged to set up meetings for Spears and Casey -- with General Georges, Catroux and Monnet -- Macmillan was far from happy about doing so: the visits, he felt sure, would do "infinite harm" and he wished the pair "would rest content with the mischief which they do either in the metropolitan see or in their dioceses. They need not poach in mine".¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 21 and 22 July 1943, pp 160-61.

¹⁰⁷ Makins to Strang, 26 July 1943, FO 800/432.

¹⁰⁸ Makins to Foreign Office, 21 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

¹⁰⁹ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 22 July 1943, p 161. Casey and Spears actually left North Africa on 23 July, and, with the benefit of hindsight, Makins was able to conclude that fortunately, as far as he knew, "the visit did no harm". Makins to Strang, 26 July 1943, FO 800/432. Nonetheless, the visit had obviously left a deep impression on him, for four months later, he referred, again in a letter to Strang, to the visit from the firm of "Casey and Spears". He went on to describe how "both then expressed the most bitterly anti-French sentiments; their one desire

ix) "Recognition" Versus "Acceptance"

The high hopes which Churchill's initiative had engendered were quickly dashed. He had not chosen a particularly opportune moment to approach Roosevelt regarding recognition for the French Committee. De Gaulle had taken full advantage of Giraud's absence in America¹¹⁰ on a visit designed to increase his prestige, to undermine his rival's position and to strengthen his own. He had himself undertaken a tour of North Africa to much popular acclaim; he subsequently began a purge of all officials with Vichy connections, whilst the Gaullist press ran a series of attacks on Giraud to Roosevelt's great anger. The President replied to Churchill that he did not think the word "recognition" should be used at any time. Instead, he suggested that the more anodyne "acceptance" might be a more suitable term.¹¹¹ "What petty nonsense this is!", wrote Harvey.

We have done irreparable harm to our joint relations with France by this behaviour, strengthening Soviet influence, since Stalin is known to be ready to recognise and is only waiting for us, weakening the Committee itself to the benefit of de G. in his autocratic capacity and causing confusion in the underground movement in France. For all this,

seemed to be to humiliate the French and in particular to "get even with de Gaulle". Makins to Strang, 26 November 1943, FO 800/432.

¹¹⁰ Giraud was absent between 2 and 25 July 1943. Even as distant an observer as Lt. Col. P. Coghill of the British Security Mission in the Levant predicted in his diary on 7 July that Giraud would probably find that in his absence "de Gaulle and Catroux have smoothly ridden him off". Coghill Diaries, Diary and Notes, August 1941-July 1945, Entry for 7 July 1943, p 29, MEC.

¹¹¹ Roosevelt to Churchill, T1085/3, 22 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

Winston, Roosevelt and Hull bear sole responsibility.¹¹²

In view of Roosevelt's continued intransigence, Churchill was forced to backpedal somewhat. He sent a stern warning to Macmillan intending it to reach de Gaulle:

You must not imagine that any ground can be regained by the De Gaullists by intrigue or manoeuvre against the vast forces they have antagonised. De Gaulle's only hope is honest teamwork within the Committee. Thus he may slowly and painfully regain the confidence of the rescuing Powers which he has cast away ... Why can he not be a Patriot and sink his personal vanity and ambition? Then he might find friends who would recognise the good that is in him. As Ike remarked in another connection: "We have no use for glory-hoppers".¹¹³

A frustrated Eden was meanwhile struggling to merge the British and American formulae of recognition into one acceptable to both Churchill and Roosevelt. He feared that he had "whittled down "recognition" almost to vanishing point" so that "the French may well ask why, having been asked for bread, we give them a stone".¹¹⁴ When he tried to assert his own influence and told Churchill that he wanted the matter settled before the forthcoming Quadrant conference¹¹⁵, the Prime Minister replied that the matter was not that urgent: rather than complicate matters by starting another argument with Roosevelt about "recognition" versus

¹¹² J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 24 July 1943, p 278.

¹¹³ Churchill to Macmillan, T1096/3, 23 July 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

¹¹⁴ Minute by Eden, PM/43/255, 1 August 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

¹¹⁵ The Quadrant or Quebec conference took place during August. A number of topics were discussed including "Overlord" (or the cross-Channel operation), Italy, the South East Asia command, Far Eastern strategy, and the recognition of the French National Committee.

"acceptance", Churchill preferred to raise the matter actually at the conference, as he felt a certain delay would be "salutary". "Indeed", he continued,

I think that it is good for these Frenchmen, who are talking so high and would like their respective attitudes to be the centre of world attention, to have a little more time to cool down. Nothing will tend to unite them more than the evidence of their being in eclipse through their quarrels ... My goal is the recognition of the Committee in its collective capacity and its eventual inclusion with the same status as that of other refugee governments in the array of the United Nations ... The obstacle to this is de Gaulle, his personality and his actions. As I have so often said, the President will not recognise the French Committee until he is convinced by practical experience that de Gaulle has not got it in his pocket. It is de Gaulle's duty to regain the confidence of the two rescuing Powers. If he will do his part, I will do mine.¹¹⁶

Harvey now despaired of "ever getting French recognition through". Along with Roosevelt, Churchill wanted certainty that de Gaulle was the "prisoner of the Committee" before contemplating recognition. "It will take years", he lamented, "to undo the harm already done to Anglo-French relations by this ungenerous and haggling attitude of Winston's. The British public is in no way approving of it and the dangerous feeling is growing that we have no policy of our own on this or other questions but defer always to the Americans".¹¹⁷

Far from showing that de Gaulle was prisoner of the Committee, events in Algiers continued to demonstrate the exact opposite. Giraud had returned from America enormously conceited and "apparently relying on the Americans to

¹¹⁶ Eden to Churchill, PM/43/249, 28 July 1943; Churchill to Eden, M539/3, 30 July 1943; both in PREM 3 181/2.

¹¹⁷ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 30 July 1943, p 282.

support him as some sort of dictator".¹¹⁸ "The usual three- or four-day French crisis" ensued, observed Macmillan nonchalantly, when in a series of meetings Giraud attempted to assert his authority over a Committee which was now solidly behind de Gaulle.¹¹⁹ Having persuaded the Americans to do likewise, Macmillan resolved to leave well alone. His relaxed approach proved sensible, for on 31 July, the Committee announced that though the co-presidency would continue, Giraud, as Commander-in-Chief, would assume control of military questions, while de Gaulle would have responsibility for the political sphere.¹²⁰ Macmillan was well pleased and failed to see how Roosevelt could now hold out against recognition which the Committee so richly deserved. Hold out Roosevelt could and did however. Despite a further tentative approach from Churchill, Roosevelt refused to budge until he had had the chance to talk the matter over in Quebec.¹²¹ "The President's attitude could not be more short-sighted", noted Harvey.¹²²

Fortunately Churchill was now convinced that recognition had to happen. Before setting off for Quebec aboard the Queen Mary, he drafted a note which he instructed Eden to send to Algiers when he considered appropriate. The note instructed Macmillan to inform the Committee that at his

¹¹⁸ Macmillan, War Diaries, Entries for 27 and 29 July 1943, p 166 and p 168.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, Entry for 30 July 1943, p 171.

¹²⁰ Though on the face of things, this seemed a fair and equal distribution of power, in reality the balance of power was actually tipped slightly in de Gaulle's favour by the transformation of the military committee into the Committee for National Defence, with de Gaulle as chairman.

¹²¹ Churchill to Roosevelt, T1182/3, 3 August 1943; Roosevelt to Churchill, T1198/3, 4 August 1943; both in PREM 3 181/2.

¹²² J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, Entry for 4 August 1943, p 283.

forthcoming meeting with Roosevelt, he was going to attempt to bring about "a satisfactory recognition of the Committee as now constituted and organised". "Nothing will help me in this task more than a continuity of firm unity within the Committee itself", he warned.¹²³ Harvey thought the telegram quite admirable and that it would "help a lot to mitigate the damage already done".¹²⁴

By now, the situation was such that recognition was essential -- at least from Britain's point of view. Churchill's pre-conference soundings of the Americans did not give cause for great hope, and post-conference, even Eden was obliged to admit that he "had no idea of the strength of the anti-French recognition opposition".¹²⁵ Roosevelt and Hull were adamant that they did not want to recognise de Gaulle in terms that would amount to giving him "a white horse on which he could ride into France and make himself the master of a government there"¹²⁶; no compromise could be found to persuade them otherwise. Churchill and Eden were forced to the conclusion that separate formulae of recognition would provide the only solution to the impasse, and, as the conference closed, this proved to be the case. On 27 August, the individual statements of recognition were finally published. The American version was much less cordial, but at least, as Churchill observed, provided

¹²³ Note from Churchill to Eden, 5 August 1943, PREM 3 181/2.

¹²⁴ J. Harvey (Ed), *op cit*, 6 August 1943, p 284.

¹²⁵ *ibid*, Entry for 30 August 1943, p 288.

¹²⁶ C. Hull, The Memoirs of Cordell Hull, Vol II, p 1241. For a fuller account of the conversations between the British and the Americans at Quebec about recognition, see Kersaudy, *op cit*, pp 294-297.

Roosevelt with what he wanted: "a sheet anchor ... against the machinations of de Gaulle".¹²⁷

¹²⁷ W. S. Churchill, The Second World War. Closing the Ring, Vol V, (London, 1952) p 80.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF CARDS

i) Lascelles Holds The Fort

The Foreign Office had rightly displayed scepticism about the likelihood that Syrian and Lebanese elections would run a smooth course. Within days of the election announcements "a serious politico-religious-electoral crisis"¹ had blown up in the Lebanon. On 17 June, Tabet issued two decrees which established new methods of calculating the total Lebanese population, and allowed for the inclusion of some 160,000 (mainly Maronite Christian) Lebanese émigrés, as well as altering the manner in which deputies were allotted to districts; furthermore, not only was the total number of elected deputies increased from forty two to fifty four, but the proportion of Christian deputies was increased from twenty two to thirty two, whilst the Moslem share was augmented by only two, from twenty to twenty two. Though there had been no reliable census since 1932, the Moslem and Christian populations had been estimated as roughly equal in size and consequently, the Moslem community violently objected to such an unfair division. Moslem representatives united to demand the rescinding of the decrees and the holding of a new census; certain leaders called for a boycott of the elections, for the resignation of Tabet, and even for a declaration that Moslems were unable to co-operate in the Lebanese state in its present form; it was generally suggested that the Moslems of the Lebanon should turn to Syria for protection.²

¹ Wadsworth to Hull, 24 June 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 976-78.

² Lascelles to Foreign Office, 23 June 1943, E3651/27/89, FO 371/35177; Lascelles to Foreign Office, 29 June 1943, E3785/27/89, FO 371/35178.

Spears had warned Chataigneau³ of the fierce hostility that these decrees would arouse and of the serious risk that neighbouring Arab states might refuse to recognise any future Lebanese Parliament, as being unfairly constituted and unrepresentative. As the crisis developed however, Spears was obliged to hand over the reins to Lascelles⁴ on 22 June and depart for London via Cairo.

The Foreign Office was dismayed at this "unfortunate contre-temps", but considered that a resolution of the matter was essentially a French responsibility, though Lascelles "might do such prodding as he can in the present unhappy state of relations".⁵ Using Moslem agitation as his pretext, Tabet actually announced on 25 June that the Lebanese elections would now be postponed until 26 and 27 September (the latest possible date under Catroux's decree). On 27 June, he further announced that a census would take place before the elections. As the previous census had taken eight months to complete, Lascelles could only conclude that this was a device to postpone the elections indefinitely so that Tabet might retain his "semi-dictatorial position".⁶

Lascelles at first seemed uncertain how far Tabet was acting in collusion with the French, for there were indications that he was inspired "mainly by other fanatical and short-sighted Christian politicians, and intended merely

³ Chataigneau had replaced Lépissier as Secrétaire Générale of the Délégation Générale.

⁴ D. W. Lascelles: First Secretary in Beirut.

⁵ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 25 June 1943, E3651/27/89, FO 371/35177. Eyres was referring to the already fraught relations with the French as a result of the Mokkadem affair.

⁶ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 26 June 1943, E3692/27/89, FO 371/35177; Lascelles to Foreign Office, 28 June 1943, E3737/27/89, and Lascelles to Foreign Office, 29 June 1943, E3785/27/89, both in FO 371/35178.

to strengthen the position of the Christians in the new Chamber".⁷ As time passed however, Lascelles became convinced that Tabet had been "bear-led" by the French, who by their "open cynicism" over such matters as the Mokka-dem affair, had revealed that they were hoping to use the time gained by postponement to secure seats for "a majority of pro-French stooges"; he feared that once they had acquired "a completely subservient Lebanese Chamber", they then proposed to rush through a treaty of alliance with France.⁸

It was Lascelles therefore, and not Spears, who fulfilled Foreign Office predictions and advocated postponement of the Lebanese elections. He despondently explained that whilst absolutely clean elections had never been expected, it had been hoped to eliminate the worst forms of interference. However, present French attitudes "doubtless stiffened by North African developments ... make it probable that in the Lebanon, ... elections, if held at all, will be a farce". He argued that Moslem feelings were hardly conducive to a peaceful election whereas a postponement would provide extra time to introduce certain essential safeguards for impartiality which, to date, had not been achieved. Additionally, the Syrian elections could take place and these might provide an example to the Lebanese "to support their better elements". Lascelles preferred grappling with the disadvantages of indefinite postponement "to the establishment of a Lebanese Chamber

⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 23 June 1943, E3651/27/89 and E3692/27/89, FO 371/35177. In contrast, Wadsworth thought it "axiomatic that no such decrees could have been issued without French approval". Wadsworth to Hull, 24 June 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 976-78.

⁸ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 26 June 1943, E3702/27/89; Lascelles to Foreign Office, 29 June 1943, E3785/27/89; both in FO 371/35178.

packed with French puppets which could do both of the States great harm..."⁹

Lascelles went on to a lengthy and cynical discourse on the status of Lebanon which disclosed his disillusionment with the state of affairs which prevailed. He argued that the Lebanon was an artificial creation of the French mandate, upheld by the French who hoped that in so doing, they could control the Syrian hinterland. Lascelles believed that there was no real desire for independence in the Lebanon; the Christians merely wanted protection from the Moslems who sought federation with Syria. Given this belief, and especially the united attitude of the Moslems during the crisis, Lascelles suggested that British attitudes towards the concept of an independent Lebanon ought to be rethought for the future.¹⁰

The Foreign Office however, would have no truck with any of Lascelles' arguments. The idea of postponement of the elections was rejected out of hand: British policy was to ensure that Lebanese elections were held as soon as possible after those in Syria.¹¹ He was informed in no uncertain terms that Britain had no intention of aiming for any modification in the status of the Lebanon; nor was it thought likely that the French could stampede either of the States into the conclusion of a treaty:

It would be contrary to the general policy of the United Nations to allow a treaty of this kind to be negotiated before the end of the war. And it is most unlikely that the French Committee of Liberation would be regarded as entitled to conclude a treaty in the name of France...

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 29 June 1943, E3785/27/89, FO 371/35178.

¹¹ Foreign Office to Lascelles, 8 July 1943, E3785/27/89, FO 371/35178.

It was Britain's aim that France should enjoy a position in Syria and the Lebanon approximating to that which Britain enjoyed in Iraq.¹² Eden noted his approval of the reply to Lascelles:

Our people must clearly understand that it is NOT our policy to substitute ourselves for the French in Syria and that we want to help the French there in the sense described...¹³

Unfortunately, in the Lebanon, the belief had already gained ground "that the elections will be postponed indefinitely or at least until such time as the French have made quite certain that their nominees will be returned".¹⁴ The Moslems, still enraged by Tabet's new electoral laws, drew encouragement from the active support of Nuri es Said¹⁵ and Nahas Pasha¹⁶ for their cause. Though Nuri spent a week in the Lebanon en route for Arab unity discussions in Cairo, he did not intervene directly; Nahas, however, wrote to Catroux, whom he considered to be the only person capable of solving the problem and who had arrived in the Levant on 3 July to wind up his affairs.¹⁷ Nahas protested at the

¹² Lascelles was disgusted with these instructions and commented: "If this stuff is all they can give us by way of guidance, I would much rather have none at all ... I trust this telegram is Sir M. Peterson's unaided composition. But even so, it is very disappointing in view of the presence of Mr Casey and General Spears in London". Note by D. W. Lascelles, 11 July 1943, FO 226/240.

¹³ Minute by Eden, 7 July 1943, E3785/27/89, FO 371/35178.

¹⁴ Weekly Political Summary, No 66, 7 July 1943, E3957/27/89, FO 371/35178.

¹⁵ Nuri es Said: Prime Minister of Iraq.

¹⁶ Nahas Pasha: Prime Minister of Egypt.

¹⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 11 July 1943, No 401, E4029/27/89, FO 371/35178; Weekly Political Summary, No 67, 14 July 1943, E4142/27/89, FO 371/35178; for text of Nahas's

postponement of the elections and at the uneven distribution of seats, and suggested a more equitable division of twenty nine Christian seats to twenty five Moslem seats.¹⁸ Such intervention on the part of other Arab leaders irritated the French, who believed that Britain encouraged them to play up Levant problems in order to divert attention from Palestine and the Jewish problem.¹⁹ For once, the Foreign Office viewed Nahas's meddling with tolerance: provided it did not encourage the Moslems to become too intransigent, they saw it as a useful reminder to the French that their activities in the Levant were being closely scrutinised by the Arab world in general.²⁰

Lascelles meanwhile, was busy pouring scorn on Catroux, who had taken the opportunity provided by the lull in events in North Africa to round up his affairs in the Levant. He reported disgustedly that Catroux's farewell visit had been "stage-managed" for "maximum political effect" and transformed into something of "a triumphal official progress".²¹ Moreover, while the French were doing all they could to emphasise Catroux's continued supervisory interest in the Levant, he had, despite his function as Co-ordinator

letter, see Killearn(Cairo):FO, 17 July 1943, E4302/27/89, FO 371/35179.

¹⁸ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 11 July 1943, No 401, E4029/27/89, FO 371/35178; for copy of Nahas's letter to Catroux, see Killearn(Cairo) to Foreign Office, 17 July 1943, E4302/27/89, FO 371/35179.

¹⁹ Killearn(Cairo) to Foreign Office, 2 July 1943, E4016/27/89, FO 371/35178.

²⁰ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 14 July 1943, E4016/27/89, FO 371/35178.

²¹ When Algiers received their copy of Lascelles' impressions of Catroux's visit to the Levant, J. M. Addis commented that he found it difficult to reconcile the Beirut accounts of Général Catroux with his performance in Algiers. Rooker pointed out in reply that "In Beirut, Catroux is "speared" to irritation". Minutes by J. M. Addis, 1 August 1943 and J. K. Rooker, 2 August 1943, FO 660/35.

for Moslem Affairs, failed to see any Moslems, still less begun redressing their grievances. Furthermore, it was rumoured that the main purpose of Catroux's visit was to hold the Syrian nationalists to their rumoured deal that they would sign a treaty with the French immediately after the elections, in return for French support at the elections.²²

Lascelles's criticism of Catroux was a little precipitate. Catroux was probably allowing himself some time in which to try and assess the situation, for on 8 July, he launched into action: between 8 and 12 July, he saw the leaders of various Moslem communities to discuss the problem. He openly expressed his view that Tabet had committed "a major political blunder", and that Helleu had proved his ineptitude not only by allowing the seating crisis to develop but also a difference with the British over Mokkadem "so acute" as to be evident to all.²³ On 12 July, he sent proposals to the Moslems which were fundamentally those that Nahas had suggested: postponement of a census, the holding of elections by 1 August and a twenty nine to twenty five Christian to Moslem ratio. Despite general Moslem acceptance of these proposals, the Christians, led by the Maronite Patriarch and Emil Eddé, refused to agree to such a compromise and now echoed the Moslem threat to boycott the elections.²⁴ Catroux entered into further negotiations with the Moslems, during which it was agreed that there should be a return to the original number of forty two elected deputies and that the Lebanese elections should be held on 8 August. He then departed for

²² Lascelles to Foreign Office, 7 July 1943, E3966/27/89, FO 371/35178; Weekly Political Summary, No 66, 7 July 1943, E3957/27/89, FO 371/35178.

²³ Weekly Political Summary, No 67, 14 July 1943, E4142/27/89, FO 371/35178.

²⁴ *ibid.*

Algiers, leaving Helleu with the practically impossible task of imposing this arrangement on Tabet and the Christians.²⁵

As Lascelles noted, Helleu's task had hardly been eased by the fact that Catroux had been overtly contemptuous of him and had made several open references to his incompetence. Helleu's position was further complicated by the strong suspicion which many entertained of his complicity in Tabet's original decrees and by the scandal he was currently provoking by installing his mistress in an office of the Grand Sérail.²⁶ In fact, Helleu made no secret of the fact that Catroux had left him "a frightful mess (gâchis) to straighten out" and had done "much harm ... by his undue encouragement of the Moslems". He confided also that he was having a "dreadful time" with Tabet and very much doubted whether he could be brought to heel.²⁷ Eventually, on 21 July, Helleu summarily dismissed Tabet and appointed a new interim government under Petro Trad²⁸ with Abdullah Beyhum and Tawfiq Awad as Secretary and Assistant Secretary of State respectively. The distribution of seats and the date of the elections still remained unresolved but it was felt at least that this was "a step in the right direction".²⁹ The ease with which Helleu accomplished this tricky task only increased British suspicions that the French had all along called the tune: Tabet's acceptance of dismissal without a fight went far "to confirm recent

²⁵ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 17 July 1943, E4166/27/89, FO 371/35179.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 17 July 1943, E4195/27/89, FO 371/35179.

²⁸ Petro Trad: of a leading Beirut Greek Orthodox family; had thrice served as President of the Chamber of Deputies, and was generally regarded as pro-French in his politics.

²⁹ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 21 July 1943, E4263/27/89, FO 371/35179.

suspicious that he was merely barking on the end of a chain which has now been pulled in".³⁰ Most of all, Lascelles observed, "the open political "arranging" by the French" served inevitably "to emphasise the extent to which [they] are still running the country politically".³¹

ii) The Seating Crisis Resolved

The Lebanese situation remained confused: for all his assertiveness in dismissing Tabet, Helleu was at a complete loss as to how he should follow this up. Matters were not helped by Lascelles's open espousal of the Moslem cause, much in the manner of Catroux. He saw several of the Moslem leaders and exhorted them to stand firm and resist being forced into an unfavourable compromise. His partisan conduct only reinforced Foreign Office displeasure with him, and he was swiftly instructed to show "every consideration" for the Christian community too, and to urge both communities to settle their differences.³²

Consequently, when Spears finally returned to Beirut on 25 July from his London sojourn, the situation had not improved at all. Helleu confessed that he was now "worried to death" about the predicament. He was, in desperation, contemplating reverting to a Chamber of sixty three, with a thirty five to twenty eight Christian to Moslem ratio. Spears was quick to point out that while it would no doubt be possible to impose such a ratio on the Moslems, "it would be the height of folly to do so": Moslem opinion would only

³⁰ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 21 July 1943, E4300/27/89, FO 371/35179.

³¹ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 17 July 1943, E4166/27/89, FO 371/35179.

³² Lascelles to Foreign Office, 22 July 1943; Minute by C. W. Baxter, 23/24 July; Foreign Office to Lascelles, 25 July 1943; all in E4300/27/89, FO 371/35179.

be further antagonised and the likelihood of outside Arab involvement would be increased, given the close attention both Nuri and Nahas were paying to events. Instead, Spears urged Helleu to consider accepting Nahas's proposal; though Helleu was amenable, he preferred a Chamber of fifty five to Nahas's suggested fifty four.³³

With the memory of his London visit still uppermost in his mind, Spears wrote to Eden, commenting that Helleu's excessive friendliness since his return, and the fact that he was now "eating out of [his] hand", must owe something to the "considerable influence" of "Massigli's admonitions". Unwilling to leave it at that, he speculated that it could also be due to the excellent personal relations he had always enjoyed with Helleu. Spears commented however, that he detected in Helleu's demeanour, the mark of a desperate man who realised that he had "made a mess of things" and eagerly sought support, especially in view of Catroux's overt disavowal of his policies.³⁴

At Helleu's request, Spears saw the Maronite Patriarch on 29 July, who proved "completely unreasonable", and held out for a sixty three seat Chamber, with a preponderance of Christians.³⁵ A Christian Congress held the same day only increased Christian intransigence.³⁶ According to Spears, Helleu now adopted the policy "of an old woman, hiding

³³ Spears to Foreign Office, 28 July 1943, E4656/27/89, FO 371/35180.

³⁴ Spears to Eden, 29 July 1943, FO 226/243.

³⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 August 1943, E4517/27/89, FO 371/35179.

³⁶ At the Congress, support for Tabet's decrees was reaffirmed and a boycott of the elections was threatened unless they were upheld. Wadsworth to Hull, 2 August 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 980-83.

behind her umbrella and dashing through the traffic".³⁷ The Frenchman had telephoned from Damascus that he had decided to try and break the impasse by imposing by decree a ratio of thirty Christian to twenty five Moslem seats. Though Spears initially agreed to this for the sake of early elections, he had second thoughts and subsequently informed Helleu that this most recent proposal had "every disadvantage" in that it would be opposed by Moslems and Christians alike. Yet on 30 July, Spears met with the Mufti and various members of the Moslem Congress, and to his astonishment, managed to persuade them to accept Helleu's proposal of a thirty to twenty five ratio. The only condition the Moslems imposed was that a complete census should be held within two years and thereafter the ratio of seats adjusted accordingly³⁸. On 31 July, Helleu published his decrees and he and Spears broadcast an appeal for "brotherly unity". Helleu stressed that the imposition of decrees was necessary as it would permit the Lebanese to embark on their journey towards sovereignty, while Spears warned that a refusal to compromise would risk losing the sympathy of the democracies.³⁹

Spears informed London that the Moslems were now satisfied though the Christians remained agitated. The Foreign Office, however, regarded Christian dissatisfaction as "less dangerous" than Moslem discontent, in view of possible Syrian, Egyptian and Iraqui involvement.⁴⁰

³⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 August 1943, E4517/27/89, FO 371/35179.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Wadsworth to Hull, 2 August 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 980-83. Spears commented that Helleu's speech was "very weak and apologetic". Spears to Foreign Office, 1 August 1943, No 431, E4517/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁴⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 August 1943; Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 4 August 1943, both in E4517/27/89, FO 371/35179.

Wadsworth, who had closely observed the entire proceedings, was highly suspicious of the undue haste with which the decrees had finally been imposed and thought that both Spears and Helleu might have acted on "undisclosed motives of expediency"; he believed that Spears, in his championing of the Moslem cause, was probably hoping to restore British pre-eminence amongst the Moslems which Catroux's recent visit had undermined⁴¹, while Helleu was happy to "make Spears appear chiefly responsible for overriding Christian pretensions and to profit from the possible resulting impasse by again deferring elections".⁴²

Despite the prominent rôle of the British throughout the seating crisis, it is difficult to ascertain and assess their exact influence. What is evident is that Spears certainly tried to use his rôle in the resolution of the affair to worm his way back into the Foreign Office's good books. He informed London that the crisis had been acute, yet his desire "to mark a spirit of co-operation" had been so great that he had worked throughout with Boegner, who had admitted that without British help, no solution could have been reached.⁴³ Though the Foreign Office was grateful that Spears and Helleu had seen fit to work together to avert a crisis, and there was recognition of the good job that

⁴¹ Conversations Wadsworth had subsequently with Christian leaders, revealed that they had also thought that Spears's speech had been "a play to regain Moslem support". Wadsworth to Hull, 4 August 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 983.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 August 1943, E4517/27/89, FO 371/35179.

Spears had done⁴⁴, Sir Maurice Peterson thought the telegram was "pure megalomania".⁴⁵

Spears seemed determined to blow his own trumpet and advertise his success. He telegraphed again on 4 August, informing London that the crisis was officially over as the Christians had formally accepted Helleu's compromise, and again emphasised how grateful the French had been for British support.⁴⁶ He wrote a letter to Eden later in the month, expressing the hope that the Foreign Secretary was satisfied with the way he had handled affairs since his return:

I have gone out of my way to make the attitude of His Majesty's Government clear and the French should be grateful for the help they have received. Had it been our intention to let them be driven out of the Levant, a quite simple way of doing so would have been to let Helleu stew in his own juice. Moslem tempers were rising fast in Syria and the Lebanon and he had managed to antagonise the Christians as well, so that he would have been in inextricable difficulties if it had not been for our support. Gratitude however, will not last. Few people like being helped and the French are no exception ...⁴⁷

After reading this telegram, Eden minuted: "He appears to be behaving a little better". Sir Maurice Peterson however, thought that this was perhaps "a trifle on the optimistic side" and drew Eden's attention to another file, concerning the problem of treaty negotiations between the French and

⁴⁴ A Foreign Office minute acknowledged that "M. Helleu and Sir Edward Spears between them have done a good job to do them justice". Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 10 August 1943, E4656/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁴⁵ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 5 August 1943, E4656/27/89, FO 471/35180.

⁴⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 4 August 1943, E4614/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁴⁷ Spears to Eden, 22 August 1943, E5332/27/89, FO 371/35181.

the Levant States, over which the usual war was being waged with Spears.⁴⁸

iii) Syrian Elections: The Assault Commences

Meanwhile, in Syria, events rolled smoothly towards the primary elections on 10 July.⁴⁹ On 9 July, Lascelles forwarded to the Foreign Office a report by the Political Officer at Soueida⁵⁰ in Jebel Druze, concerning the situation there on the eve of elections. It claimed that there was no doubt that the French were intriguing in local politics, generally by bribing certain notables and demanding that they subsequently used what influence they had over the local people to support the French candidate; such influence was neither so great nor so energetically exerted as many alarmists would claim. A more powerful and subtle weapon was the mere tradition amongst the people, based on twenty years' experience, "that it is much better in the end to do as the French say". This analysis, Lascelles added, applied "with approximately equal force to other parts of Syria". His general impression was, that unlike in the Lebanon, the French were not, on the whole, resorting to direct methods of electoral persuasion. In the Foreign Office, Hankey reflected: "This confirms our information that the French

⁴⁸ Minutes by A. Eden, 1 September 1943, and Sir M. Peterson, 1 September 1943, both in E5332/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁴⁹ Weekly Political Summary, No 66, 7 July 1943, E3957/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁵⁰ The Political Officer at Soueida was Flight Lieutenant R. K. Boothway.

have not intervened unduly in Syria. In the Lebanon, it is a different story".⁵¹

While confusion still reigned in the Lebanon, primary and secondary elections both took place throughout Syria almost without incident, and resulted in a sweeping victory for the nationalists led by Shukri Quwatli.⁵² Spears was astonished by the mere trickle of complaints about electoral malpractices instead of the expected flood, but attributed the generally calm and impartial atmosphere to the well-publicised British desire for free elections, to the strategic presence of British officials during the voting, and to the knowledge that close attention was being paid to the elections by other Arab nations. The Foreign Office however, inclined to the view that the French were simply resigned to the inevitability of a nationalist win.⁵³ Spears confessed that popular interest in the elections had been slight and the turn-out in Damascus and Aleppo for the primaries had been as low as thirty per cent. He admitted therefore, that the election results were not exactly representative, but still, he felt they provided "overwhelming proof of the preponderance of pro-nationalist feeling in Syria".⁵⁴ Political activity now focused on the

⁵¹ Report by Flight Lieutenant R. K. Boothway, Political Liaison Officer, Soueida, 4 July 1943; Covering letter from Lascelles to Foreign Office, 9 July 1943; Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 22 July 1943; all in E4206/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁵² Weekly Political Summaries, No 67, 14 July 1943 E4142/27/89 and No 69, 28 July 1943, E4459/27/89, both in FO 371/35179.

⁵³ Spears to Foreign Office, 7 August 1943; Minutes by H. M. Eyres, 25 August 1943 and Sir M. Peterson, 26 August 1943; all in E4999/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁵⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 7 August 1943, E4999/27/89, FO 371/35179. Spears explained that the nationalist victory was due to the vastly superior party organisation and funds they enjoyed, the widespread belief that they had the blessing of both the British and the French and to the undoubted prestige of Shukri Quwatli himself.

election of a President and the formation of a new government and at the first meeting of the Syrian Chamber on 17 August, Shukri Quwatli was almost unanimously voted President of the Republic⁵⁵; after some political manoeuvring, the new government was announced on 19 August under the Premiership of Saadullah Jabri.⁵⁶

With the establishment of an independently elected government in Syria, it seemed evident that serious attempts should now be made to undo the shackles of the French mandate. It was equally evident that the French would do their utmost to resist this and merely wished to replace one set of shackles by another, in the form of a treaty of alliance. Spears informed Wadsworth that even before his election, Shukri Quwatli had said that he had been "playing" the French over the question of a treaty, but that the new Chamber would never conclude an alliance with the French.⁵⁷ After his election, Shukri Quwatli continued the same strategy: when Helleu paid him a private congratulatory visit on 18 August, the Syrian President assured him of his firm desire for friendly co-operation with France, and left Helleu with good reason to believe "que le Gouvernement en formation inscrira dans son programme la prévision d'un traité avec la France". Helleu was forced to admit however, that when pressed, Quwatli had asked for "un petit délai pour y préparer les députés et prévenir les manoeuvres éventuelles de certains correspondants britanniques locaux".⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Weekly Political Summaries, No 71, 11 August 1943, E4779/27/89; No 72, 18 August 1943, E4900/27/89; both in FO 371/35180.

⁵⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 August 1943, E5104/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁵⁷ Wadsworth to Hull, 4 August 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 883-85.

⁵⁸ Helleu à Alger, 18 Aout 1943, No 1203, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

Shukri Quwatli and his ministers refrained conspicuously from publicly referring to a Franco-Syrian treaty, though commented favourably in public on the ongoing conversations between Nuri es Said and Nahas Pasha on Arab unity⁵⁹; this attitude Spears reported, had "greatly perturbed" the French authorities. Their concern was such, he disclosed, that it was rumoured that they had approached the Syrians and offered to cede immediate responsibility for Bedouin control and customs in return for a satisfactory public statement about a treaty. Shukri Quwatli had consulted his Council of Ministers which refused to countenance such an offer. Although Spears found the report "interesting", he doubted "whether the French would be willing to pay such a price for a mere statement in Parliament".⁶⁰

On 23 August, Shukri Quwatli disclosed to Lascelles that he was under strong pressure from the French to negotiate a treaty of alliance. Catroux was due to return in September, when it was expected that he would increase the pressure, and so the President warned that the British should not be alarmed if he was obliged to "caress" the French. Lascelles replied diplomatically that any evidence of more cordial relations with the French would be welcomed by the British.⁶¹ The Syrians were in fact, already "caressing" the French: a report written by a visiting French personality from Algiers of an audience with Shukri Quwatli, Saadullah Jabri and

⁵⁹ Weekly Political Summary, No 72, 18 August 1943, E4900/27/89, FO 371/35181. On 26 August, the Syrian Parliament carried a motion that the Government should work for the attainment of a confederation of Arab States and the future unification of Arab countries. Spears to Foreign Office, 27 August 1943, E5156/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁶⁰ Weekly Political Summary, No 75, 9 September 1943, E5421/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁶¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 August 1943, E5070/27/89, FO 371/35180.

Jamil Mardam⁶², shows how the Syrians were masters of this art. Whilst for his part, the visitor did his utmost to glorify the achievements of the French Committee, the Syrian trio vied with each other to flatter de Gaulle and the exploits of the French Army. The most interesting points of the conversation, the writer of the report declared, were raised by Jamil Mardam, who had explained that his sole aim was "de fixer le statut politique et diplomatique de son pays, notamment dans ses rapports avec la France". He professed eagerness to begin conversations immediately, but only with high-ranking, responsible officials, and in conditions of "la plus grande discrétion". He expounded at great length on the procedure it would be necessary to follow if any results were to be achieved: "négociations minutieuses et absolument secrètes où l'accord sera réalisé complètement entre Autorités supérieures afin de pouvoir être soumis en bloc et dans des conditions favorables préparées par lui, au Parlement Syrien".⁶³

Yet while the Syrian Foreign Minister supposedly professed a readiness, given the right conditions, to enter into negotiations with the French, the Syrian President had indicated to Lascelles, though "without actually saying so", that he was "dead against" a treaty with France.⁶⁴ The Syrians were obviously playing a double game and plainly hoped to string the French along for as long as possible, in the hope that somehow, perhaps at the end of the war, circumstances might alter sufficiently to allow them to fight off French attempts to force them into a treaty. A secret report which the Foreign Office later received indicated that the Syrians expected political developments

⁶² Jamil Mardam: Syrian Minister for Foreign Affairs.

⁶³ Note pour M. l'Ambassadeur, 26 Aout 1943, (unsigned) 72 AJ 225, Archives Nationales.

⁶⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 August 1943, E5070/27/89, FO 371/35180.

connected with Arab federation to strengthen their negotiating position vis-à-vis the French.⁶⁵

In the absence however, of any substantial developments on that front, Syria's main hope obviously rested on the much disputed question of the French Committee's eligibility to conclude a treaty in the name of France. Shukri Quwatli had asked Lascelles on 23 August what Britain's attitude towards the treaty question would be. He had been told just what he wanted to hear, namely that Britain was well-disposed towards a treaty like her own with Iraq, but held it contrary to general United Nations policy to allow such a treaty to be concluded before the end of hostilities. In reporting the conversation to the Foreign Office, Spears urged that to avoid "unnecessary awkwardness", the Committee of Liberation should be informed without delay of His Majesty's Government's views "on the impossibility of concluding a treaty before the end of the war". Despite his warning to Catroux in March, the French in the Levant, judging by their actions, were "quite unaware of these views".⁶⁶

iv) The Treaty Debate Opened

Indeed, Spears had been pestering the Foreign Office on the treaty question since early June. He had requested elucidation on the matter, pointing out that the Committee's claims to governmental status and particularly its title to conclude treaties in the name of France had "an important

⁶⁵ Minute by Mayers, 14 September 1943, E5705/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁶⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 August 1943, E5070/27/89, FO 371/35180.

bearing on the political future of the Levant States".⁶⁷ The new French Committee at Algiers had only just taken its first breath and was struggling for its very existence (see above) and it was not until a month later that Peterson addressed the problem. Britain had always maintained that the conclusion of treaties before the end of hostilities would be contrary to the policy of the United Nations; nonetheless, when France and the Levant States came to regularise their relations, Britain hoped that France would achieve a position akin to that of Britain's own in Iraq. If both parties desired a treaty, Peterson suggested that the problem of the French Committee's eligibility to conclude a treaty might be surmounted by the initialling of draft treaties to be ratified at some future date; in this case, Britain would not insist on awaiting the end of the war until they came into force. Peterson felt that Britain could not pressure the States one way or another; neither could she permit a treaty which barred the States from participating in any future Arab federation, or one by which the French sought to impose unduly onerous conditions on the States.⁶⁸

A month later, Peterson's minute was fleshed out to form the essence of a telegram to the British Embassy in Washington, when an attempt was made to define the American stance on the matter.⁶⁹ The minute had been an attempt to offer a solution to the eligibility problem based on the hypothesis that both parties desired a treaty. The telegram to Washington went one step further: it plainly stated that there was reason to think that certain prominent Syrian, and

⁶⁷ Spears to Macmillan, 10 June 1943, Z6713/5/69, FO 371/36127.

⁶⁸ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 15 July 1943, E4520/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁶⁹ C. W. Baxter to R. Campbell(Washington), 16 August 1943, FO 226/246; also contained in FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 989-991.

possibly also Lebanese, nationalists were "anxious to negotiate treaties with the French authorities when the new governments are set up".⁷⁰ When he learned of the despatch, Spears was horrified. All evidence, he claimed, pointed to the fact that the bulk of the population in the Levant, with the exception of certain sections of Lebanese Christians, was strongly averse to the idea of any treaty with France. They saw a treaty not as a step towards real independence but as a means of binding them to France for the foreseeable future. In particular, a treaty would destroy all hopes of Arab federation, towards which the French had already demonstrated their opposition by suppressing all mention of the subject in the press and elsewhere.⁷¹

Spears's annoyance was such that he simultaneously despatched a personal telegram to Eden, requesting an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the despatch of the Washington telegram, and wondering whether Eden had been absent at that time. He reminded the Foreign Secretary that the question of a treaty between France and the Levant States had been discussed during his recent visit to London, and the fact that treaties were undesirable before hostilities ended had been confirmed in his new instructions. He claimed never to have reported that Syrian nationalists were anxious to negotiate treaties; the truth in fact, was quite the opposite, and Wadsworth, his American colleague fully supported this view. Hence, Spears fumed:

This complete reversal of policy on a question of maximum importance to the Levant States is apparently based on a postulate in direct

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 August 1943, E5088/27/89, FO 371/35180.

contradiction with all that I have ever reported concerning the opinion here.⁷²

In a further telegram, Spears argued that the telegram which appeared to have given the Foreign Office the impression that Shukri Quwatli might be prepared to negotiate a treaty, stated quite clearly that if he ever did so, it would be "in the teeth of popular opposition". Worse still, he blithely announced that it was quite conceivable, that to gain time in the future, Shukri Quwatli might, "as a mere pretext", tell the French that Britain's attitude constituted the only barrier to treaty negotiations.⁷³

The Foreign Office was not happy with Spears' telegrams. All sorts of indications about the state of feeling of the Syrian nationalists had been received from the Levant, "many of them inconsistent with each other". As Hankey wrote: "The fact probably is, that they express sometimes one view and sometimes another".⁷⁴ Spears was informed that the telegram to which he had objected so strongly, was merely an attempt to consult the Americans on what was indeed a matter of considerable importance to the Levant States and that there was nothing very surprising about this. It was admitted, however, that if Shukri Quwatli was now so opposed to the idea of a treaty with France, then the situation would have to be reviewed.

⁷² Spears to Eden, 26 August 1943, E5329/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁷³ Spears to Foreign Office, 3 September 1943, E5285/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁷⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 27 August 1943, E5088/27/89, FO 371/35180. This allegation by Hankey was a little unfair: the only proof that could be supplied to back up his excuse was a telegram from Lascelles, in which the latter had stated that Shukri Quwatli's attitude towards a treaty was "ambiguous". See Lascelles to Foreign Office, 7 July 1943, E3966/27/89, FO 371/35178.

The Foreign Office ended by reminding Spears that only by treaties was it likely that the "final" French position in the Levant States would be defined, and moreover, Syrian and Lebanese politicians should certainly not be given any grounds for representing Britain to the French as "constituting [the] only barrier in the way of immediate negotiations".⁷⁵ A telegram was also despatched to the British Embassy at Washington, confirming that enquiries should proceed, but stressing that the envisaged scenario of both parties wanting a treaty might not materialise, in which case, His Majesty's Government had no intention of interceding.⁷⁶ An official in the Spears Mission commented ungraciously: "This is merely an attempt to save a wall-eyed face. I think we can rely on the State Department to take a more realistic view".⁷⁷

Spears evidently did not think it sufficiently safe to trust to the State Department and quickly set about drumming up support. He wrote to General Holmes, putting him in the picture and commenting unfavourably on the Foreign Office policy which was "by no means easy to understand or define".⁷⁸ Furthermore, he enlisted the assistance of Casey, who reinforced Spears' remarks about Syrian unwillingness to negotiate a treaty with the French and upheld his contention that the telegram to Washington was at variance with the revised instructions issued to Spears at the end of July.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Foreign Office to Spears, 28 August 1943, E5088/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁷⁶ Foreign Office to Washington, 3 September 1943, FO 226/246.

⁷⁷ Minute to His Majesty's Minister, Spears, 5 September 1943, FO 226/246.

⁷⁸ Spears to Holmes, 3 September 1943, FO 226/246.

⁷⁹ Casey to Foreign Office, 30 August 1943, E5196/27/89, FO 371/35181.

Despite all this, the Foreign Office insisted that two facts remained:

(a) The Syrians can't enjoy full independence while the French forces remain in occupation of Syria without a treaty, [and]

(b) the French can't enjoy the predominant position we've promised them without one. The force of effects is therefore likely to bring both parties to want one eventually (unless [the] Syrians think they can get rid of [the] French altogether).⁸⁰

Hankey believed that this thought had almost certainly crossed Syrian minds, for he had heard that they were presently toying with the idea of an appeal to the United Nations to evict France -- if they thought there was any chance of this ploy succeeding, then they would do everything possible to stall treaty negotiations.⁸¹

Within the Foreign Office, there was considerable sympathy for the French plight. It was felt that the developing situation must be causing them increasing anxiety:

In the past, practically speaking, they were in the arena alone with the Syrian nationalists. Now they face them before a whole crowd of interested spectators: Great Britain, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, all capable, in a greater or lesser degree, of intervention. Pressed by the thought that the influence of the other Arab states may increase in Syria while that of France diminishes, the French may very naturally feel that now or never is the time for a Syrian treaty. It is open to question whether, in view of our promise to respect the special position of France in the Levant States, we have any grounds for denying to the French Committee of National Liberation, the right to choose their own time to negotiate. It may also be open to

⁸⁰ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 6 September 1943, E5285/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁸¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 14 September 1943, E5705/27/89, FO 371/35181.

question whether it is in the ultimate British interest to see French influence in Syria reduced to nothing, as, by the passage of time, it may well be.⁸²

v) Lebanese Elections: Accusations and Counter-Accusations

With the seating distribution crisis finally over in the Lebanon, the way had been cleared for elections which were announced for 29 August⁸³. The election campaign was soon in full swing, but it was not long before the Foreign Office was inundated with complaints from Spears about the electioneering activities of the French. It was noted ruefully that the elections had "reopened the breach between Spears and the French".⁸⁴ Even the Free French Délégation in Cairo thought it appropriate to warn Helleu that Spears was on the point of publicly manifesting British dissatisfaction with French interference; to pre-empt his manoeuvre, it was suggested that a declaration should be made insisting on the Free French desire for free elections and pointing to the concrete proof of this desire in French behaviour during the Syrian elections, the first really free elections the Near East had ever witnessed.⁸⁵ Helleu in fact reported to Algiers on 27 August that he had made such a speech, reaffirming his neutrality in the forthcoming elections and stating that his

⁸² Minute by Mayers, entitled Prospects of the Franco-Syrian Treaty, 14 September 1943, E5705/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁸³ Spears to Foreign Office, 6 August 1943, E4653/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁸⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 29 August 1943, E5126/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁸⁵ Caire à Beyrouth, 19 Aout 1943, No 221, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

colleagues had been issued with strict instructions to maintain a similar attitude.⁸⁶

Regardless of Helleu's statements, Spears's discontent was growing considerably. On 22 August, he requested that the Foreign Office bring the matter of French interference to Massigli's attention as Helleu was either unwilling or unable to control his subordinates. The French malpractices were "so conspicuous", he claimed, that unless quickly terminated, "the validity of the Lebanese elections ... will be open to most serious and public question".⁸⁷ In the Foreign Office there was some uncertainty about suddenly landing Massigli with such a complaint when nothing of a similar nature had been said during his London visit; it seemed inappropriate to complain now that he had returned to Algiers, and with the elections less than a week away, almost too late to intervene usefully. Sir Maurice Peterson, however, thought it probable that the French were intervening in the Lebanon to a far greater extent than they had done in Syria and decided that a "few firm words" in Algiers would not go amiss.⁸⁸ A telegram was therefore despatched on 25 August.

Always reluctant to rely on the Foreign Office to rebuke the French adequately, Spears, after securing Casey's authorisation, had taken it upon himself to write to Helleu, complaining bitterly about French intervention in the elections and hinting darkly that Britain would not feel bound to recognise a Parliament and Government which

⁸⁶ Helleu à Alger, 27 Aout 1943, No 36-43, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁸⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 22 August 1943, E4974/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁸⁸ Minutes by H. M. Eyres and Sir M. Peterson, 24 August 1943, E4974/27/89, FO 371/35180.

resulted from a rigged election.⁸⁹ Though London did not doubt that the French were intervening openly and agreed that the subject needed broaching, it was nonetheless thought that Spears's letter ought to have been more tactful and diplomatic.⁹⁰ Peterson was concerned that Spears had given "a very strong hint that we may disavow the elections and refuse to recognise the new Lebanese Government", yet he did not think that there was "the slightest intention of doing either".⁹¹ Spears defended himself by pointing out that he had obtained Casey's authorisation before making the threat. He claimed that reports of French interference were so numerous, and although well-authenticated, incapable of absolute proof, that something had to be done to make Helleu realise the gravity of the situation.⁹²

In the meantime, he had received an "unsatisfactory" reply from Helleu, in which the Délégué had rambled vaguely on the inevitability of such accusations and counter-accusations at election time. He had alleged that he possessed a mass of similar evidence concerning British interference, but had been too polite to refer to it. Helleu argued that after twenty years of the mandate, it was only natural that the population should consult and expect advice from French officials, who had anyway been instructed to maintain a strict neutrality. Helleu ended his letter by

⁸⁹ Spears to Helleu, 24 August 1943, E5230/27/89, FO 371/35181; Spears to Foreign Office, 26 August 1943, E5092/27/89, FO 371/35180. Wadsworth reported that this protest, along with its "six-page bill of particulars" was what led Helleu to issue a public statement about the desire for free elections. Wadsworth to Hull, 3 September 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 988.

⁹⁰ Minutes by H. M. Eyres, 3 September 1943, and C. W. Baxter, 4 September 1943, E5320/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁹¹ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 4 September 1943, E5230/27/89, FO 371/35181.

⁹² Spears to Foreign Office, 26 August 1943, E5092/27/89, FO 371/35180.

asking whether it was part of British policy "to exert here a special surveillance of my activities and those of agents placed under my orders", for, he noted, this would seem "scarcely compatible with [the] friendly and trusting character of Franco-British relations".⁹³

Hankey shuddered at the sharpness of tone of Helleu's come-back⁹⁴, but would have been even more concerned had he seen a fuller report with which Helleu supplied Algiers. In this, Helleu claimed that Spears regularly met Lebanese personalities

pour se livrer auprès d'elles à de vives et injustes attaques contre les autorités françaises et, dans le dessein de troubler les esprits, agiter la menace d'une non-reconnaissance du futur Gouvernement libanais par le Gouvernement britannique.

Furthermore, he described how active the British had been amongst Damascan personalities "pour les mettre en garde contre la conclusion d'un traité entre la Syrie et la France". Numerous British agents, he continued, "prêtent une oreille complaisante à tous les renseignements tendancieux que propage le rumeur publique", and "interviennent ouvertement dans la campagne électorale et par tous les moyens s'efforcent d'exciter la masse musulmane". Helleu claimed that as he knew Spears's tendency to outbursts of bad temper, he attached little importance to his whinings. Whilst he struggled to restrict and resolve these incidents locally, in the interests of the alliance, he nonetheless recorded that they forced him to believe

⁹³ Spears to Foreign Office, 26 August 1943, E5120/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁹⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 28 August 1943, E5120/27/89, FO 371/35180.

que Spears poursuit ici une politique personnelle difficilement conciliable avec les assurances données par M. Churchill et M. Eden.⁹⁵

This was a charge which Foreign Office officials had strenuously denied on numerous previous occasions, but with which they must privately have agreed. There was even considerable sympathy in the Foreign Office with Helleu's complaint about the surveillance of his activities. The Legation, it was felt, had never successfully understood that it was not supposed to function as "Helleu's governess", and it was admitted that British interference in the elections had "gone far beyond the limits we should have liked to set".⁹⁶

The mutual accusations only multiplied in number and increased in asperity as the election approached. Boegner complained to Lascelles on 26 August about the activities of several British officers, namely Captain Lawson, the Political Liaison Officer at Tripoli, Lieutenant Thomas of the British Security Mission in South Lebanon, and a "British" soldier, Captain Morgan (who in reality, Spears claimed, was one Abdul Hadi Mohammed Takhr ed Din).⁹⁷ Not to be outdone, Spears complained again on 27 August about French behaviour and believed he had scored a point when Helleu instructed all French conseillers to absent themselves from their posts until 30 August. Unfortunately for Spears, however, Helleu retracted his initial order and ordered them

⁹⁵ Helleu à Alger, 27 Aout 1943, No 36-43, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁹⁶ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 29 August 1943, E5126/27/89, FO 371/35180.

⁹⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 28 August 1943, E5388/27/89, FO 371/35181.

back to their posts for polling day, 29 August.⁹⁸ "Any telegram from Beirut saying that Helleu has agreed to do something", complained Eyres, "is immediately followed by another one saying that he has gone back on his word".⁹⁹

The continuing correspondence between Helleu and Spears had by now become "remarkably offensive".¹⁰⁰ Spears had categorically denied Helleu's allegations of British interference in the elections and to back up his case, he had pointed out that he had received thanks from various Lebanese leaders "for the way in which no favouritism of any kind has been shown by the British". Spears argued that the Lebanese situation had been exacerbated by certain individuals, for French officials in Syria had refrained "in a most praiseworthy way" from excessive interference and must therefore have had "a greater sense of responsibility and a truer sense of the importance of [the] pledges given", than their Lebanese counterparts. Helleu's explanation that during the mandatory period, the Levant peoples had become accustomed to relying on France for counsel was an understatement, Spears alleged, since he had "never heard anyone contest that in pre-war years, the elections were, to all practical purposes, directed and controlled by the French..." Neither would Spears admit that the complaints submitted to Helleu constituted a "surveillance" of his activities by the British. The surveillance of which Helleu complained was executed by locals, "who indignantly report frequent infringements of their most elementary liberties". No-one, Spears claimed, would be more pleased than the

⁹⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 27 August 1943, E5126/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 28 August 1943, E5130/27/89; both in FO 371/35180.

⁹⁹ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 29 August 1943, E5126/27/89, FO 371/35180.

¹⁰⁰ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 13 September 1943, E5408/27/89, FO 371/35181.

British if the officials they were forced to complain about "realised the import of the new obligations which the French have undertaken in the Levant and ceased compromising both French and British good faith".¹⁰¹

Despite the aggravation and acrimony they were causing between the British and the French, the Lebanese primary elections passed off peacefully enough. According to Wadsworth, French intervention and pressure had been largely blocked by Spears's "energetic protests and counter-measures".¹⁰² In all the more outlying districts, the candidates backed by the French were defeated. In Beirut however, "Boegner's pirates" came out on top; similarly, at Mount Lebanon, French protégés were successful. It was no coincidence, Spears pointed out, that these two areas were those where most complaints about irregularities had been received. Spears felt, nonetheless, that the results represented "a definite advance" on past elections. He did fear, however, that as only a dozen or so strong and independent deputies were elected, it would be too much to hope for the formation of a strong Government from their number.¹⁰³

Indeed, given the tenor of Spears' pre-election reports and dire warnings, the results seemed far better than anyone had dared to anticipate. As Eyres remarked, the Lebanese seemed "to have diddled or out-tricked the French fairly successfully ... the repeated cries of Wolf! Wolf! will only

¹⁰¹ A copy of Spears's letter to Helleu, on 27 August 1943, is to be found in Spears to Foreign Office, 1 September 1943, E5408/27/89, FO 371/35181.

¹⁰² Wadsworth to Hull, 3 September 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 988.

¹⁰³ Spears to Foreign Office, 30 August 1943, E5169/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 1 September 1943, E5238/27/89; Weekly Political Summary, No 74, 1 September 1943; all in FO 371/35181.

increase our tendency to take these reports with a cellarful of salt".¹⁰⁴ Later assessments after the secondary elections on 5 September, did reveal considerable malpractices, ranging from administrative inefficiency to intimidation and even murder: there had been delays in posting the lists of voters, the lists were anyway inaccurate, and excluded many eligible to vote whilst including the names of people long deceased; votes had been bought, ballot papers faked, voters bribed, intimidated and three killed.¹⁰⁵ While the resulting Chamber was hardly representative, it was felt that it was at least capable of evolving towards democratic government. The Foreign Office found the instances of French interference made "unsavoury reading", but thought that things were best left well alone, and certainly any attempt to declare the results null and void were to be "deprecated": an international enquiry would only stir up mud, (much of it perhaps attached to Sir E. Spears), and would probably not prove anything conclusively anyway.¹⁰⁶

vi) Manoeuvring in a Microcosm

Despite Spears' efforts to neutralise French influence in the Lebanese elections, he was still worried about the unrepresentative nature of the Chamber, and quickly realised that much would depend on the holder of the Presidential office, given that his rôle was much more than ceremonial and that his tenure was for six years.¹⁰⁷ It was soon realised

¹⁰⁴ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 2 September 1943, E5238/27/89, FO 371/35181.

¹⁰⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 September 1943, E5817/27/89 and E5596/27/89, both in FO 371/35182.

¹⁰⁶ Minute by C. A. F. Dundas, 30 September 1943, E5817/27/89, FO 371 35182.

¹⁰⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 September 1943, E5596/27/89, FO 371/35182.

in the days immediately following the elections, that of the five main contenders for the post, Ayoub Tabet, Alfred Naccache and Petro Trad stood little chance against two old rivals, Emil Eddé and Bechara el Khoury. Even Eddé however, who had long enjoyed French support, was seriously handicapped by the cloud of legal doubt which hung over his eligibility to stand for the Presidency.¹⁰⁸ The British considered him to be of doubtful moral character¹⁰⁹, and Spears feared that if elected, he would favour "a reactionary and isolationist national policy". Even if not elected, he was potentially troublesome as it was thought that his opposition in the Chamber could do considerable harm.¹¹⁰ In contrast, Spears felt that Khoury would follow a moderately nationalist policy of "gradual emancipation from French control" and "of reasonable co-operation with neighbouring Arab states", though he was "far from being an out and out pan-Arab".¹¹¹ It gradually became accepted in the Levant that while Eddé was the "French" candidate, Khoury was "generally favoured by Spears" and the campaign became clearly hall-marked by an "intense Franco-British rivalry for ascendancy of influence".¹¹²

Spears informed the Foreign Office that subsequent events surrounding the election of the Lebanese President followed

¹⁰⁸ The Lebanese Constitution disqualified former Presidents from standing until six years had elapsed since their previous term ended. Eddé had served as President from 1936 until 1941, though the constitution had been suspended in 1939, a factor which Eddé claimed mitigated the circumstances.

¹⁰⁹ Amongst other things, Eddé was suspected of being involved in the traffic of hashish.

¹¹⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 September 1943, E5596/27/89; Weekly Political Summary, No 77, 22 September 1943; both in FO 371/35182.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Wadsworth to Hull, 22 September 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 992.

"a most curious course".¹¹³ He failed to mention that this was largely due to his own machinations and that, in fact, as he subsequently admitted to Casey, "the reality is beyond anything that could be explained in telegrams".¹¹⁴ In his letter to Casey, Spears described Eddé as "a consummate scoundrel ...[and] the most complete French stooge", whose election would have "opened all sorts of vistas, none of them pleasant", as the French would then have been able to create numerous headaches for the British. He confessed that to begin with, he had very little faith in Bechara el Khoury, but as the fight developed, he had begun to realise that he "was much more of a man than his opponent". Spears furthermore admitted that he began to give Bechara el Khoury "some support, of the discreetest kind ... far more for the sake of his followers than himself". His letter continued:

As a matter of fact, although I was really anxious only to exercise such influence as was necessary to keep Eddé out, and wanted in any case to remain in the background, and not give the French the least opportunity for criticism, I found myself more and more involved ...¹¹⁵

There had been a general feeling that if the two old rivals would fade out of the picture, there might be a chance for a neutral candidate. On 16 September, Spears secured Helleu's agreement that both Eddé and Khoury should end the long-standing parliamentary rivalry between themselves, "which had done the country much harm in the past", by standing down as Presidential candidates. Eddé had already intimated to Spears that he would be ready to stand down in favour of a Maronite candidate; Spears therefore set to work on Khoury who also agreed eventually to stand down, though

¹¹³ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 September 1943, E5674/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹¹⁴ Spears to Casey, 21 September 1943, FO 226/240.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

he would do so only in favour of Camille Chamoun, whom Spears knew to be "anathema to the French".¹¹⁶

As Spears had anticipated, the prospect of Chamoun as a possible candidate for the Presidency filled the French with absolute horror and they "went up in smoke".¹¹⁷ Helleu informed Algiers that he could not contemplate Chamoun as President for one moment. For the past two years, he had been

un agent des plus actifs des services secrets britanniques et ... nous est ouvertement hostile. Son accession au pouvoir constituerait non seulement pour le prestige de la France mais encore pour le maintien effectif de nos positions au Levant, une défaite totale. Je suis donc résolu à tenter d'empêcher par tous les moyens le succès de M. Camille Chamoun.¹¹⁸

Helleu was consequently forced to accept the fact that Khoury was not such a bad prospect after all. He was helped to reach this decision when Spears happened to draw his attention to some 1934 newspaper articles about Eddé's activities, which would hardly have been ideal publicity material for a prospective President's image.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Camille Chamoun was an ardent and patriotic opponent of the French mandate, and therefore completely unacceptable to the French. His election, Helleu was reported to have said, would drive de Gaulle "insane". Bechara el Khoury, Haga-iq Lubnaniyah, (Lebanese Realities), Beirut, 1960, p 261, quoted in A. Susser, Western Power Rivalry and its Interaction with Local Politics in the Levant, 1941-46, (University of Tel Aviv, 1986).

¹¹⁷ Spears to Casey, 21 September 1943, FO 226/240.

¹¹⁸ Helleu à Alger, 17 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

¹¹⁹ Memorandum concerning events on 16 and 17 September 1943; Memorandum concerning events on 17 and 18 September 1943, signed by Spears and dated 20 September, FO 226/240.

The story Spears told the Foreign Office glossed over such apparently minor details and merely revealed that the French had "placed a veto on a candidate acceptable to both parties involved", (i.e. Chamoun), and then completely reversed their policy of support for Eddé by abandoning him and throwing "their whole weight in favour of Bechara el Khoury" because of their unwillingness to be left on the losing side. "Now that Bechara el Khoury had become the "French candidate", Spears concluded, "I gladly agreed to give him what support was in my power".¹²⁰

Casey was treated to the full version of events, as Spears knew from their close working relationship and the similarity of their views on the wider issues of British policy in the Middle East, that he could rely on the Minister of State's complicity. He ended his letter to Casey thus:

The French themselves are not only not in a position to complain about us, but are greatly indebted to us for having so readily consented to the elimination of Shamoun, the man they so much fear, so that after one of the most difficult and nerve-racking experiences I have had, we are sitting very pretty as far as they are concerned and above all, we have had our way. The only regret I have is that all this expenditure of time, energy and of having had to indulge in manoeuvres that have nearly broken my neck, should have been in this microcosm. We have expended as much energy over this silly little country as if it had been a case of swaying opinion in the USA or USSR.¹²¹

Spears was sufficiently proud of his work to send a copy of his letter to Casey to MacMichael in Palestine, another man on whom he could rely to approve his acts, along with a request to destroy the copy once it was read. He must have been pleased with MacMichael's response: after reassuring

¹²⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 17 September 1943, E5596/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 20 September 1943, E5674/27/89; both in FO 371/35182.

¹²¹ Spears to Casey, 21 September 1943, FO 226/240.

Spears that his copy had been consigned to the flames, he continued: "What a suitably ingenious mind you have got. It is like a corkscrew working with a bottle of arak!".¹²² Praise indeed for Spears' efforts.

Having ensured that Chamoun would not be elected, Helleu tried to make the best of a bad job with Khoury. He saw him on 18 September and informed him that it was hoped that in exchange for French support and approval, he would underline in his inaugural address, that amongst the United Nations, France, the traditional friend of the Lebanon, would occupy a privileged place. "Il m'a semblé indispensable", stated Helleu, "de lui faire nettement comprendre qu'il se présentait aux élections avec l'appui de la France".¹²³ Helleu attempted to bring about an entente between Khoury and Eddé, but failed. Eddé was enraged by the shabby treatment meted out to him by the French and would have nothing of it, and so the election of Khoury became "a foregone conclusion". Spears laughed up his sleeve at the French, who had spent vast amounts of money and had "encouraged every possible malpractice" to secure Eddé's success, yet had "so misplayed their hand" that he was now their "deadly enemy" and they were obliged "to expend every ounce of their influence to secure the election of his rival".¹²⁴ Bechara el Khoury was duly elected President by the Lebanese Chamber on 21

¹²² MacMichael to Spears, 2? September 1943, (exact date illegible) FO 226/240.

¹²³ Helleu à Alger, 18 Septembre 1943, Nos 1326 and 1330, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004. Helleu subsequently reported to Algiers that Khoury's inaugural address had made special mention of France, to whom the Lebanon was attached by a traditional friendship. What Helleu failed to point out was that Khoury had tempered his tribute by adding that no friendship, however, was incompatible with the rights of independence. Helleu à Alger, 21 Septembre 1943, No 1338, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999; Wadsworth to Hull, 22 September 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 992-3.

¹²⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 September 1943, E5674/27/89, FO 371/35182.

September and provided Spears with "an extremely satisfactory victory", all the more so perhaps because "French prestige inevitably suffered a heavy blow".¹²⁵ There was better to come, for, prior to his election, Khoury had asked Riad Solh¹²⁶ to form a Cabinet, and his appointment was a further setback for the French.¹²⁷ By 27 September, with considerable British advice, he had formed a Cabinet which was on the whole, "strong and homogeneous".¹²⁸ For Spears, everything had ended in an infinitely more satisfactory manner than he had ever dared to hope. As he wrote to Casey:

I have felt all along as if I were building a house of cards, and that each additional card was likely to bring down the whole structure. Yet until the last tier was in position, nothing had been achieved.¹²⁹

Certainly the construction work which Spears had put into building his "house of cards" had been considerable and he was evidently well pleased with the result. His long and arduous struggles with the French over elections had resulted in strongly nationalist governments in Syria and Lebanon, both largely amenable to British influence, and both, given the right support and encouragement, willing to challenge the French for their independence. It remained to be seen how long the "house of cards" would survive.

¹²⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 21 September 1943, E5675/27/89; Weekly Political Summary, No 77, 22 September 1943, E5700/27/89; both in FO 371/35182.

¹²⁶ Riad Solh: a Sunni Moslem with a long history of pan-Arab and anti-Mandate nationalism.

¹²⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 24 September 1943, E5734/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹²⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 27 September 1943, E5799/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹²⁹ Spears to Casey, 28 September 1943, FO226/241.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSONALITIES AND POLICIES

i) Casting out Motes

Whilst Spears had been away in London in the summer of 1943, during the full heat of the election campaigns, Lascelles had himself felt obliged to tackle Helleu about the recent rapid deterioration in Anglo-French relations. At a meeting on 10 July, he pointed out to Helleu that he knew many well-authenticated cases of both Frenchmen and locals being "warned off" friendliness with the British. Such growing hostility, he alleged, could only be the result of a general directive from some high-ranking official in Beirut. When Helleu denied all knowledge of any such directive, Lascelles was forced to conclude that orders were being issued in Helleu's name of which he was unaware. Helleu insisted that the deterioration in relations was "solely due to a few isolated incidents", such as the Mokkadem affair. He assured Lascelles that he desired good relations, but said that his position was difficult as he was constantly accused of surrendering to the British. He hoped that the current London meetings would result in "a better atmosphere".¹

Lascelles however, was not prepared to let matters rest there. He ventured to suggest that "the basic problem was the mentality of certain important sections of the French community", who, forgetting that their presence in the Levant was "due mainly to a sacrifice of British blood, were eaten up with unworthy suspicions". This disease, Lascelles complained, could not be cured by paper agreements alone. The British, he continued, found it difficult to reconcile

¹ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 10 July 1943, E4028/27/89, FO 371/35178.

the present French attitude in the Levant with Catroux's unequivocal declaration of independence, and he advised that a clarification of "this patent contradiction between past assurances and present practice" was long overdue. When Helleu argued that the mandate still legally existed and therefore had to be enforced, Lascelles retorted that there was neither necessity nor justification for enforcing "what had publicly been recognised as a dead letter", whereupon the Frenchman was reduced to muttering that "everything was in a dreadful muddle". Lascelles observed to the Foreign Office that the real trouble was that Helleu was entirely incapable of controlling the less desirable elements of his staff.²

Sir Maurice Peterson replied to Lascelles, remarking that his interview with Helleu had been "most timely". Massigli had only recently undertaken to ensure better co-operation in the Levant and moreover, had given categorical assurances to fulfil the promise of Syrian and Lebanese independence, though Peterson admitted that it yet remained to be seen "whether French deeds will be as good as French words". Mindful of Britain's own half of the bargain to improve relations in the Levant, Peterson went on to criticise severely the Beirut Legation for its recent attitude towards the French. He commented that

from all we hear and gather from the Middle East, we strongly suspect that there is a mote to be cast out of our own eye also. We frequently detect ... a somewhat carping spirit, a sort of determination to find fault with the French.

Seeking to illustrate his point, Peterson referred amongst a variety of other issues, to the satisfactory completion of the Syrian primary elections; the British allegations of constant French interference had evidently been proved

² *ibid.*

wrong, since the French had refrained from electoral malpractice.

Similarly, a complaint from Lascelles concerning Catroux's recent visit to the Levant, when he had likened Catroux's tour to a royal progress, had caused considerable irritation and annoyance within the Foreign Office. Peterson rebuked Lascelles for his complaint, pointing out that there was no objection to Catroux's undertaking a "state progress" through the Levant States, if he desired to do so. On the contrary, the Foreign Office expected the French "to take the lead in maintaining Allied prestige" and were only sorry that they were so bad at it. Furthermore, the Foreign Office very much hoped "that Governments will emerge ... which will co-operate with them and with us. A most difficult situation will result if they don't, with possible effects both in Iraq and Palestine".³

The crux of the matter seemed to be, as Peterson tried to stress to Lascelles, that

while many Englishmen, both civil and military, in the Middle East want to get the French out of Syria, and while the French must obviously be aware of this fact, this is not the policy of His Majesty's Government ... we fully realise what a difficult task the Legation must have in keeping British subjects generally in line with this policy. The difference of point of view is no doubt due to the necessity for His Majesty's Government to take a wider view of the problem of the Levant States, including not only the Arab problem as a whole but also our future relations with North Africa and subsequently with France, than British subjects in the Middle East can be expected to do so".⁴

³ Peterson to Lascelles, 21 July 1943, E4028/27/89, FO 371/35178.

⁴ *ibid.*

The failure of Middle Eastern officials to take a more circumspect view of their relations with the French was a constant cause of frustration to the Foreign Office, and one which they had sought to rectify on numerous occasions, to seemingly little effect. In the aftermath of the discussions with Massigli, during which both sides had promised to make a fresh start, Peterson struggled once more to bring this point home to the recalcitrant Lascelles.

Lascelles was not prepared to stand for such a dressing down and fought back with a lengthy rebuttal of each of Peterson's criticisms. He claimed that British concern about French intervention in Syrian elections had been justified. That there had been less interference than initially feared was due firstly to unremitting British pressure on the higher French authorities to call their local representatives to order, secondly, to close and well-publicised British surveillance of events and thirdly, to the French realisation that a nationalist victory was almost a foregone conclusion. The Lebanon, "where the French are undoubtedly determined to maintain their position much more forcibly", was a different kettle of fish. Lascelles reported that he had already been obliged to complain about the electioneering activities of the French conseillers for North and South Lebanon, but despite his promises, Helleu had failed to keep them in check.⁵

Additionally, Lascelles maintained his belief that Catroux's recent "state progress", far from upholding Allied prestige, had been definitely prejudicial to it, as well as to the purity of the forthcoming elections; its "triumphal" nature had, he claimed, been achieved "by a series of particularly blatant measures", including "outright

⁵ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 17 July 1943, E4195/27/89, FO 371/35179. Spears had already complained to Viénot in London on 12 July about Pruneaud and Dementque, the two concerned. (See above)

pressure" to swell the crowds; this sort of thing, Lascelles alleged, was definitely harmful to Allied interests, and only caused irritation and resentment amongst the local people while serving to increase their natural tendency "to conclude that as the French are all-powerful, the only safe course is to vote for the French candidates". The best way of enhancing Allied prestige, as far as he could see, was to give substance to Allied promises of independence.⁶

As for Peterson's point that it was the attitude of many of the British officials in the Levant which fostered a good deal of the suspicion that the French harboured towards Britain, Lascelles could not agree. A large part of their suspicion was definitely caused, as Peterson had correctly said, by a natural instinct for self-preservation among French officialdom. But from his own experience, he had become convinced that a great many Frenchmen were determined to ensure that the Levant States were "saved for France"; many, if challenged about the declaration of independence, would contend "more or less frankly that declarations of this sort are always made ... to smooth the path of an army and that they should not be taken too seriously now". Lascelles argued that as even in the pre-war period the Levant States "were always a fruitful breeding ground of Anglo-French misunderstandings and irritation", these two reasons alone provided "ample cause for Anglo-French antagonisms even if all the British always behaved with the most perfect tact and discretion".⁷

Lascelles had the grace to admit that the British were not "entirely blameless" but thought that Peterson had gained "an exaggerated impression of the extent to which we

⁶ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 9 August 1943, E4879/27/89, FO 371/35179.

⁷ *ibid.*

contribute to the malaise". The frequent criticism of the attitudes and behaviour of the French in letters and telegrams from the Levant was hardly evidence of "a carping spirit", and he believed there was a very real distinction between "a publicly critical attitude as opposed to a desire to get the French out of the Levant". Yet Lascelles had also admitted honestly:

The fact is that there is hardly a British official or officer in these States who would not, in his heart of hearts, be delighted to see the last of the French, whether this meant the emergence of real independence or of a state of more or less overt dependence on ourselves. But I can honestly say that in my experience, all those who hold these private views have been extremely careful to keep them to themselves or at any rate "in the family".⁸

Turning the tables on Peterson, Lascelles submitted that there was a feeling among British officials in the Levant that the Foreign Office "carped" at them and was determined to find them determined to find fault with the French. In what he termed "our local tight-rope act", Lascelles assured Peterson that no extraordinary measure of sympathy or indulgence was expected from the Foreign Office; what was hoped for was a certain understanding of the considerable difficulties the job entailed and in particular, of the fact that "the French are at their worst in the Levant States -- as indeed they always have been".⁹

Unswayed by Lascelles's efforts to persuade them otherwise, Foreign Office officials continued to believe that the Legation was determined to find fault with the French. It certainly did not provide the type of objective reporting required and, it was observed, Spears' telegrams could only be interpreted "if we know who he is quarrelling

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

with at the moment".¹⁰ It was seriously doubted that anything could be said to change the attitude of the Legation staff but a week later, Peterson had one last try. He wrote again to Lascelles and sympathised with the semi-administrative, semi-diplomatic nature of his post, the special difficulties of which were compounded by triangular aspect of Levant affairs. Where the Legation fell down, Peterson claimed, was in allowing the administrative side to gain the upper hand, thereby forcing Britain to involve herself in both wartime and post-war responsibilities she had no intention or desire to assume. "French motives are no doubt and almost invariably open to suspicion", Peterson concluded. "But what requires a measure of definition is the extent to which we are entitled to question them".¹¹

ii) Personality Problems Once More To The Fore

The London discussions which had taken place on the Levant in the summer of 1943, between the British and the Free French, had acknowledged the need for better understanding and co-operation on the spot and had resulted in earnest promises on both sides to endeavour to work together in harmony in the future. Eden had assured Massigli

¹⁰ Minute by H. M. Eyres, 21 August 1943, E4879/27/89, FO 371/35179.

¹¹ Peterson to Lascelles, 28 August 1943, E4879/27/89, FO 371/35179. If Peterson thought he had had the last word on the matter, he was wrong. Over a month later, he received a reply, not from Lascelles but from Spears himself. The letter was short and evidently written purely to annoy: in it, he pointed out that the Legation "do not administer anything; the Mission, in so far as it has administrative functions, merely acts as the agent of the Middle East Supply Centre and fulfils an essentially economic rôle here ... It has, of course, been a source of constant and comprehensible irritation to the French that we have achieved so much more for this country in a couple of years than they did in twenty..." Spears to Peterson, 30 October 1943, FO 226/240.

that Britain would do nothing to weaken the French position in the Levant, that her primary preoccupation was military security; these reassurances had been passed on to Helleu who replied that he found them satisfying.¹² In Algiers, Catroux informed Macmillan that he had been "much concerned at [the] evidence he had found of strained Anglo-French relations in the Levant and expressed his determination to bring them back to [the] proper basis of friendship".¹³ Hopes, however, of a marked improvement in relations after the consultations quickly evaporated: the attitude of friendliness and co-operation so ardently vouched for in London and Algiers failed to percolate to the officials in the Levant itself. The earnest promises about endeavouring to work together, sincere as they may have been, were being broken in the Levant as they were being uttered in London and Algiers.

One of the most obvious problems in the Levant, and one which was frequently blamed for a multitude of sins, was that of personalities. Both the British and the French had a list of individuals whom they believed to be the chief trouble-makers in various areas. A conversation which took place between Filliol¹⁴ and Hamilton¹⁵, in Cairo on 25 July is particularly revealing. According to Filliol's report, Hamilton had complained of French hostility towards British military and political officials, though he recognised that their presence in such great numbers, as well as old rivalries which were still very much alive, made for great difficulties. Hamilton had vowed that those difficulties

¹² Massigli à Helleu, 2 Aout 1943; Helleu à Alger, 5 Aout 1943; Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1009.

¹³ Macmillan to Foreign Office, 19 July 1943, E4198/27/89, FO 371/35179.

¹⁴ Filliol: Secretary to de Benoist, Cairo.

¹⁵ J. A. Hamilton: Chargé d'Affaires at Beirut until early 1943; transferred to act as Arab adviser to Casey.

were largely "des difficultés de personnes". He had apparently continued:

Si nous pouvons de notre côté, nous débarrasser du Général Spears, et si vous, de votre côté, pouviez vous débarrasser de deux ou trois personnes, [les relations] finiraient par s'aplanir.

Filliol was quick to agree about getting rid of Spears, but when Hamilton accused both Blanchet and Boegner of being intrinsically anti-British, he had leapt to their defence.

Filliol believed that whatever policy the Foreign Office pursued was irrelevant

tant que le Général Spears continuerait à suivre sa politique propre, laquelle était appuyée par tous les Britanniques du Levant à tel qu'on ne pouvait, à Beyrouth, entrer en conversation avec quelquonque d'entre eux, sans avoir à subir une violente attaque verbale anti-française.

Unlike Hamilton, the Frenchman thought "qu'y avait plus qu'une question de personnes au fond de cette affaire". Conversations with various British officials had led him to conclude that the British desired to control the Near East both politically and economically. This desire, however, had been confounded by Zionism and the French influence in Syria and Lebanon, and consequently Britain had decided to eliminate the French as a force in the Levant. Hamilton assured Filliol that British policy in the Levant was governed by Churchill's declarations and by the Lyttelton-de Gaulle accords, and that there was no desire to eliminate the French; he continued to insist that at least ninety per cent of the problems in the Levant between the French and the British stemmed from the characters he had named.¹⁶

¹⁶ Conversation Filliol-Hamilton, 25 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

When in London, Spears had embarked upon his own campaign to impress upon the French the imperative need for certain personnel changes and had singled out Pruneaud, Dementque, Blanchet, Boegner and Helleu. From the Levant, he had been strongly backed by Lascelles, who had bitterly criticised Helleu. He regarded him as an "incompetent Délégué Général" and one who was

almost universally condemned by his own people. The bad men, though they largely control him, blame him for not being actively and personally anti-British; the good men -- and there are a few of them left in Beirut -- blame him for being under the influence of the bad men. Everybody blames him for being incapable of asserting his authority over the local politicians.¹⁷

On his return to the Levant, Spears had returned to the charge, quickly forgetting the assurances he had given in London to work for better relations with the French. He believed that the course of the Lebanese election campaign "had demonstrated conclusively M. Helleu's unfitness for the position he holds. His plaintive public declarations of French impartiality were completely belied by the actions of his subordinates and he is openly held in contempt by the French as well as the native populations".¹⁸

Spears had observed that due to Helleu's ineptitude, the Délégation staff did scarcely any work, unless connected with electoral intrigues. Chataigneau had frankly admitted in conversation, that all power was concentrated in the hands of Boegner, who worked hard, Spears claimed, but in the wrong cause. He was convinced that Catroux must have reported unfavourably on Helleu to the French Committee after his visit to the Levant and was unable to understand

¹⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 20 July 1943, No 41, FO 226/243.

¹⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 6 September 1943, E5539/27/89, FO 371/35182.

why nothing had yet been done about him. He now suggested laying the matter frankly before M. Massigli for the situation was intolerable:

It can truthfully be said that under M. Helleu's -- or rather M. Boegner's administration, French prestige in [the Levant] has sunk lower than ever before, and that on the civilian side at least, French co-operation in the war effort has practically ceased to exist.¹⁹

Besides, Spears added, Helleu's replacement would certainly be "welcomed warmly by the great majority of French in the Levant, though for widely varying motives".²⁰

Within the Foreign Office, Hankey was quick to point out that a stronger and more skilful Délégué Général than Helleu would probably have more frequent and more serious rows with Spears and expressed reluctance to start intriguing against Helleu. Slightly more concern was manifested over Blanchet and Boegner, but it was thought that in view of the ill-feeling engendered by the election campaigns, the atmosphere with the French was presently too bad for the matter to be successfully broached.²¹ When Casey however, telegraphed his full support for Spears' recommendations for the replacement of Helleu and particularly Boegner, observing that there was "no prospect of Anglo-French collaboration" while the latter remained in the Levant, the Foreign Office was forced to give way.²² Considerable opposition remained to the idea of pressing for Helleu's removal, but it was decided to concentrate on Boegner, who was "undoubtedly a bad lot".

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 17 September 1943, E5560/27/89, FO 371/35182.

²² Casey to Foreign Office, 24 September 1943, E5744/27/89, FO 371/35182.

"The irony of all this" commented Sir Maurice Peterson, "is that the French are now practically asking for the removal of Sir L. Spears!"²³

The French did indeed tend to view Spears as the root cause of all their difficulties in the Levant and were most anxious to see him removed. Though by early September the Levant elections were over, in London the recriminations against Spears were still pouring in. Viénot was instructed to impress upon the Foreign Office the unfriendly nature of Spears's behaviour, which had completely contradicted the assurances given to Massigli during his London visit.²⁴ Viénot actually saw Sir Maurice Peterson on 13 September to complain about Spears' activities; he singled out from amongst his many transgressions, Spears's convocation of the interim Lebanese government prior to the elections and his warning to them that Britain would never recognise a government resulting from rigged elections, his repeated accusations that Helleu and his staff were intervening unduly in the elections, and some recent correspondence with Helleu, which was "not only unjustifiable but departed from all standards of propriety in tone".²⁵

Peterson promised to inform Eden of the complaints and did his best to say as much as he could on behalf of Spears. He felt obliged to observe that the Foreign Office had itself felt "uneasy about the degree and extent of French intervention" during the Lebanese elections, and had expressed this concern to Massigli. It had been thought that the extent of French interference had rather left the

²³ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 30 September 1943, E5744/27/89, FO 371/35182.

²⁴ Alger à Londres, 3 Septembre 1943, No 876-77, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

²⁵ Minute by Sir M Peterson, 13 September 1943, E5525/27/89, FO 371/35181.

question of the representativeness of the Lebanese Chamber open to doubt. Peterson tried to draw Viénot into a more general discussion of French policy in the Levant, especially with regard to Arab federation, but the Frenchman was not easily side-tracked and before departing, once again referred to Spears' misdemeanours.²⁶ The Foreign Office had to admit that Viénot's complaint about the recent correspondence between Spears and Helleu was not without justification; it had already caused some raised eyebrows and was "a model of how not to conduct diplomacy with your allies". Such correspondence was more usual, it was observed, when Britain was "either about to break off diplomatic relations or had recently occupied the country by force of arms!!!" (The correspondence concerned allegations and counter-allegations of interference in the recent elections²⁷) Yet for all this, it was considered useless to reprimand Spears, though a report of the meeting was sent to him in the hope that it would serve as a warning.²⁸

As more detailed reports of the elections in Syria and Lebanon began to reach Algiers, and with them allegations of British interference, Massigli was forced to instruct Carlton Gardens to intervene urgently with the Foreign Office, and to impress upon the officials there that French complaints about the attitude of British representatives during the Levant elections were well-founded. The declarations of Churchill and Eden aside, it had been recognised by both parties in London, he claimed, that Anglo-French difficulties in the Levant stemmed largely from

²⁶ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 13 September 1943, E5525/27/89, FO 371/35181; Viénot à Alger, 13 Septembre 1943, No 1220-26, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1009.

²⁷ See Spears to Foreign Office, 1 September 1943, E5408/27/89, FO 371/35181.

²⁸ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 29 September 1943, E5525/27/89, FO 371/35181. The report was despatched to Spears on 30 September.

friction between the local authorities. Whereas Helleu had been informed of this and acted accordingly, Spears manifestly had not, as his actions throughout the elections and afterwards had testified. Eden should be informed that Massigli personally sought to draw his attention

sur les conséquences funestes que pouvaient avoir sur les relations franco-britanniques, les intrigues d'un personnage [Spears] dont nous sommes convaincus qu'il outrepassé systématiquement les instructions du Foreign Office et dont les initiatives s'il demeure en situation de les continuer, risquent d'avoir les conséquences désastreuses.²⁹

Viénot duly saw Eden on 5 October and passed on Massigli's message. Eden assured Viénot of Britain's disinterestedness in the Levant but pleaded ignorance about Spears's alleged intervention in the elections; he asked Viénot to pass on the relevant details to Sir Maurice Peterson, which the Frenchman duly did the following day.³⁰ Peterson recorded that Viénot had spoken "in stronger terms than he has yet used ... of the persistent trouble ... caused by Sir E. Spears". He observed however, that the complaints against the British Minister remained very general, except that Viénot now claimed that Spears had consistently supported the notably anti-French Riad Solh and had actively campaigned against Eddé, the candidate favoured by the French; it was also alleged that he had threatened to cut off the paper supply to the Levant unless Britain was permitted to share in its distribution. Peterson had tried to defend Spears against Viénot's attack by pointing a finger at the French, who Spears believed were "trying to influence the Lebanese elections to an undue extent", and by

²⁹ Alger à Londres et Beyrouth, 28 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

³⁰ Record of conversation between Eden and Viénot, 5 October 1943, E5961/27/89, FO 371/35182.

questioning Viénot about the election results generally.³¹ Viénot had anyway thus far received scant news about the Levant situation³², and steadfastly refused to be deflected. He insisted that it was quite intolerable that the British representative at Beirut should make a point of opposing French influence and that Spears's conduct was quite inconsistent with the pledges repeatedly given by Britain. Interestingly, in his own report of this meeting to Massigli, Viénot mentioned that in conclusion, he had hinted "que nous estimions désirable le rappel du Général Spears".³³

Foreign Office opinion on this occasion, however, was not particularly sympathetic to French complaints "which are probably due mainly to French disappointment at the fact that the Lebanese elections have gone against them and of course to their normal dislike and suspicion of General Spears and his policy"³⁴ As the matter had been raised with Eden however, it was impossible not to follow the matter up, and information with which to rebut the French claims was requested from Spears.³⁵ Three telegrams were soon winging their way to the Foreign Office containing Spears's defence

³¹ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 6 October 1943, E5984/27/89, FO 371/35182.

³² Viénot à Massigli, 6 Octobre 1943, No 373, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999. Viénot complained to Massigli about the paucity of information he had received about the Lebanese elections, and claimed that he had only been informed of the composition of Riad Solh's cabinet by chance.

³³ Viénot à Massigli, 7 Octobre 1943, No 387-88, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

³⁴ Minute by C. W. Baxter, 11 October 1943, E5984/27/89, FO 371/35182.

³⁵ Foreign Office to Spears, 12 October 1943, E5984/27/89, FO 371/35182.

against each of the allegations made against him.³⁶ He denied that he had consistently backed Riad Solh³⁷ and claimed to have seen him for the first time in a year only after the elections were over. He admitted that doubt did surround the legitimacy of Eddé's candidature but denied that he had ever campaigned against him. He also admitted that he had warned members of the Lebanese interim government about the dangers of rigged elections, but individually, as he felt that Britain could not be committed in advance to the recognition of a Government brought into existence by cooked elections. It was also "quite true" that he had repeatedly accused the French of interference in the elections, though he had never accused Helleu personally. Exhaustive reports however, had demonstrated the need for such representations.

Spears used the opportunity of defending himself to launch another attack on Helleu:

More generally, I can only regard it as the measure of Helleu's subservience to Boegner that the former should have levelled such accusations against me, despite the fact that he has repeatedly expressed to me his warm thanks for several "interventions" carried out by me at his request.³⁸

He claimed always to have enjoyed cordial relations with Helleu, but denounced him as "helpless in Boegner's hands". As an example, Spears mentioned that Helleu had remarked

³⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 14 October 1943, Nos 573, 574 and 575, E6214/27/89, E6218/27/89, and E6219/27/89, FO 371/35182.

³⁷ Later in November, Spears remembered this accusation and drew Foreign Office attention to an interview between M. David, French Délégué, and Riad Solh, during which M. David had reproached the Lebanese for their intransigence, saying that they were most ungrateful in view of the fact that he had helped them to get into Parliament. Spears to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E7207/27/89, FO 371/35190.

³⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 14 October 1943, No 573, E6214/27/89, FO 371/35182.

privately to him that Gautier³⁹ had "gravely abused his official position" and that Dementque⁴⁰ was a "crook" who was "entirely unfitted to hold ... any office", yet the very fact that both still retained their posts was, Spears alleged, "surely a sufficient commentary both on Helleu's position and on the *bona fides* of his complaints about me".⁴¹

For Spears however, the real truth of the matter was that the French were "aghast at their failure and the reaction it has aroused ... They have made such a public mess of their cuisine that countless Lebanese of predominantly French culture who had never thought in nationalist terms before, are now doing so with enthusiasm". The united patriotic front which they had created by their intervention was "a Frankenstein [which] ... they must now explain away as best they can"⁴², and which Spears believed they were attempting to do by blaming him.

Yet however largely Spears had featured in French criticisms as the reason for French problems in the Levant, considerable concern had been expressed by Frenchmen about certain elements within the French camp. In particular, several damning reports had focused on the rôle of the leading Free French official there, Jean Helleu. During the summer, troubled reports had begun to reach Algiers about Helleu and the Levant situation. Admiral Auboyneau's stay had so worried him that he wrote to de Gaulle advising that Catroux, in view of his immense prestige and authority in the area, should return to the Levant as soon as possible; better still, he suggested that de Gaulle himself (who, he

³⁹ Gautier: Head of the Surêté Général.

⁴⁰ Dementque: Conseiller, Tripoli.

⁴¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 14 October 1943, No 574, E6218/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁴² Spears to Foreign Office, 14 October 1943, No 575, E6219/27/89, FO 371/35182.

claimed, was regarded in the Levant as something of a superhuman legend), should plan a pre-election visit. He voiced his concern about Helleu thus:

Helleu est estimé de tous et ne manque ni de tact ni de fermeté, mais je crains qu'il ne surestime la force de notre position et ne sousestime le danger des intrigues anglaises ... il n'aurait pas, à mon sens, l'autorité et le prestige nécessaires pour défendre efficacement les intérêts de la France dans ces circonstances difficiles.⁴³

Another visitor expressed grave doubts to Massigli about Helleu's abilities to dominate affairs, warning that the situation in the Levant should be considered as "excessivement grave".⁴⁴

By the time Catroux did visit the Levant in July 1943, a serious crisis had been precipitated in the Lebanon, and his annoyance with Helleu had been only too evident. He had denigrated Helleu personally and criticised both his handling of the Mokka-dem affair and of the seating distribution crisis, accusing him of a "manque de doigté".⁴⁵ Madame Catroux had hurled insults at Madame Helleu⁴⁶, and when the Catrouxs had absented themselves from a reception on 14 July, "no attempt was made to hide this private feud from the public eye".⁴⁷ It was indeed, Lascelles commented, hard to avoid the general impression that Helleu was "not

⁴³ Auboyneau à de Gaulle, 29 Mai 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

⁴⁴ Lettre à M. l'Ambassadeur, signé Paul le Gissie(?), 10 Juin 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1522.

⁴⁵ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 20 July 1943, No 41, FO 226/243; see also: Holmes:Wilson, 13 July 1943, FO 660/35.

⁴⁶ Madame Catroux had alleged that Madame Helleu had been the mistress of a Roumanian and a German successively, and ought to be under police surveillance.

⁴⁷ Lascelles to Foreign Office, 20 July 1943, No 41, FO 226/243.

long for this world" and it was thought "almost certain that Catroux would do his best, once in Algiers, to secure his removal".⁴⁸ Certainly when Spears met Catroux in Algiers in July, Catroux was "obviously as displeased as he could be with Helleu". He had openly criticised the Délégué's mismanagement of the situation and had expressed the view that the challenge to Moslem opinion which Tabet's action in raising the number of Christian seats had represented, "had done more to endanger the independence of the Lebanon than anything that had occurred for many years" and was the "equivalent of a death sentence to an independent Lebanon in the future".⁴⁹

Equally however, Helleu resented the ambiguity of his own rôle during Catroux's visit: he complained to Massigli of the confusion that Catroux's involvement in Levant affairs caused, though he requested that Massigli keep this piece of correspondence secret from de Gaulle. He also sought reassurance, since he had received two or three reports that Catroux had claimed that responsibility for the Levant had devolved upon him in his capacity as Commissioner for Moslem Affairs and no longer rested within the orbit of the Commissariat des Affaires Etrangères. Helleu stressed that it was "indispensable de disposer de l'autorité nécessaire pour mener à bien la tâche qui m'a été confiée".⁵⁰

Massigli had been worried about Helleu for some considerable time. From reports he had received, it had been evident that Helleu had regarded both the Mokka-dem affair and the postponement of the Lebanese elections as a

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 28 July 1943, E4656/27/89, FO 371/35180; Spears to Eden, 29 July 1943, FO 226/243.

⁵⁰ Helleu à Alger, 16 Juillet 1943, No 195, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN. Vol 1004; Helleu à Massigli, 26 Juillet 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

prestigious success and had been reluctant to compromise by giving way or undoing what had been done. Equally worrying was a request from him, dated 4 June, but received over a month later, for "un crédit de 20 millions de francs pour orienter les elections dans un sens favorable à nos intérêts et déjouer les manoeuvres anglaises".⁵¹ Furthermore, Massigli had been forced to field British complaints during his London visit as best he could, with little or no up to date information from the Levant.

Matters seemed to show no sign of improvement: the first detailed report on the Syrian elections emanating from the Levant did not reach Algiers until 20 September and in a letter to Helleu, Massigli observed that "le silence de la Délégation Générale ... nous faisait craindre que notre position au Levant fut gravement amoindrie". No report on the Lebanese elections had yet been received and Massigli was obliged to rebuke Helleu for this, informing him that "ce défaut d'information a produit au Comité une assez fâcheuse impression". Massigli commented that he realised that Baelen's indisposition was probably increasing the strain on Helleu, but regretted that he was unable to supply him with the trained personnel which he had requested⁵²; he suggested that a reorganisation of the staff at the Délégation and in particular, the granting of greater responsibility to Chataigneau, might improve matters.⁵³ Given the worrying state of affairs and the new situation created by the elections, Massigli had determined upon a thorough review of all aspects of the Levant situation. It was decided that Chataigneau (accompanied by Baron de Benoist)

⁵¹ Note pour M. Pleven, 15 Juillet 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁵² Helleu had written to Massigli on 13 September requesting more personnel. See Helleu à Massigli, 13 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1026.

⁵³ Massigli à Helleu, 21 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

should return to Algiers to provide an assessment of the evolution in Syrian and Lebanese politics and of the position of France, particularly with regard to her relations with Britain.⁵⁴

iii) "Explaining Away Frankenstein"

As the established power in the Levant with over twenty years of mandatory experience, the French had indeed initially viewed the proposed elections with a certain degree of complacency. So it had been that in April, Lieutenant-Colonel F. Reyniers⁵⁵ recorded his general observations on the situation in Syria thus:

Notre influence est si évidente en Syrie que les nationalistes ... ont, pour la campagne électorale, à d'autres alliances, préféré la nôtre. Ils ont parfaitement senti qu'alliés à nous, ils représentaient une force inégalable ... Bien compris, la Syrie ne nous est défavorable. Si son atavisme du peuple dominé l'amène à jouer la division entre ses divers protecteurs, cela n'est pas incompatible avec une préférence pour la France, qui doit pour elle, comme pour un cheval fugueux et quelquefois indocile, savoir rendre la main sans jamais lâcher complètement les rênes.⁵⁶

Given that the French were so overconfident, the victory of nationalist sentiment which the elections represented had come as an even greater blow and caused the French in the

⁵⁴ Alger à Beyrouth, 9 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004; Spears to Foreign Office, 15 September 1943, E5560/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁵⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel F. Reyniers: Head of the Services Spéciaux for Syria.

⁵⁶ Inspection Générale de l'Etat de Syrie, Aperçu Général, No 15, Lt-Col. F. Reyniers, 25 Avril 1943, 4° P1277, Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine.

Levant to react in a variety of different ways. The first and most immediate reaction, especially of the French officials *in situ*, who possibly believed that they might be held responsible for the election disaster, was, understandably enough, to play down the extent of the nationalist victory. Thereafter, they searched for an excuse, a scape-goat, somebody or something else to blame. In a detailed report which he compiled on the Syrian elections, Helleu stressed that the nationalist victory was of "une tendance modérée très nette", and that for the moment, everything augured well. He believed that the Syrian Chamber would be "particulièrement sensible aux influences qui pourraient s'exercer sur lui du dehors" and better still,

Shukri Quwatli et ses amis, notamment Jamil Mardam, nous sont reconnaissants de notre attitude impartiale pendant les élections et semblent vouloir se maintenir dans les bonnes dispositions qu'ils ont manifestées dans leurs conversations avec le Général Catroux.⁵⁷

A similar report on the Lebanese elections attempted not so much to play down the nationalist victory as to question the validity of the elections themselves:

En résumé, les conditions dans lesquelles s'est déroulée la consultation électorale, imposent de constater que le Liban n'était pas mûr pour des élections libres. La partialité et la venalité des fonctionnaires, l'incompréhension générale des intérêts supérieurs du pays, le peu de maturité politique d'une opinion qu'intéressent avant tout les questions des personnes, tout cela crée une atmosphère peu favorable au fonctionnement normal d'institutions démocratiques dans ce pays.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Helleu à Massigli, 11 Septembre 1943, No 212, Note sur les élections syriennes, (15pp) Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁵⁸ Les élections libanaises, (10pp), 29 Aout-5 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

The keynote however, of French reaction to the election results was bitter criticism of British "ingérences". In numerous belated reports, Helleu complained at length to Algiers about British policy. He alleged that there was a blatant contradiction between British assurances to the Committee about the French pre-eminent position in the Levant

et la politique pratiquée, sur place, par les anglais, politique qui tend à éliminer progressivement notre influence et à rendre ainsi pratiquement inopérantes les assurances prodiguées à Londres.⁵⁹

Helleu alleged that the British had launched a massive propaganda campaign against the French, in the form of posters, pamphlets and tracts, which the French could do nothing to counteract simply for lack of paper. Similarly, Britain had sent numerous agents to the Levant "soit de faire directement de l'action politique, soit de noyauter le personnel français".⁶⁰ Using all manner of threats and intimidation, these agents had intervened consistently during the election period on behalf of local anti-French personalities, and systematically campaigned against French sympathisers.

In Syria, the British were now encouraging the government to refuse to conclude a treaty with France and moreover to demand that the French authorities immediately cede to them various essential interests and responsibilities such as the Intérêts Communs. As soon as the Lebanese government was formed, it too, would inevitably receive the same treatment from the British. On a more

⁵⁹ Politique Britannique dans les Etats du Levant, 1 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1009.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

general level, the British did all they could to promote the idea of independence by invoking democratic principles and the Atlantic Charter "pour amener les Etats à se soustraire à l'influence française". Conversely, they exploited the Lyttelton-de Gaulle accords "pour exercer de continuelles ingérences dans notre politique".⁶¹

Helleu claimed that the major preoccupation of each of the electoral candidates prior to the elections had been to secure the patronage of one of the Allied powers.⁶² In March however, Catroux had instructed all French officials to formally abstain from involvement in the elections and these instructions had been reissued frequently.⁶³ For example, on 5 April, General Collet had instructed all officials in Syria that the elections should take place in complete freedom and that they should henceforward "donner publiquement l'impression d'une neutralité absolue". He had emphasised that France must maintain "une attitude inattaquable" throughout the election period in the hope of subsequently attaining a treaty of alliance with the Levant States. It was pointed out that it had anyway been against French interests to align herself too closely with certain candidates and to oppose others, as this would only have aroused bad feeling and forced the latter into the British camp, whilst creating the worst impression in the Arab world in general. It had also been thought that a policy of strict neutrality might be advantageous for France, possibly providing her with the chance of winning over "certains adversaires de la veille..."⁶⁴

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *Compte-Rendu sur le déroulement des élections au Liban*, (25pp), Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁶³ *Les élections libanaises*, (10pp), 29 Aout-5 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

The British too had proclaimed that they had no desire to intervene in the elections and Spears had frequently stated that his government attached great importance to the freedom of the elections. It was alleged in reports to Algiers, however, that the subsequent actions of British officials had made a complete mockery of all these official statements. Spears had behaved as though he possessed a veritable *droit de regard* over the acts of the Délégation Générale and its staff. Complaints from him, which were generally devoid of all foundation, had rained down upon the French and "apparent d'autant plus abusifs que de sérieuses doléances sur les ingérences britanniques auraient été absolument justifiées".⁶⁵

Helleu complained particularly about British behaviour in the Tripoli region, and the activities of Captain Lawson on behalf of Abdul Hamid Keramé. The fact that Spears had written Helleu a letter on 28 August, disposing of all the charges against Lawson, was evidently deemed inconsequential.⁶⁶ Lawson had allegedly declared himself "disposé à mettre tout en oeuvre pour assurer le succès de la liste Keramé", and Keramé too had been overheard saying "N'ayez aucun crainte pour ma candidature. Je suis soutenu par les Anglais. Au moment voulu, ils imposent leur volonté. Ce sont eux qui feront les élections".⁶⁷ In South Lebanon, British favour had been exercised in Adel Osseiran's cause. He had received a visit from Spears in April and thereafter regular visits from Lieutenant Thomas of the British Security Mission. The interference of Major Patrick Smith in the same region had been so pronounced that the British had

⁶⁵ Les élections Libanaises, (10pp), 29 Aout-5 Septembre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁶⁶ See Spears to Helleu, 28 August 1943, No 488, FO 660/36.

⁶⁷ Ingérences britanniques dans les élections, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

been obliged to remove him, though officers of the OCP had continued to intervene openly.

Other British agents whose intervention had been most marked were Colonel Furlonge and Captains Maroun Arab, Morgan and Pavitt. Helleu also singled out Captain Mudy and Major Altounian: the former had openly supported Sheikh Hamoudi, had visited him regularly and had taken him to Aleppo where he had presented him to other British officers at the Hotel Baron; this had given Hamoudi the opportunity "de se prévaloir des hauts relations qu'il possède parmi les Britanniques"; the latter "sous la couvert d'études sur le paludisme, parcourt la Syrie et prend des contacts de nature politique avec les principales notabilités du pays". Helleu cited numerous specific dates on which various local politicians had met with British officers -- for example, on 5 August, Hamid Franji met with Colonel Furlonge and on 8 August, Colonel Coghill hosted a dinner for Abdul Hamid Keramé. Any such event aroused Helleu's suspicion: a reception held on 21 April, attended by Captain Corfe, Major Hope and Captain Holman, was reported as being of "une tendance nettement politique"; he judged a fête held on 10 May to celebrate the Tunisian victory, at which distributions were made to the poor, to be inspired above all, by "des buts électoraux".⁶⁸

British intervention had not ceased after the elections. Rather, Helleu contended, the re-establishment of constitutional régimes in the Levant had afforded Spears the opportunity to intervene more actively and openly in local affairs, "et de se hausser le ton de ses prétentions". During the election of the Lebanese President and the formation of his Cabinet, "l'action britannique a été plus flagrante que jamais". Eddé's position in the competition

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

for the Presidency had at first seemed strong; however, seeds of doubt about his eligibility had been sown and he had been seriously handicapped by "l'opposition ouverte, pour ne pas dire officielle, du Général Spears et des services britanniques". Spears had seized immediately on the question of Eddé's eligibility and soon, "le bruit se répandit rapidement que la Grande Bretagne avait déclaré la guerre à M. Eddé et que, dans ces conditions, la succès de celui-ci devenait problématique". Thus the British had managed to secure Eddé's defeat. Writing well after the event, Helleu now sought to represent this as no bad thing for France, as he believed that Eddé was not a man of conciliation: "On pourrait craindre, en particulier, que l'intransigeance de M. Eddé ne résuscitât dans un proche-avenir, le conflit islamo-chrétien..."⁶⁹

Similarly, Helleu now looked with considerably more favour on Bechara el Khoury now that he was in office and commented that he seemed "par ses dispositions et son tempérament, plus capable de faire [l'] oeuvre d'apaisement". Helleu struggled to emphasise to Algiers that Khoury's success had not been assured until he himself had pronounced in his favour: "Que le nouveau Président ait dû son succès à la France, c'est là, sans aucun doute, un élément qui ne peut manquer de nous donner des garanties à sa politique". Besides, Helleu added, "il est en tout cas essentiel d'avoir évité le succès d'une candidature britannique, objet patiemment poursuivi par le Général Spears".⁷⁰ Having attempted to demonstrate that Khoury was obligated to France and therefore a certain degree of leverage existed over him, Helleu attempted also to play down the effect of his success on French prestige:

⁶⁹ Helleu à Massigli, 4 Octobre 1943, a/s L'élection du Président de la République Libanaise et de la Formation du Cabinet Riad Solh, (14pp), Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

Du point de vue français, l'accession de M. Bechara el Khoury au fauteuil présidentiel est loin de constituer l'échec que certains ont voulu y voir. Par suite d'un enchaînement fortuit de circonstances, l'opinion libanaise avait pris coutume de considérer M. Bechara el Khoury comme le candidat des Anglais, M. Eddé comme le candidat Français. Rien n'est plus faux. Certes, M. Eddé se pose volontiers ici comme le champion de l'amitié franco-libanaise, au service de laquelle il met un très brillante intelligence, une profonde culture française, et un remarquable talent de polémiste ... Cependant, malgré tous les titres auxquels M. Eddé a droit à la reconnaissance de la France, nous n'en sommes moins fondés à accorder notre confiance à M. Bechara el Khoury ... qui est, au demeurant, un bon patriote libanais.⁷¹

Helleu claimed that it went without saying that British influence had played a predominant rôle in Riad Solh's success in obtaining the post of President of the Council. Riad Solh could be relied upon "pour pratiquer une politique à la fois anti-libanaise et anti-française". Furthermore, Spears and his cronies had done their level best to ensure that the majority of Solh's Cabinet was "d'inclination anglophile", as revealed particularly by the portfolios bestowed upon Camille Chamoun and Adel Osseiran. Its composition clearly testified to "l'ingérence des services britanniques dans la politique intérieure libanaise".⁷²

Nevertheless, Helleu refused to worry inordinately about the Lebanese Cabinet. He assured Algiers that from his contacts with Riad Solh he had formed the clear impression that the Prime Minister would seek "au cours de son mandat, à concilier les revendications nationalistes pouvant émaner de certains membres du Parlement avec le maintien des positions françaises". Helleu reported that he had warned Riad Solh that for the present, in view of the war and the

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

fact that the mandate still legally existed, France could only make concessions to Lebanon within the framework of a treaty. He advised Algiers that in this respect, firmness would be required to offset "[les] intrigues britanniques destinées à amener le Parlement libanais comme d'ailleurs le Parlement syrien, à poser le plus rapidement possible, la question des Intérêts Communs, de la Surêté Générale, des Douanes, en un mot, à mettre en cause le maintien des positions françaises au Levant". He claimed to be counting on Khoury to act deliberately "pour apaiser les passions et maintenir sur son véritable terrain le problème des rapports franco-libanaises".⁷³

All in all, Helleu claimed, the examples of British complicity in the making of the elections were "tellement multiples qu'il faudrait un roman feuilleton pour les narrer dans leur totalité".⁷⁴ He pleaded once more with Massigli to focus the Committee's attention most urgently on Spears's hostile intentions:

Il n'est pas ici un de nos adversaires qui ne soit appuyé par les services britanniques. Il n'est pas un de nos amis que ne soit combattu par eux. Il n'est pas une matière où Spears n'intervienne dans un sens déplorable à nos intérêts. Je ne doute pas que dans un proche avenir, nous ne voyons l'[action?] britannique prendre la forme d'encouragement à des revendications de la part des Etats et même à des reformes constitutionnelles tendant toutes à un affaiblissement de nos positions.⁷⁵

While Helleu claimed to recognise the wisdom, in the interests of general policy, of maintaining good relations

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Les élections du Liban, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

⁷⁵ Helleu à Massigli, 25 Septembre 1943, No 141-7, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

with the British in the Levant, and claimed to have faithfully carried out his instructions to the letter in this regard, he was now convinced

que ce n'est qu'au détriment de notre influence au Levant que ce résultat peut être obtenu. En dépit des assurances que Messieurs Churchill et Eden vous ont données, les agents britanniques ne semblent poursuivre ici d'autre but que notre éviction et vous jugerez sans doute indispensable de mettre le CFLN au courant de la question.⁷⁶

To increase the impact of these reports, Helleu eventually provided Massigli with even more minutely detailed reports of British interference in the Syrian and Lebanese elections, broken down region by region, citing specific offenders and listing specific occasions on which they had intervened and quoting various "écoutes" as proof. In a separate report, Helleu warned:

Du point de vue de l'influence française, les élections ne constitueront qu'une étape dans une évolution que les britanniques s'efforceront d'infléchir dans un sens contraire à nos intérêts.

Speaking before the events of November 1943, Helleu was unable to appreciate the irony of his following words:

Tenu compte du fait que notre action sera évidemment conditionnée par l'étendue du redressement de la France en général, il dépend de nous que la Chambre libanaise adopte une attitude favorable à notre politique.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Helleu à Alger, 25 Septembre 1943, No 141-47, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁷⁷ Les élections libanaises, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1004.

iv) A Policy of Firmness...

As the French struggled to come to terms with the new situation in the Levant, realisation gradually dawned that once the new Syrian and Lebanese governments were firmly in the saddle, they would launch a renewed and concerted⁷⁸ campaign for the cession of various interests and responsibilities which the French presently controlled. Helleu anxiously reported to Algiers that France would be in the gravest danger should she divest herself of such interests before her position was guaranteed by the conclusion of a treaty. He strongly recommended that the Committee take a very firm line on the issue; he requested that his own instructions should reflect that firmness and asked that his telegram should be shown to Général Catroux.⁷⁹

Catroux informed Massigli that he wholeheartedly endorsed Helleu's opinion and appreciated only too well the danger of immediate cession of the Intérêts Communs and other responsibilities. He pointed out that it was extremely important

que nous conservions dans l'avenir des gages importants pour entamer les négociations du traité dans un position avantageuse.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Weekly Political Summary, No 80, 13 October 1943, E6203/27/89, FO 371/35182. The British correctly anticipated that the States would probably concert their action for greater effect, and a few days later, Riad Solh informed Spears that both governments were in complete agreement. Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6249/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁷⁹ Helleu à Alger, 22 Septembre 1943, No 1340, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁰ Catroux à Massigli, 30 Septembre 1943, No 120, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

Massigli had already instructed Helleu along these lines: he might inform the Levant States that cession of the Intérêts Communs was possible, but only within the framework of treaty negotiations, as the two questions were inextricably linked. He copied the telegram to Catroux, pointing out that their views coincided completely.⁸¹

The new governments in the Levant States were indeed impatient for progress: Saadullah Jabri had already attempted to sound out Fauquenot⁸² about the possibility of concessions, in a manner "aussi séduisante que possible pour nos intérêts".⁸³ Fauquenot had stressed that France could make no concessions unless as part of treaty negotiations, but Jabri had tried to persuade him that this approach would do France no good at all, claiming that it would be far better to treat on equal terms as otherwise it would be obvious to the outside world that the States were being coerced. The French immediately suspected that the Syrians hoped to hoodwink them: they probably intended to profess their desire for a treaty, but would then raise every possible obstacle to it. They would undoubtedly claim that British and American opinion thought that both sides should

⁸¹ Massigli à Catroux, 6 Octobre 1943, No 8418 AE; Massigli à Helleu, sans date, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸² M. Fauquenot: French representative at Aleppo.

⁸³ Beyrouth à Alger, 9 Octobre 1943, No 172-80, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

negotiate on a basis of equality⁸⁴, hoping thereby to extract the maximum concessions immediately from the French. Helleu had already been forced to stop the publication of an article which demanded the immediate cession to the Syrian state of all French-controlled forests, and fully expected the launching of a press campaign to increase pressure on the French. He vowed to do his best to nip in the bud any other such manoeuvres by the Syrian government, for, he reiterated, there should be no question of ceding the advantages France presently held, before a treaty had been concluded.⁸⁵

The French expected a similar assault from the Lebanese and were not disappointed: on 7 October, the Lebanese Parliament voted overwhelmingly for a programme of reform and a revision of the constitution as outlined in speeches by the President and Prime Minister.⁸⁶ Each of the Lebanese politicians, Helleu observed, was trying to outdo his colleagues in the nationalist stakes, and to publicly prove his patriotism on the independence issue. He was convinced

⁸⁴ Wadsworth had already received several requests from the Syrians for recognition from the United States. The State Department felt however, that "there must be an effective transfer of substantial authority and power to the new government before serious consideration can be given to the extension of full recognition". Welles to Wadsworth, 22 August 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 987. Wadsworth had subsequently told the Syrians that recognition could not take place "until Syria had at least first acquired fuller possession of the machinery of government". Wadsworth to Hull, 2 October 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 994-5.

⁸⁵ Helleu à Alger, 9 Octobre 1943, No 172-180, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁶ The main points of the programme included complete independence, the use of Arabic as the official language, the achievement of dipomatic representation abroad, co-operation with other Arab States, revision of the electoral law, the ending of the system of denominational and regional representation and the negotiation of an agreement with Syria for joint control of the Intérêts Communs. Spears to Foreign Office, 8 October 1943, E6034/27/89, FO 371/35182.

that their audacity owed much to encouragement from British agents as generally they would have dreaded flouting French authority so openly. Again, Helleu reminded Algiers of the importance "de ne pas se départir de la plus grande fermeté".⁸⁷ He had already warned Khoury and Solh "qu'en fait et en droit, le mandat subsiste jusqu'au moment où nous serions déchargés par la Société des Nations". The very fact that the French had chosen (of their own volition) not to flaunt their mandatory authority should not be interpreted as a renunciation of French rights. He had further stressed that in view of the presence of the Spears Mission and the British Army, "qui peut toujours invoquer des motifs de sécurité militaire pour imposer le point de vue anglais dans les affaires du pays", the Intérêts Communs could only be surrendered "dans le cadre du futur traité". Helleu refused to be disheartened: he believed that by relying on the saner elements amongst the Lebanese, who realised that the maintenance of the French position was essential for Lebanon's very existence, and who, for the moment, constituted the interested majority, "nous pourrions résister par notre fermeté à ceux qui voudraient contester notre position privilégiée".⁸⁸

Meanwhile, the British kept a watchful eye on the situation. It was emphasised to London that the Syrian and Lebanese governments were really in earnest about their independence and had even stated that if France proved unyielding, they would resort to force, though they hoped that she would "cave in before a threatening attitude".⁸⁹ Observers in the Middle East, however, believed that the emergence of nationalist governments had dealt the French

⁸⁷ Helleu à Alger, 9 Octobre 1943, No 181-88, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Weekly Political Summary, No 80, 13 October 1943, E6203/27/89, FO 371/35182.

such a severe blow that, "far from accepting the situation and resolving to assist [the Levant States] ... they are determined to oppose the aspirations of the nationalist leaders by every means in their power".⁹⁰

This assessment was not far wrong. After the elections, Helleu had tried to rally the spirits of French officials. A letter he wrote to all *délégués* and *conseillers*, attempting to define the French position in the face of the nationalist current which threatened to submerge everything, illustrates well the attitude the French were determined to adopt.⁹¹ He stressed that in the last resort, France still legally possessed the mandate for Syria and the Lebanon. Furthermore, the question of returning to the Levant States the responsibilities which they were now demanding could only logically be regulated within the wider framework of more general relations between France and the Levant States. Moreover, negotiations to regularise those relations required an atmosphere of complete mutual confidence, which in view of British intrigues to evict France from the position she rightfully occupied, was manifestly lacking. He observed:

En un mot, nous ne pourrions accorder aux Etats les attributions de l'indépendance que lorsque nous aurons la certitude que l'octroi de cette indépendance ne facilitera pas l'installation au Levant d'une puissance autre que la France.⁹²

France, above all else, was determined to maintain her privileged position in the Levant, the letter continued, and to safeguard her moral and material interests in the area.

⁹⁰ Weekly Political Summary, No 81, 20 October 1943, E6293/27/89, FO 371/35182.

⁹¹ Helleu à Massigli, 11 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁹² *ibid.*

In an obvious attempt to raise morale, Helleu embarked on a disquisition of recent successes in France's external policy, designed to illustrate that she was now in a better position than ever since 1940 to make her voice heard and to begin defending her national interests: the liberation of national territory was under way in Corsica⁹³; in France itself, an army of patriots was ready and waiting to take up the struggle; half the pre-war fleet was now at sea alongside the Allies; French military forces grew daily. Furthermore, her admission to the Mediterranean Commission demonstrated conclusively that France had regained great power status:

Militairement et diplomatiquement, la défaite est effacée et la France a maintenant la certitude qu'elle sera demain, à nouveau, grande et forte. Elle n'a donc aucune raison de consentir ici d'abandonner et de renoncer à sa mission séculaire dans le Proche Orient, tout en étant résolue à exécuter, le moment venu, ses promesses aux Etats.⁹⁴

Helleu exhorted his staff to draw inspiration from this, though he felt obliged to warn them that they should allude to the mandate only "avec la plus extrême prudence". Equally, whilst keeping their intervention in local affairs to a minimum, officials should take great care to strictly uphold their prerogatives "et de réagir fermement contre tous gestes ou mesures vexatoires à votre endroit ou incompatibles avec l'exercice de vos attributions légitimes."⁹⁵

⁹³ In early September 1943, upon news of the Italian armistice, uprisings had taken place in Corsica. On 13 September, Général Giraud, who had for some time been in contact with the resistance, had despatched two destroyers to assist the struggle.

⁹⁴ Helleu à Massigli, 11 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

v) Or A Policy of Force?

If Helleu thought stirring words were sufficient to rally French spirits, there were those on his staff who did not agree, most notably Boegner, who had other ideas as to how best to uplift French morale. Boegner considered that protests from Algiers to London about British interference in the Levant had been ineffectual. He therefore fully expected that any firmness which the French now displayed towards the Levant States over the issue of surrendering various responsibilities to them, would be countered by increased British pressure on the Committee to make concessions. He forecast that the British would use two arguments: they would firstly remind the French that they had endorsed Catroux's proclamation of independence; they would additionally point out that a negative stance by France would exacerbate local feeling and risk provoking trouble which would compromise the security of the armed forces in the Levant. The first argument, Boegner contended, could be dealt with easily, since France was ready to enter into immediate negotiations to bring about Syrian and Lebanese independence, albeit within the framework of treaty negotiations. The second argument would be more difficult to overcome: the French, Boegner alleged, had to admit that given the current state of opinion in the Levant, disorders were a real possibility and the British would exploit this fact for all it was worth, claiming that France lacked sufficient military strength to enable her to assure the maintenance of order. Without doubt, if disorders did occur, Britain would be only too eager to step in, but, he warned, "nous aurions ensuite à payer le prix de leur concours".⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Note pour l'Ambassadeur, signé Boegner, 13 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

Boegner's solution to the problem was to request from Algiers,

sans retard et avec la plus grande insistance, l'envoi au Levant d'effectifs militaires substantiels. Outre les sécurités qu'une telle mesure nous donnerait, nous serions plus à l'aise par le seul spectacle de notre force pour conduire les difficiles négociations des traités. Enfin, la présence au Levant des effectifs français renforceraient considérablement notre prestige en effaçant l'impression généralement ressentie par les populations que nous sommes ici en état d'infériorité en face de nos alliés.⁹⁷

Helleu did not succumb immediately to Boegner's advice. He briefly informed Algiers on 16 October that he had been subjected to a first offensive from Khoury and Solh at a reception given in his honour on 12 October, and two days later to a similar assault from the Syrians, which seemed to confirm that the two governments were concerting their actions.⁹⁸ He had remained insistent in the face of both approaches that the mandate remained in French hands until she was officially divested of it by the League of Nations or some such organisation which would replace it in the future. He had promised, however, that he would make further announcements on his return from Algiers where he was due to visit the following week.⁹⁹ He confidently reported that he had received assurances that the Syrian and Lebanese Parliaments would commit "aucun geste compromettant" during

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Helleu à Alger, 16 Octobre 1943, No 222-26, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁹⁹ Massigli à Helleu, 4 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1026; Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6222/27/89, FO 371/35182.

his absence, but would content themselves with demanding certain minor concessions.¹⁰⁰

Spears received a full account of both Helleu's meetings but from the Syrians and Lebanese themselves. Spears was convinced that Helleu had been "primed" by de Gaulle through Chataigneau, who had just returned from Algiers, where he had been acquainting Massigli at first hand with the situation which the French faced. When the Lebanese had asked what concessions could be made towards their independence, Helleu had apparently "intimated quite plainly that nothing whatever would be conceded till the mandate had been terminated by the conclusion of a treaty". When Solh challenged the Committee's competency to conclude a treaty, Helleu had replied that he and de Gaulle were "prepared to give their word of honour" that any instrument signed now would be later ratified by France". The Lebanese had reminded Helleu of the French failure to ratify the 1936 treaties. They had explained him that they had been elected on a far-reaching nationalist programme which they must fulfil or else resign. Helleu had merely warned them that they must govern with "sagesse", whereupon Solh and Khoury both "declared roundly that they would rather cut off their right hands than sign a treaty with the National Committee".¹⁰¹

The French had inevitably steered the conversation towards the British, who, Boegner claimed, were "the real stumbling block". He argued that British championship of Levant independence was merely a prelude to a British take-over of the Levant. Reflecting afterwards on the report of

¹⁰⁰ Helleu à Alger, 16 Octobre 1943, No 222-26, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999; Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6249/27/89; Spears to Foreign Office, 20 October 1943, E6384/27/89; both in FO 371/35182.

¹⁰¹ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6249/27/89, FO 371/35182.

the conversation, Spears mentioned that Solh seemed to be "verging on despondency at the impasse ... reached with the French". The one good thing was that at least he had agreed that "the only wise course would be to press for concessions not likely to lead to a head-on clash with the French". Spears continued:

It is clear that if the French maintain this completely intransigent and unjustified attitude, they will before long come up against very stiff opposition on the part of both the Syrian and Lebanese Governments. Neither ... has any intention of allowing itself to be fobbed off by the French with offers of a treaty bargain; and Lebanese public opinion is now so fully aroused that for the first time in the history of the Levant States, the Lebanon has ceased to be the brake on Syria for which she has always been used by the French in the past.¹⁰²

The Syrians had fared no better in their conversations with the French and had reached practically the same deadlock with Helleu. The French had said "No treaty, no concessions".¹⁰³ Spears stressed to the Foreign Office that the Levant States were showing great patience and considerable statesmanship but could not be "bottled up indefinitely ... For the first time in their history, Christians and Moslems are working in perfect harmony ... Their demands are at present wholly legitimate, but further frustration will render them more difficult to control and will eventually lead to a really serious clash".¹⁰⁴

Spears was adamant that French intransigence had been "dictated by Algiers". He wrote:

¹⁰² Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6249/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹⁰³ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 October 1943, E6384/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

I cannot too strongly urge that [the] opportunity presented by the [forthcoming] presence of Helleu there (i.e. Algiers), should be taken to attempt to convince Massigli at any rate, of [the] fact that [the] French are heading for complete disaster in these States if they attempt to maintain their present line.¹⁰⁵

He later advocated that it would be better still if a stern warning could be given to the French in Algiers before Helleu arrived there and was "put through the mill by de Gaulle".¹⁰⁶ From a subsequent conversation with Chataigneau, Spears confirmed that the latter had returned from Algiers with instructions (on which Helleu had acted clumsily), "that nothing should be given away without a treaty". Chataigneau claimed to have been so struck, since his return, by the extraordinary change in Lebanese opinion, that he was no longer sure this was feasible. Spears was relieved when Chataigneau assured him that Massigli had "in no way departed from the assurances he gave in London that the French had no intention of withholding complete freedom from the republics"; he nonetheless feared that French policy would probably be "to fight a slow rearguard action".¹⁰⁷

Spears had received various other disturbing reports about the French and their intentions in the Levant. Riad Solh alleged that Boegner had told one of his colleagues "that the French were tired of this comedy and would now resort to force". When Chataigneau had been informed of this, he had appeared "genuinely horrified" and had commented that the French surely had better employment for

¹⁰⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6249/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹⁰⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 20 October 1943, E6384/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹⁰⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6250/27/89, FO 371/35182.

such limited forces as they possessed.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, from Cairo, Casey reported a conversation between Hamilton and Filliol, during which the latter had confessed that the results of the Lebanese elections had been "a severe blow to the French position in the Levant", caused by the bungling of the French Délégation and the interference of the Spears Mission. The French now "had to make up their minds whether to sit down under it (which would mean ... [the] gradual elimination of French influence from the Levant) or else react violently". Filliol was apparently certain that they would choose the latter course, which would commence with a visit to Beirut from de Gaulle¹⁰⁹, who he would make it plain in truculent terms that the French had no intention of being ousted. "It looks", Casey warned, "as if we should be prepared for trouble ahead".¹¹⁰

The Foreign Office thought that de Gaulle could easily be choked off (after all, they had managed this before) and that Filliol was probably trying to hint that Britain was "playing with fire".¹¹¹ It was natural, Hankey thought, that both sides should stake their claims on the high side at first, and Peterson agreed: the French position was similar to Britain's own in Egypt from 1922 to 1936, when a treaty eluded her and she was loath to make concessions and thereby weaken her bargaining power. "Nevertheless", Hankey lamented, "this is the opening move of a long question which

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ On Spears's copy of the telegram, one of his staff had minuted: "If the Syrian and Lebanese authorities had the guts to do so -- and I'm not sure they haven't nowadays -- they could make a visit by de Gaulle such a flop as to lower French prestige still further". Minute by Spears Mission official, 18 October 1943, FO 226/243.

¹¹⁰ Casey to Foreign Office, 16 October 1943, E6220/27/89, FO 371/35182.

¹¹¹ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 October 1943, E6220/27/89, FO 371/35182.

is going to give us a series of headaches and will possibly make difficulties for us..."¹¹²

¹¹² Minutes by R. M. A. Hankey, 20 October 1943 and Sir M. Peterson, 21 October 1943; both in E6250/27/89, FO 371/35182.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COLLISION COURSE

i) "Heading For Trouble"

When the Syrian and Lebanese Parliaments convened on 19 October, no motion detrimental to the French mandatory authority was tabled and Helleu concluded that his warnings to the Governments had been heeded.¹ However, a series of meetings on 20 October between the Syrians and the Lebanese had culminated in the signature of an agreement between the two countries to establish a joint commission to press for the return of the Intérêts Communs. On the same day, Jamil Mardam handed Helleu a letter in which the Syrian government claimed amongst other things, the cession of the Intérêts Communs and the transformation of the Délégation Générale into a simple diplomatic mission.² Helleu informed Algiers that on its receipt, he had merely smiled and observed that these demands had been formulated without regard either for his recent declarations or for the conditions of the mandate, which still existed until France was discharged of it. He had offered "que, s'il était impossible pour le moment d'accueillir les demandes qu'il formulait, nous ne refuserions sans doute pas à examiner d'un commun accord, certains aménagements destinés à acheminer la Syrie vers son indépendance".³

On 22 October, the Syrians and the Lebanese again pressed Helleu for the transfer of the Intérêts Communs. In

¹ Helleu à Alger, 22 Octobre 1943, No 241-43, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

² Jamil Mardam à Helleu, 20 Octobre 1943, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

³ Helleu à Alger, 22 Octobre 1943, No 241-43, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

the face of such relentless assaults, Helleu finally succumbed to Boegner's advice and decided that more decisive action was required: in a telegram to Algiers, he re-emphasised that, without the prior guarantee of a treaty, any premature surrender of French interests in the Levant would have the gravest consequences for France. He reminded Algiers however, that the French could only uphold that attitude "si nous avons les moyens de faire face aux réactions qu'elle risque de provoquer et qui seraient encouragées où même suscitées par les britanniques et les autres Etats arabes".⁴ Coming to the crux of the matter, he continued:

Il me semble probable, en effet, que dans un délai difficile à évaluer exactement mais qui pourrait être assez court, nous serons soumis à un véritable chantage aux troubles. Notre solution de ne pas satisfaire aux revendications des gouvernements de Syrie et du Liban sera présentée comme ayant pour résultat de créer une effervescence dont de graves désordres résulteront. Pour nous inciter à des concessions, on tirera l'argument de l'insuffisance des moyens militaires dont nous disposons au Levant.⁵

It was inevitable that Britain would be the arbitrator of the situation, Helleu claimed, and to avoid this, he thought it

indispensable et urgent ... que le Comité de la Libération décide d'envoyer des effectifs français en nombre substantiel au Levant. J'ai estimé utile de vous saisir dès maintenant cette question dont je vous entretiendrai de vive voix car j'y attache pour notre prestige et le maintien des positions françaises au Levant un intérêt capital.⁶

⁴ Helleu à Alger, 23 Octobre 1943, No 245-47, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

In addition to requesting more troops with which to uphold French prestige, Helleu wrote to the Lebanese reaffirming the continued existence of the mandate, and stating that the proposed constitutional amendments as outlined on 7 October would prejudice France's mandatory authority. He furthermore warned that the Committee would regard any unilateral action as invalid.⁷ Spears observed that this letter of Helleu's had now "brought to a head the whole vexed question of the mandate".⁸ He remarked that Helleu had singled out for special protest the Lebanese desire to adopt Arabic as their official language.⁹ To Spears this represented "an assertion of [French] theoretical mandatory rights in regard to a practical matter". As the matter was of no direct bearing on the prosecution of the war, the French action was deemed by Spears to have been "gratuitously provocative". He admitted that the French were on firm ground in claiming that the mandate continued to exist legally, but warned that if this was perpetually thrust down Lebanese throats, the force of public opinion would oblige the government "to react in a manner highly embarrassing to ourselves as well as the French". If she could do nothing else, Spears felt that Britain must honour

⁷ Weekly Political Summary, No 82, 27 October 1943, E6293/27/89, FO 371/35182; Spears to Foreign Office, 25 October 1943, No 597, E6459/27/89, FO 371/35183; Wadsworth to Hull, 24 October 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 998-99.

⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 25 October 1943, No 598, E6459/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁹ In this connection, Leo Amery's letter to Eden on 15 November, written in the midst of the crisis is interesting to read. He suggested to Eden that one of the reasons which might have underlain "the almost inexplicable folly of Helleu and the French in this Lebanese business" was the Lebanese abolition of French as the official language: "That to a Frenchman was not only a declaration of war but the deepest of insults". Amery to Eden, 15 November 1943, FO 954/15.

Lebanese independence "to the limit of [her] powers, i.e. by treating [the] mandate as a dead letter in practice".¹⁰

In another telegram to London, Spears warned that the Lebanese Government was under strong and rising pressure from the Chamber to press ahead with constitutional reform.¹¹ The present strategy of the Lebanese was to induce Chataigneau, in Helleu's absence, to withdraw Helleu's letter; otherwise, they were threatening to ventilate the matter "with maximum publicity". Such publicity, Spears alleged, was Lebanon's only weapon and would force the French either to retreat and face yet another public defeat, or else to react in some violent way "with quite unpredictable consequences". Spears pleaded that "counsels of common sense" be made to prevail at Algiers to prevent the development of a very dangerous situation.¹²

For once there was considerable sympathy for Spears within the Foreign Office. C. A. F. Dundas thought it probable that the French were "heading for trouble" in the Levant, and that, should a head-on collision occur, British troops might possibly have to become involved to suppress disorder, which would be "disastrous" for British prestige. As it was, the state of increasing tension which already prevailed could only harm British interests. Spears' fears were not considered exaggerated, and Dundas recommended that Britain should do all in her power "to prevent a shooting match developing". He suggested that the opportunity presented by Helleu's presence in Algiers should be seized

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Wadsworth reported to the State Department that he had twice been assured that Lebanese deputies would begin demanding explanations if the Government continued to postpone forthright action. Wadsworth to Hull, 24 October 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 999-1000.

¹² Spears to Foreign Office, 25 October 1943, No 599, E6451/27/89, FO 371/35183.

to restate Britain's desire for friendly relations between France and the Levant States.¹³

Hankey blamed both the Lebanese and the French for the troubled state of affairs as both had overstated their position. Riad Solh had run the gauntlet by publicly committing his government to a series of reforms affecting the position and rights of France, without any prior consultation with the French. Hankey thought that it would be "most unwise" of the Lebanese to precipitate matters by publicising the matter in the Chamber. Furthermore, as Helleu had offered to examine certain arrangements by which the States could be helped gradually towards independence, it was wrong of them to refuse to even consider this option. Nonetheless, Helleu's letter had been "unresponsive to Lebanese aspirations" and was obviously calculated to annoy and to irritate the Lebanese as much as possible. The French had gone too far in suggesting that until the mandate was legally terminated, no amendments could be made affecting their position. Though correct in essence, this was not, Hankey believed, an argument which it was politically wise to use, "for it is plain as day that there are concessions which the French must make now".¹⁴

A two-pronged strategy was therefore decided upon by the Foreign Office. A telegram was despatched to Algiers, advising Macmillan that it was essential "that [the] French should not handle the matter in a way to exacerbate nationalist feeling in the Levant States". It was in the interests both of France and the war effort that progress towards independence was made and to halt that progress would create a situation of "undesirable tension". Besides,

¹³ Minute by C. A. F. Dundas, 26 October 1943, E6451/27/89, FO 371/35183.

¹⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 27 October 1943, E6451/27/89, FO 371/35183.

the Foreign Office believed that it was simply not possible to contend, as the French were doing, "that all changes must await the negotiation of a Treaty".¹⁵ Another telegram was sent to the Levant observing that both sides seemed to be adopting "a provocative and unreasonable attitude". It was "plainly impossible" for the French to now halt the process of implementing the long-promised independence, but if present Lebanese behaviour persisted, it would force a deadlock. It was hoped that the government could be induced to behave "with greater political wisdom in spite of the comprehensible strength of public feeling".¹⁶

Spears would have none of this, as he could not accept that the Lebanese were in any way to blame. In reply, he argued that the Lebanese were not anxious to precipitate a crisis and would listen to reason "provided the French show a genuine desire to meet their views and not merely to gain time and fob them off as it is believed they are doing now". He promised to do his best to dissuade the Lebanese "from violence whether of word or deed", but observed that if he were "to attempt to convince them that their interests would best be served by accepting a claim to exercise the mandate in practice ... the only result would be the loss of such limited influence as we now have with them".¹⁷ He sent another telegram containing a detailed exposition of

¹⁵ Foreign Office to Algiers, 29 October 1943, E6459/27/89, FO 371/35183.

¹⁶ Foreign Office to Spears, 29 October 1943, E6451/27/89, FO 371/35183. The original telegram was deciphered incorrectly and read "in spite of the alleged strength of public feeling". Spears angrily pointed out that the phrase implied that the Foreign Office had some doubts about the reality of public feeling. He personally had not come across any visitor to the Levant who had not been "struck by the strength and genuineness of national feeling". Spears to Foreign Office, 1 November 1943, E6631/27/89, FO 371/35183.

¹⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 November 1943, No 609, E6631/27/89, FO 371/35183.

Lebanese views on the mandate¹⁸, which he evidently hoped would assist the Foreign Office to comprehend the Lebanese case.

In fact, however, Spears's attitude had only given further cause for concern. In a series of telegrams, the Foreign Office replied that it was not impressed by the legal arguments of either side regarding the mandate; it was thought that such legalistic disputes should not be permitted to obscure the practical question at issue. Britain had endorsed the promise of independence to the Lebanese and sympathised with their desire to obtain it in practice. However, Britain also sympathised with the French position to a considerable degree. The position of France was likened to Britain's own between 1922 and 1936, when she consistently refused to make concessions to the Egyptian government except as part of a treaty.¹⁹ The Foreign Office did, however, think that the French ought to be prepared to make some concessions now, especially as it seemed that the powers that she was anyway obliged to reserve for the duration of the war were sufficiently good bargaining counters for subsequent treaty-making purposes. Some form of

¹⁸ Spears to Foreign Office, 1 November 1943, E6631/27/89, FO 317/35183. In brief, Spears explained that the Lebanese accepted the fact that the mandate could not at present be legally terminated. However, they did not recognise the Free French claim to have inherited the mandate. They considered that Catroux's proclamation of independence in advance of any treaty had deprived the French of any right to maintain the mandatory régime in force. Furthermore, they refused to negotiate with the French except on a basis of complete equality. The Foreign Office pointed out that Britain had recognised that the Free French had inherited the mandate, as had the United States government, and other Allies too had expressly or implicitly admitted the same. It was absurd for the Lebanese to contest this as otherwise, Catroux would not have been entitled to proclaim their independence, and the Lebanese government itself would be of dubious status as it had arisen by virtue of Free French decrees.

¹⁹ Foreign Office to Beirut, 6 November 1943, E6653/27/89, FO 371/35183.

treaty settlement between the parties was inevitable sooner or later -- it might well be that the Levant States would find it the only way of getting rid of French troops.

In Foreign Office eyes, it would not harm the States at least to enter negotiations to test the water and to see how far the French were prepared to go. Spears was reminded that however much the States might be banking on the collapse of France as an effective European power, Churchill had stated in the House of Commons on 21 September "that he regarded the restoration of France as one of the Great Powers of Europe, as a sacred duty from which Great Britain would never turn". Whatever Helleu might say, the Committee was not in a position to guarantee that any treaty which might be negotiated now would be ratified by post-war France. The long and short of it was that the French should be prepared to make some concessions and the States to make some temporary arrangements.²⁰

In attempting to urge compromise on both sides, the Foreign Office received some unexpected but nonetheless welcome assistance from Casey. He wrote to Spears reminding him that the British guarantee of Syrian and Lebanese independence must inevitably be limited because of Britain's promise to support the French in securing a position analogous to Britain's own in Iraq. Moreover, he pointed out,

His Majesty's Government's policy for the future of France certainly contemplates her recovering as much of her pre-war position and prestige as is consistent with post-war conditions.²¹

²⁰ Foreign Office to Beirut, 6 November 1943, Nos 496, 497, and 21 SAVING, E6653/27/89, FO 371/35183.

²¹ Casey to Spears, 28 October 1943, E6707/27/89, FO 371/35183.

The nationalist governments, voted in "on the independence ticket", had no intention of negotiating treaties on which their independence was to be conditional, but rather claimed effective independence "as a condition precedent to negotiating a treaty". In contrast, the French, smarting from their loss of face, were stalwartly defending their position, preferring to conserve any potential concessions as bargaining counters, and tending to believe that the British, and Spears especially, were egging on the local governments.

Casey foresaw a period of difficulty as the States became increasingly insistent and the French, in consequence, increasingly intransigent; it would worsen if the States, having failed to make any impression on the French, turned to Britain for assistance she would be honour bound not to provide:

It would seem that our only course for the moment is to proceed with circumspection towards both parties, being careful not to do anything in the Levant field which may compromise or conflict with the wider policy decided by His Majesty's Government in relation to the future of France, whilst trying to moderate the elation which has naturally resulted in the States from the recent elections, so that they may conduct their relations with the French in such a way that no open breach is caused.²²

Casey suggested a whole series of concessions, such as the transfer of the Bedouin control, which the French could easily make without harming their negotiating position. He concluded:

Our status as the honest broker in this difficult situation is a most delicate and exasperating one and you have my sincere sympathy in having to play this extremely tricky hand.²³

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

"For once the Middle East and Foreign Office seem to be in agreement", minuted Hankey. "This is a most useful letter".²⁴

Useful though the letter may have seemed in London, especially coming from Casey, it had little real influence on Spears. His reply to Casey pointed out that had the French been willing to make the concessions everyone was suggesting that they ought to make, there would be no problem. Thus far however, their attitude of "No treaty, no concessions" had given scant room for any hope that they would agree to anything of the sort. In complete contrast, the Syrians and Lebanese had throughout been extremely moderate and "thoroughly amenable to reason". Whilst Spears agreed that he saw very difficult times ahead, "largely due to the fact that we have given contradictory promises", he thought that the British position was simpler than Casey had outlined: whatever His Majesty's Government had said about the French enjoying a position in the Levant similar to Britain's own in Iraq, it had always stipulated that any treaty between France and the States must be freely negotiated. "Even the Foreign Office", he continued, "has never envisaged coercing the States or questioning their freedom of choice". There was certainly no possibility that Spears would attempt to persuade the States to sign a treaty with France, for as he asserted, this would merely result in forfeiting his own influence with them, which he had no intention of doing. The real danger, as he perceived it, was that the French "were now so cross and bad-tempered at what

²⁴ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 8 November 1943, E6707/27/89, FO 371/35183. Like Casey, the Foreign Office believed that the French could afford to make numerous concessions to the States, without encroaching at all in the powers reserved in Catroux's proclamation. Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 8 November, E6652/27/89, FO 371/35183.

has happened that there is nothing they will not do to upset things here".²⁵

ii) "Les Dociles Serviteurs De La Politique Anglaise"

Regardless of Foreign Office efforts to defuse the situation, the French and the Lebanese remained locked in conflict. On 25 October, Chataigneau refused to withdraw Helleu's letter despite Riad Solh's threat to publicise it. The Lebanese presented Chataigneau with yet another note demanding the transformation of the Délégation Générale into a diplomatic mission, plus the transfer of all attributes of sovereignty to the Lebanese government.²⁶ The note, Spears claimed, though "quite firm", was couched in "very polite language" and even paid tribute to the historical friendship and liberal traditions of France. Members of the Lebanese government were convinced that yet again the French were playing for time "in the hope that the end of the war or some other at present unforeseen event may strengthen their hand". They remained determined however, "to forge ahead", and it was commented that indeed "[the] pressure of public opinion is such that they cannot afford to delay".²⁷

In fact, on 28 October, the Lebanese government had been subjected to severe scrutiny by the Chamber as to the state of progress on the independence front. Riad Solh had avoided mentioning the dispute with the French, and had merely replied that constitutional amendments were being studied.²⁸ As a result, on 30 October, the Lebanese again took up the

²⁵ Spears to Casey, 5 November 1943, FO 226/243.

²⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 27 October 1943, E6512/27/89, FO 371/35183.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Weekly Political Summary, No 83, E6713/27/89, FO 371/35183.

cudgels by replying "in comparatively mild terms", to Helleu's letter of 25 October, and stating that the French attitude was contrary to the promises of independence of 1941, and that the government proposed to proceed with its programme of reform. With a certain degree of relish, Spears commented that he understood Riad Solh's present intention was "to reserve his heavy batteries for use if [the] French prove obdurate".²⁹

The French were already feeling the weight of the Lebanese assault. Chataigneau, who had ostensibly been left in charge in Helleu's absence³⁰, despatched a fifteen page report on the Lebanese situation to Massigli to inform him of the exact state of affairs.³¹ He described the Lebanon as faced with a choice:

D'un côté, s'ouvre la voie -- celle de l'opportunité -- des fortunes politiques rapidement et brillamment édifiées dans le sillage de l'impérialisme britannique, soigneusement camouflé derrière les grands mots d'indépendance et de souveraineté nationale. L'autre route -- celle de la tradition -- mène à la recherche d'une émancipation patiemment élaborée sous l'égide de la France et à l'établissement d'un statut définitif qui assurera au Liban la protection française contre les visées des Etats voisins.³²

Yet judging by the present Lebanese attitude, they had already clearly indicated where their preferences lay.

²⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 2 November 1943, E6653/27/89, FO 371/35183. For text of Lebanese note, see E6847/27/89, FO 371/35184.

³⁰ Helleu left the Levant on 26 October. He reached Algiers on 29 October and was back in Beirut by 9 November, several days earlier than he had originally intended.

³¹ Chataigneau à Massigli, 1 Novembre 1943, No 287, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

³² *ibid.*

Chataigneau recalled a conversation he had had with Habib Abi Chahla and quoted his words:

Le Liban ... est un voilier; jadis le vent soufflait de France. Aujourd'hui, il vient de l'Angleterre.³³

Chataigneau believed that the very violence of ministerial declarations was striking and clearly demonstrated the orientation of Lebanese politics: they made it perfectly plain that all that was required of the French was their departure -- Axis broadcasts could not have made a better job of getting the point across. The three essential points of Riad Solh's campaign were to revise the constitutional safeguards of French rights, to eliminate the use of the French language and to secure the return to the States of all the responsibilities presently managed by the French. Chataigneau had no illusions:

Dans le fond, comme dans la forme, le programme ministériel manifeste d'ailleurs une résolution prise une fois pour toutes, de nous évincer.

Nor had the Lebanese wasted any time in setting about attaining those aims. They had begun by raising public consciousness and spreading "independence fever", "pour donner l'impression que le gouvernement est débordé par son opinion". The next task had been to persuade the French of the urgent need to quench this thirst for independence "par des gestes "dignes du glorieux passé de la France" ". Otherwise, the French would be accused of contributing, by their negative attitude, to the serious disorders which would undoubtedly erupt.

All this, Chataigneau believed, denoted "l'existence d'un plan d'action mûrement préparé et dont l'accomplissement doit trouver des solutions hors du Liban".

³³ *ibid.*

He was convinced that the Lebanese would never have been sufficiently courageous to challenge the French unless they were certain of backing from powerful allies. They knew they could rely on help from Damascus, Bagdad, Cairo and other Arab states. Moreover, they also hoped for support from America. But as champions of Lebanese independence, the aforementioned were of only secondary importance compared with Britain. Spears and his agents visited the Lebanese Parliament almost daily to give advice and directions to the Ministers, most of whom owed their portfolios to British intervention. Chatigneau commented scathingly:

Il ne s'agit pas, à proprement parler, d'une collusion entre les Britanniques et le gouvernement. Plus exactement, les gens en place se sont faits les dociles serviteurs de la politique anglaise.³⁴

Yet for all this, Chataigneau was not without hope:

Il y a trop de France là-bas, comme disait M. Briand, pour que l'on puisse nous éliminer de ce pays en vingt-quatre mois".³⁵

The most important thing for France to realise was that in the long run, if she did not reaffirm her determination to remain in the Levant, even her most faithful allies would abandon her:

Ne doutons pas que toute manifestation de fermeté ... sera saluée avec enthousiasme par la majorité de l'opinion libanaise, qui ne doute point de notre libéralisme mais qui n'est point sûre que nous ayons les moyens de nous opposer avec succès aux manoeuvres destinées à nous évincer.³⁶

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

iii) Helleu In Algiers

Whilst Chataigneau advocated by letters and telegrams from the Levant a policy of firmness, Helleu was doing much the same in Algiers. Whilst his precise activities for much of his stay are unknown, he attended "une réunion du Comité restreint" on 5 November. Before de Gaulle, Catroux and Massigli, he reported on the Levant and in return received guidelines as to the policy he should adopt.³⁷ France should refuse to consider the surrender of any power unless as part of negotiations for a treaty to regulate relations with the States, based on the 1936 treaties. If the States contested the right of the Committee to ratify the 1936 treaties, Helleu should refuse to be drawn on the matter, and might well point out that "si ce droit pouvait être mis en cause, la légitimité des proclamations qui ont donné l'indépendance aux Etats, deviendrait elle-même incertaine". The Committee however, would permit the States to send representatives to Algiers to negotiate amendments to those treaties, once they had been ratified. As far as Catroux was concerned, these were the only directives issued to Helleu. He admits however, that subsequent to the restricted Committee meeting, Helleu had requested reinforcements for the Levant, a request which was denied for reasons of manpower shortage and shipping difficulties.³⁸

Catroux seems to have been quite disturbed by Helleu's appeal for reinforcements for the Levant, and revealed his concern in a note to Massigli. Faced with the intransigence of the Lebanese government, he pointed out that Helleu,

tout en faisant preuve d'un certain optimisme en ce qui concerne l'avenir, voit un remède aux difficultés qui peuvent résulter de cette situation dans l'envoi au Levant de forces militaires

³⁷ Catroux, *op cit*, pp 403-404.

³⁸ *ibid*, p 404.

françaises ... Nous trouverions, à son avis, dans la présence de troupes de souveraineté, le moyen de résister plus efficacement à des pressions hostiles que certaines autorités alliées seraient disposées à encourager. J'ai quelque peine à me rallier complètement à ce point de vue...³⁹

Catroux went on to cast considerable doubt on the wisdom of Helleu's suggestion for reinforcements. He argued that if the French military establishment in the Levant was reinforced by black troops, Arab nationalists would jump at the chance of denouncing France for her colonialism and her repressive tendencies. Equally, the use of contingents of North African Moslems would do little to prevent serious local reactions and moreover, would gravely upset North African opinion. It could only be by the use of European troops, with which the French army was not abundantly supplied, "qu'on pourrait sans trop d'inconvénients, manifester notre force pour n'avoir pas à nous en servir. Encore faudrait-il, dans ce dernier cas, faire parvenir ces renforts d'une manière progressive et avec beaucoup de discrétion".⁴⁰

Catroux preferred to align himself with the more moderate suggestions which Chataigneau and de Benoist had proposed during their recent visit to Algiers: "une déclaration faite sans retard par le Comité ... sur la question de l'attribution effective des avantages de l'indépendance à la Syrie et au Liban et aussi sur le problème de l'Unité Arabe". Catroux believed that France should anyway have a clear-cut position on these issues and that this approach represented the most skilful way of dealing with the problem. Whilst France had no desire to renege on her promise of independence, she had every right to remind the Levant States that juridically and

³⁹ Catroux à Massigli, 8 Novembre 1943, No 266, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

technically, the mandate still existed and it still belonged to France. Furthermore, the Syrians and Lebanese ought to be referred to Catroux's proclamations of 1941, which subordinated the concession of complete and total independence to the conclusion of a treaty.⁴¹

Catroux ended his note by offering his own solution to the situation in the Levant:

Il importe plus que jamais que nous témoignons en même temps que nous voulons satisfaire les aspirations des syriens et libanais et que ces satisfactions ne dépendent que de nous seuls. La Grande Bretagne a récemment pris la main du Liban. Il importe de montrer, d'une façon manifeste qu'elle a usurpé notre rôle et que ce rôle nous entendons l'exercer. Ainsi ramènerons-nous à la confiance de ce nombreux libanais et syriens qui nous sont sentimentalement attachés mais qui cessent de préférer la France à tout autre puissance, lorsque la France cesse d'affirmer ses droits éminents et prééminents.⁴²

If Helleu had been unsuccessful in persuading his superiors in Algiers of the need for more French troops in the Levant, he was more successful with another request. In view of the unilateral action which the Lebanese government appeared to be contemplating, Helleu urged the Committee to spell out the French position and to leave the Lebanese under no illusions about where they would stand if they proceeded. This resulted in a communiqué being drafted and communicated to Chataigneau, to the effect that the French would not recognise any unilateral revision of the constitution. Bechara el Khoury was subsequently shown a copy of the communiqué and strongly advised against its publication. He warned that it would leave the government with no option but to proceed with its legislative programme. Without further consultation with Algiers, the

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

Délégation Générale went ahead and published the communiqué on 5 November.⁴³ The Foreign Office considered this "an unwise move on the part of the French"; Wadsworth observed that it was a move bound to provoke bitter opposition.⁴⁴ Spears however, calmly announced that the Lebanese were about to publish their own communiqué which would reassert Lebanese rights to amend their own constitution and to announce that a Bill for the modification of certain provisions of the constitution was being submitted to the Chamber and would be put to the vote in a special Parliamentary session on 8 November. Riad Solh was reported to be "quite firm", and, having previously complied with French requests that the controversy should remain private, at least during Helleu's absence, to be glad that the French, by this public challenge, had given him a valid pretext to publicise the whole issue.⁴⁵

The Foreign Office was somewhat disturbed by this turn of events and thought that the French were behaving with "extraordinary ineptitude" by provoking what would certainly become a head-on clash "with a newly-elected and strongly nationalist government".⁴⁶ Moreover, there were niggling doubts about the exact rôle Spears had been playing throughout. Though designated the "honest-broker" by Casey, it is questionable just how honest he was being. There is precious little evidence to prove that he attempted to urge calm or compromise on either side, but more to prove that Spears and his advisers actively encouraged the Lebanese to

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 5 November 1943, No 619; Foreign Office minute, 6 November 1943; both in E6710/27/89, FO 371/35183. Wadsworth to Hull, 5 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1001-1002.

⁴⁵ Spears to Foreign Office, 5 November 1943, E6733/27/789, FO 371/35183.

⁴⁶ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 8 November 1943, E6736/27/89, FO 371/35183.

stand firm when their resolve was failing. While Spears scrupulously avoided mentioning such deeds to London, there were those at the Foreign Office who had their suspicions. As Sir Maurice Peterson lamented,

... I wish I could be more confident than I am that Sir E. Spears is holding the Syrians and Lebanese back. He has assured them -- prematurely and without authorisation -- that we will not allow the French to impose a treaty settlement on them before the end of the war and I don't suggest they need much encouragement to try to get everything now and to avoid the need for having a treaty at all.⁴⁷

Equally worrying to the Foreign Office was a report from Macmillan, who, as instructed, had spoken to Massigli about the Levant.⁴⁸ Massigli had taken the dressing down in good part and moreover, had even mentioned that he was contemplating the removal of Helleu and Boegner.⁴⁹ (Although Massigli may have been contemplating the removal of the two offending French officials, there was a *quid pro quo* in that he hoped to secure the removal of Spears whose "politique personelle was as troublesome as were the admitted faults of Helleu".⁵⁰) The disappearance from the Levant scene of Helleu and Boegner could only have been good news as far as

⁴⁷ Minute by Sir M. Peterson, 9 November 1943, E6736/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁴⁸ Macmillan refers to the meeting in his diaries, but makes no mention of a discussion on the Levant. He records merely having to chaff Massigli "out of his doldrums", occasioned by the exclusion of France from the European Advisory Commission. (See below), Macmillan, War Diaries, Entry for 2 November 1943, p 274.

⁴⁹ See also Casey to Foreign Office, 3 November 1943, E6810/27/89, FO 371/35183, in which Casey reported that Baron de Benoist had mentioned the possibility of Helleu's removal; also Rooker to Baxter, 23 October 1943, E6567/27/89, FO 371/35183 in which Rooker mentions information from Billotte to the same effect.

⁵⁰ Record of conversation between M. Massigli and Mr Macmillan, 2 November 1943, FO 660/37.

the Foreign Office was concerned, but depressingly, Macmillan's report added that it was clear that Massigli "does not accept in spirit the policy of giving back independence to Syria and Lebanon. He thinks our Arab and Colonial policy is misguided...".⁵¹

When Spears learned this, he was quick to point out that Massigli could not have been more emphatic when he had been in London in his assurances to the British of the French intention to honour the promise of independence to the Levant States. He commented that the Frenchman's views on the merits and demerits of Britain's Arab and colonial policy were of little relevance when what was at stake was the implementation of "solemn Allied promises already given".⁵² Hankey minuted:

It is most unfortunate that M. Massigli's ideas should be evolving in a sense unfavourable to the grant of independence to the Levant States and we can agree cordially with everything Sir E. Spears says about this. The trouble is that French views on Arab affairs necessarily tend to be coloured by their policy towards Arabs in North Africa, where the situation is totally different from what it is in Syria and the Lebanon. Further, General de Gaulle, who regards Syria and Lebanon as his peculiar preserve, has extremely stiff views on the whole subject".⁵³

A telegram was despatched to Macmillan, expressing concern at the reference to Massigli's weakening, as Britain could not allow the Free French to renege on their promise:

While we realise that they cannot fairly be asked to give up their whole position until a new and modified position has been secured for them by

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Spears to Foreign Office, 5 November 1943, No 621, E6736/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁵³ Minute by R. M. A. Hankey, 8 November 1943, E6736/27/89, FO 371/35183.

treaty, they can and should make gradual concessions and not stand deliberately on the status quo.⁵⁴

While the Foreign Office continued the "softly, softly" approach in Algiers, Spears had drafted what Casey considered was "a remarkably good letter" to Helleu, which seemed "to blow the French right out of the water". (When submitting the letter to London, Casey had the sense to acknowledge that perhaps the Foreign Office might not wish to do this.) Casey had persuaded Spears to await Eden's opinion before sending the letter.⁵⁵ The missive informed Helleu that the French claim to the continued exercise of the mandatory functions was viewed "as of the utmost gravity since it inevitably raises the whole question of the extent to which, were your position challenged in any quarter, the British authorities would feel justified in supporting you". The letter was never sent; presumably Eden refused to sanction its despatch. Casey informed Spears that during his stay in Cairo, Eden had been largely engaged on other matters. Casey however, had managed to broach the subject of the Levant at a Defence Committee meeting which Eden attended. He informed Spears that

the only guidance that emerged is that you should endeavour to induce the French to use discretion and tolerance in their handling of the Lebanese Government.

He added "Defence Committee were against the use of force by British troops in connection with potential disturbances".⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Foreign Office to Algiers, 10 November 1943, E6736/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁵⁵ Eden had spent the latter half of October in Moscow at the Foreign Ministers' Conference; he reached Cairo on 4 November, where he stayed several days, before eventually reaching England on 10 November.

⁵⁶ Casey to Spears, 7 November 1943, FO 226/246.

Casey, at least, had now become convinced that the Lebanese situation contained dangerous possibilities and had already surpassed the realm of local politics. On several occasions he stressed his belief to the Foreign Office that the matter ought to be "thrashed out in London on a high level" as soon as possible.⁵⁷ Yet again, on 10 November, he urged very early Anglo-French discussions in London, "if only for the purpose of counselling restraint and realism on the French". Most importantly, Casey seems to have been alive to the real need "to prevent a Franco-Lebanese-Syrian quarrel from developing into a quarrel between France and ourselves", though at this late stage, there was little he could do to achieve that.⁵⁸

iv) The Lebanese Challenge And The French Response

Despite the real dangers inherent in the situation, events were taking shape far too rapidly for discussions in London or anywhere else to have a salutary effect. On 6 November, the Bill designed to rid the Lebanese constitution of all vestiges of the mandate was circulated to the Lebanese deputies; a day later, members of the Lebanese government met with Saadullah Jabri and Jamil Mardam at Chtaura in the Lebanon and received the full backing of the Syrian government for their proposed actions.⁵⁹ The French meanwhile, were attempting to unsettle the Lebanese with a

⁵⁷ Casey to Foreign Office, 6 November 1943, E6894/27/89, FO 371/35184; Casey to Foreign Office, 8 November 1943, FO 226/246.

⁵⁸ Casey to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E6841/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁵⁹ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1003-1004. Saadullah Jabri and Jamil Mardam were returning from Cairo where they had attended discussions on Arab unity. At a meeting with Casey on 3 November, they had promised to go slow in their own battle for concessions from the French.

"whispering campaign" of "fausses nouvelles"; it was rumoured for example, that Helleu was to be replaced by a General bearing the title "Haut Commissaire", that North African troops were being despatched to the Levant, and even that de Gaulle was en route.⁶⁰ A telegram to Algiers observed with great satisfaction that Riad Solh was suffering considerable anxiety as a result of the violent press campaign that had been launched against him.⁶¹ On 7 November the French made a desperate but unsuccessful last minute attempt to sabotage Lebanese plans by trying to persuade various deputies to absent themselves from the Chamber the following day, which would render the session inquorate.⁶²

On 8 November, the day scheduled for the debate, Helleu telephoned Chataigneau from Cairo and instructed him to convey a message to the Lebanese government. He asked that the parliamentary session arranged for 3.00pm that afternoon be postponed until his proposed return on 10 November, as he possessed attractive new proposals, which he was sure would alter the situation completely. He warned that if the Lebanese confronted him with a fait accompli, he would be obliged to reserve complete liberty of judgment and action; he further stipulated that this should not be regarded as a threat, but rather as an expression of his desire "de définir franchement son attitude".⁶³ The Government regretfully refused to postpone the debate, but assured Chataigneau that they had no wish to impede any negotiations

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Beyrouth à Alger, 2 Novembre 1943, No 287-88, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 999.

⁶² Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1004.

⁶³ Catroux, *op cit*, p 405.

Helleu might wish to initiate upon his return.⁶⁴ Despite an atmosphere "tense with excitement", the Parliamentary session was "serious and orderly". An attempt by Eddé to stall matters, by proposing that the Bill be referred to a special Committee, failed. The Bill was eventually passed by forty eight votes to nil, with seven abstentions.

In the light of these events, on the evening of 8 November, General Holmes interviewed Général de Lavalade⁶⁵ about the internal security situation. De Lavalade remained "quite calm throughout" and insisted that the French would do "all in their power to avoid dissolving the Chamber". He warned however, that the French attitude must obviously depend on the instructions Helleu brought back from Algiers. He hinted curiously that it was possible that Helleu might anyway be removed, though his successor was unknown. Meanwhile, both he and Chataigneau were prepared to commence negotiations with the Levant States under three separate headings: those responsibilities which could be transferred immediately to the States, those which would require considerable discussion, and those reserved powers which could not be transferred until the war ended. De Lavalade went on to complain that it had been reported that Spears had apparently stated to a Lebanese deputy that the Lebanese would only be free once blood had begun to flow. Holmes reported that de Lavalade had threatened that "if Spears continued to urge the government to seize power as opposed to negotiating, he on his own initiative, [would] make a public scandal against [him]". Even though the French General realised that to do this would probably cost him his job, he had maintained that it would be a worthwhile

⁶⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 8 November 1943, E6776/27/89, FO 371/35183; Spears to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E7207/27/89, FO 371/35190; Catroux, *op cit*, p 405.

⁶⁵ Général de Lavalade: Commander in Chief of French forces in the Levant.

sacrifice. Holmes offered his personal opinion that "this time, the situation is considerably more serious than it has ever been before".⁶⁶

Spears, however, was busily heaping praise on the Lebanese. The Government had behaved, he asserted, "with exemplary restraint throughout", and, since the dispute had become public, had even managed to prevent the outbreak of any strikes or anti-French demonstrations.⁶⁷ For all their bravado, the Lebanese were extremely apprehensive about French reactions to their gesture of defiance in modifying the constitution. They sought assurances from both Wadsworth and Spears that they would offer some protection if French wrath were too great. Camille Chamoun pressed Wadsworth as to how the United States government would react in the event of any trouble provoked by precipitate or violent French action.⁶⁸ On the same day, two Ministers visited Spears, expressing concern that Helleu might proclaim himself High Commissioner on his return. They seemed disturbed at French action in suppressing all news reports of the Government's activities, and were anxious to know "what the attitude of the British Army would be in case the French suspended the Chamber or if there were disturbances?"⁶⁹ Both Wadsworth and Spears had replied evasively: the former had counselled against the use of force, whilst the latter had claimed that

⁶⁶ Holmes to Wilson, 8 November 1943, ADC 429, WO 201/984.

⁶⁷ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1003-1006; Spears to Foreign Office, 8 November 1943, E6811/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁶⁸ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1005.

⁶⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 9 November 1943, E6856/27/89, FO 371/35184.

it was impossible to discuss hypothetical cases and that anyway, responsibility for security lay with the Army.⁷⁰

Various incidents occurred which only made the Lebanese more ill at ease. Gautier, the head of Sûreté, was reported to have said that all was prepared for "effective reprisals".⁷¹ Helleu, contrary to his earlier statement, returned to Beirut on 9 November⁷², and announced rather ominously that he was studying how best to respond to the Lebanese act of defiance.⁷³ Then, on 10 November, the French suspended certain newspapers for specific periods and others *sine die*.⁷⁴ Even less auspiciously, the French Délégation suddenly took the "extraordinary step" of cancelling its invitations to the Lebanese government to an Armistice Day parade and ball on 11 November. Taken together, Spears alleged, these actions certainly lent colour to Lebanese apprehensions that the French were going to dissolve the Lebanese Parliament. To demonstrate solidarity with the Lebanese, Spears, in league with Wadsworth, arranged that members of the diplomatic corps would also absent themselves from the Armistice parade, though military representatives were to attend.⁷⁵ After hurried consultation with Casey, Spears informed the French that Britain was aware of, but

⁷⁰ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1005; Spears to Foreign Office, 9 November 1943, E6856/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁷¹ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1006.

⁷² Spears and Gaunson both state incorrectly that Helleu returned to Beirut on 10 November. See Spears, *op cit*, p 223 and Gaunson *op cit*, p 127.

⁷³ Catroux, *op cit*, p 405.

⁷⁴ Spears to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E6844/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁷⁵ Wadsworth to Hull, 10 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1009.

could not believe, the rumour that the dissolution of the Lebanese Parliament was being contemplated; if there was any truth in it, he earnestly begged them not to behave so rashly, certainly not until London had been informed and afforded the opportunity of representing its views to Algiers.⁷⁶

Casey himself continued to be seriously concerned at the way the situation was developing: in a telegram to London, he referred to a Defence Committee ruling of 7 October against the idea of British intervention in the Levant in the event of disturbances.⁷⁷ He anxiously sought confirmation that this was still the case, pointing out that if Britain intervened on behalf of the French, it would provoke an extremely angry Arab reaction. (Representatives of the Ninth Army had also made it plain that they would "view with strong distaste, necessity of British military intervention to support French repressive action".⁷⁸) Casey warned that the French should be left "under no illusions" about "the extent, if any, to which they can rely upon [Britain] for military support in the event of necessity". They should be warned "that if they provoke trouble, they shall do so at their own peril".⁷⁹

At an impromptu dinner at the British Legation in Beirut on the evening of 10 November, in honour of King Peter of

⁷⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E6830/27/89, FO 371/35183; Wadsworth to Hull, 10 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1009.

⁷⁷ The Foreign Office had not received a report of the proceedings of the Defence Committee to which Casey referred, and the reference therefore came as something of a surprise. See Foreign Office to Casey, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁷⁸ Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1005.

⁷⁹ Casey to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, E6841/27/89, FO 371/35183.

Yugoslavia, Spears himself repeatedly sought and received assurances from Helleu, who was a guest, that the French would do nothing likely to disturb the public order.⁸⁰ However, at approximately 4.00am on 11 November, the Lebanese President and practically his entire Cabinet⁸¹, were arrested by Sûreté agents accompanied by French marines, amongst whom, according to some reports, were Senegalese.⁸² At 8.00am that morning, Helleu broadcast two decrees, annulling the Lebanese government's constitutional amendments, dissolving the Chamber, suspending the Constitution pending fresh elections, and appointing Eddé as Head of State and Government.⁸³

v) Spears Demands British Martial Law

Helleu's actions dealt a fistful of aces to Spears, who from the outset, determined to play the game for all it was worth. When he telephoned Casey early on 11 November to inform him of the arrests, one of his first requests was that Casey should despatch a plane filled with journalists to arrive in Beirut before noon that day. He explained his suspicion that the French would almost certainly misrepresent events and try to make out that they were merely restoring order and putting right some irregularities committed by the Lebanese government. If however, some

⁸⁰ Spears, *op cit*, pp 224-226; Borden, *op cit*, pp 217-222.

⁸¹ Three ministers escaped arrest initially, though Adel Osseiran was captured later on 11 November, leaving only Mejid Arslan and Habib Abi Chahla at liberty.

⁸² On several occasions the French denied using Senegalese troops, though both General and Lady Spears insisted that they had done so.

⁸³ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, Nos 637 and 638, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35183; Wadsworth to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1011-1012.

journalists were flown in to witness events for themselves, Spears thought that it would be impossible for the French to claim that they were merely stepping in to restore order or to invent some other excuse to whitewash their action.⁸⁴

Spears also mentioned that all local papers had been heavily censored by the French, and had consequently appeared with massive blank spaces. His Press Attaché, W. Allen, "took a very intelligent initiative" and paid for those spaces to be filled with the wavelength of El Ahram, a wireless station operating from Palestine, which duly broadcast uncensored accounts of events supplied by the Spears Mission, and carried across the frontier by military motor-cyclists.⁸⁵ These conscious and active decisions to publicise events were certainly not the actions of a friendly ally, who should have been more concerned to play down the happenings and to work untiringly for a quick and peaceful solution to the crisis.

The arrests only confirmed for Spears his opinion that the French were "utterly irresponsible". Beirut was naturally "in an uproar": the Parliament and the Petit Sérail had been occupied by French troops; two French lorries and a large effigy of de Gaulle had been set alight; one person had already been killed and three others wounded in various incidents⁸⁶. The town had been plastered during the night with posters of de Gaulle and Stalin to create the

⁸⁴ Spears, *op cit*, p 228-29. Wadsworth mentions that he was due to see six foreign correspondents on 12 November, "flown here today in British plane from Cairo at Spears' suggestion". Wadsworth to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1017.

⁸⁵ Spears, *loc cit*.

⁸⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, Nos 637 and 638, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35183.

impression that the French had Russian support⁸⁷; large crowds were surging around the streets shouting "Down with France" and tearing down the posters. Though General Wilson reported that nothing had yet interfered with British communications or vital military interests, it was feared that if trouble did spread to Syria, the French would be incapable of dealing with it.⁸⁸

Spears had already received several visits from worried Lebanese, pleading for British military assistance.⁸⁹ Since 7.00am on 11 November, he himself had been urging Casey and the Commander-in-Chief to impose British martial law, as the "only way of preventing most serious riots at a most critical military juncture".⁹⁰ He argued that the very assumption of control by the British would have an immediately calming effect⁹¹; he stressed however, that there

⁸⁷ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6857/27/89, FO371/35183.

⁸⁸ Commander-in-Chief, Middle East to War Office, 11 November 1943, E6870/27/89, FO 371/35184; Wilson to CIGS, 11 November 1943, CC/1166, WO 201/984.

⁸⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, E6857/27/89, and E6859/27/89; all in FO 371/35184.

⁹⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, No 637, E6848/27/89 and Casey to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6881/27/89; both in FO 371/35184. The Allied military situation in the Aegean had deteriorated during the late summer with the German capture of Kos, Leros and Rhodes. Allied troops were heavily committed in the Italian campaign, but Churchill, who was convinced that to ignore the position in the Eastern Mediterranean was a cardinal error in strategy, was demanding action to restore the situation; plans for action were being hampered by Turkey's refusal to allow the Allies use of Turkish airfields.

⁹¹ Wadsworth, in discussing the possibility of disturbances, had predicted that if British military police were to appear on the streets, "they would probably be met with cheers rather than any bricks not thrown at the French". Wadsworth to Hull, 9 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1005. This was borne out to a certain extent: see Report by CSM, 268 FS Section, 12 November 1943, WO 201/983,

must be no dilly-dallying, for to merely threaten the imposition of martial law without actually carrying out the threat, would be "fatal".⁹²

Casey was in fact unclear about the exact implications of a declaration of martial law. He believed that it would involve taking over the Lebanese government, thereby bringing British troops into conflict with both the French and the Lebanese; Spears was obliged to explain to him that it would only mean that Britain assumed the military command. Orders would be issued to the French and to the local gendarmerie, but the government would not be taken over.⁹³ A Defence Committee meeting in Cairo on 11 November at 10.00am however, reaffirmed that British troops should not be employed unless and until martial law was declared; this would only be possible should the French advise that they were unable to control the situation, or if the disorder threatened preparations for impending operations.⁹⁴ For the moment, then, Casey managed to restrain Spears from clamouring too loudly for the imposition of martial law; instead, he advised that Spears should lodge a formal protest with the French. Casey certainly realised very quickly the need for Spears to tread with extreme care, given that, as far as the French were concerned, his position was already compromised. One of the Minister of State's first actions as the crisis broke was to contact Churchill and to warn him that the French would somehow seek

which described "the complete immunity of British personnel who were indeed invariably cheered by the mob".

⁹² Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6871/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁹³ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943; Casey to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943; both in E6871/27/89, FO 371/35184.

⁹⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, KK138, E6881/27/89, FO 371/35184. See also Lord Casey, *op cit*, p 144.

to saddle Spears with the blame for events in the Lebanon. He expressed confidence that the Prime Minister would not be so easily misled.⁹⁵

The Foreign Office was somewhat taken aback by the sudden turn of events. It had never received minutes of the meeting of the Defence Committee on 7 October, at which it had been decided that British troops should not become involved in the event of disturbances in the Levant. Casey's request for confirmation of this ruling was therefore a little puzzling, especially when followed only a day later by Spears's telegram demanding the imposition of martial law. A reply had been despatched to Casey, pointing out that given the current situation, it was "not practicable" for Britain to announce that she had no intention, under any circumstances, of taking steps to maintain order. Her own military security required calm and if necessary, Britain would have to intervene, though preferably under a declaration of *état de siège* rather than martial law.⁹⁶ For the moment though, the Foreign Office wanted assurances from the French and the Lebanese that they would do everything possible to reach a *modus vivendi*; otherwise, Britain would call a conference to which the French, the Levant States and the Americans would be invited, to try, once and for all, to effect a settlement.⁹⁷

This telegram was copied to Macmillan in Algiers who was furthermore instructed to urge the French to withdraw

⁹⁵ Casey to Churchill, MOS/102, 11 November 1943, PREM 3/421. This telegram is printed in full in Spears, *op cit*, p 232.

⁹⁶ It had been agreed with the French that they could declare an *état de siège* on their own authority in the case of internal disturbance, but must also do so at Britain's request.

⁹⁷ Foreign Office to Casey, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35183.

Helleu as Délégué Général immediately, and to release the arrested Ministers in order to facilitate the early reassembly of the Chamber. He was to warn the French that British troops would intervene to restore order should circumstances demand. Additionally, Macmillan was to draw Massigli's attention to the very dim view the Foreign Office took of "the fact that the French should have chosen to use M. Helleu to carry out this coup d'état, although M. Massigli himself had just indicated that M. Helleu was to be replaced".⁹⁸

In a further telegram, it was pointed out that the situation had been caused by "grave blunders and lack of judgment on both sides". Whilst the Lebanese were certainly not blameless, the French had behaved "even more foolishly". In Egypt between 1922 and 1936, Britain herself had faced a similar situation to that which now confronted the Committee. She however, had proceeded to make "gradual and extensive concessions to Egyptian independence, whilst retaining enough in hand ... to conclude the Treaty of Alliance in 1936".⁹⁹ In Foreign Office opinion, there was no reason whatsoever why the French should not make certain concessions to the Lebanese and several were suggested,

⁹⁸ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35183.

⁹⁹ The Egyptian analogy used so repeatedly by the Foreign Office aroused considerable criticism in the Levant. Bennett, a Middle Eastern official pointed out its invalidity: Britain's position in Egypt was based on her Protectorate, and she was under no international obligation to concede independence to Egypt. France's position in the Levant however, was derived from the mandate. He argued that France could not have it both ways: "They cannot be allowed at the same time to invoke the rights conferred on them by the mandate ... and escape the obligations". What was sauce for the goose was also sauce for the gander, and if the French claimed their rights under the mandate, Britain was equally entitled to insist that they fulfilled their obligations under it. Note by Bennett, 13 November 1943, forwarded by Brigadier Clayton to D. W. Lascelles, FO 226/246.

including the return of the Intérêts Communs, the abrogation of various French decrees, a reduction in the numbers of French officials, and even certain constitutional amendments. Above all, the French should clearly understand that

their recent violent attitude [had] put them so far in the wrong, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make allowance for such provocation as they may have received.¹⁰⁰

vi) Reprimanding The French

Responsibility for actually issuing a protest to the French in Algiers fell to Roger Makins, Macmillan's assistant, due to the Minister Resident's temporary absence in Italy.¹⁰¹ Makins duly saw Massigli early on 12 November and expressed British concern about events in Beirut. Massigli however, claimed to be without information: he could tell Makins only that Helleu had been instructed to inform the Lebanese government that the Committee was prepared to ratify provisionally the 1936 Treaties of Alliance, and would thereafter negotiate on any amendments the States might wish to press. He insisted that the Lebanese had themselves thrown down the gauntlet, by passing their Reform Bill and defying French wishes. They had done this, he maintained, with British support and encouragement. Makins denied the accusation against Britain, and expressed his deep regret that the French had allowed themselves to be

¹⁰⁰ Foreign Office to Macmillan, 11 November 1943, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184. Spears mistakenly asserts that this telegram was sent on 13 November. Spears, *op cit*, p 241.

¹⁰¹ Since the Italian surrender in September, Macmillan had been obliged to devote more and more time to Italian affairs.

provoked into an action, "the consequences of which might be difficult to repair".¹⁰²

Spears was infuriated by the reprimand the Foreign Office had seen fit to administer to the French. He considered it insufficiently deprecatory and instructed Lascelles to draft a retort to the Foreign Office of the sort "to finish off Peterson once and for all".¹⁰³ The telegram he composed, which evidently satisfied Spears, announced that it was "depressing" that attempts were still being made, in spite all that had occurred,

to whitewash the French and to insinuate that the Lebanese are nearly as much to blame for the present crisis.

The "grave blunder" committed by the Lebanese, had been their assumption that, having been described as "sovereign and independent", they could behave as such and amend their own constitution, without seeking the prior consent of the power that had so described them. By way of comparison, French foolishness

has consisted *inter alia*, in arresting the President and members of the Government, at dead of night, and removing them to an unknown destination, forcibly closing the Chamber and in letting loose hordes of French, native and black troops, on an unarmed population...¹⁰⁴

Whilst the telegram did not exactly finish off Peterson, it certainly provoked considerable irritation: Hankey found it "aggravating, to say the least". Britain's aim was to

¹⁰² Makins to Foreign Office, 12 November 1943, E6902/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁰³ Spears, *op cit*, p 242.

¹⁰⁴ Beirut to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6948/27/89, FO 371/35185. This telegram is printed in full in Spears, *op cit*, p 242-43.

unite France and the Levant States by a treaty, but with Spears at Beirut, that policy was "completely ineffective". Hankey was sufficiently annoyed to record his opinion that

we shall continue to have trouble in the Levant States, until we have a representative there who is able to use effective influence with the French authorities there, in pushing them along the right way, and who, (from whatever cause) is not *persona non grata* with them.¹⁰⁵

In the Levant meanwhile, Spears had, with bad grace, consented to lodge a protest with the French. As he was quick to point out, it was "purely for the record and will have no practical effect, as the French are obviously acting on instructions from Algiers".¹⁰⁶ Even though Casey had insisted on the protest, he too, was inclined to share this view: he thought Helleu would never have acted as he had done unless so instructed by the Committee and he stressed to London that probably only representations from both Britain and the United States would now remedy the situation in Beirut.¹⁰⁷ When making his own protest to Baron de Benoist in Cairo, Casey was remarkably conciliatory. According to the Baron's report, he had made it quite plain

que les anglais n'étaient pour rien dans les actuelles difficultés franco-libanaises, et qu'il avait donné instructions à M. Spears de prêcher instamment le calme des deux côtés.

When de Benoist had replied that the matter was strictly Franco-Lebanese, and that if Britain wanted to help France, the best thing for her to do would be to refrain from all

¹⁰⁵ Minutes by R. M. A. Hankey, 14 and 15 November 1943, E6948/27/89, FO 371/35185.

¹⁰⁶ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, No 638, E6848/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹⁰⁷ Casey to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, KK 138, E6881/27/89, FO 371/35184.

intervention, Casey had expressed entire agreement. His whole manner had been such that de Benoist formed the impression "que l'attitude de M. Casey en ce qui concerne les affaires du Levant en général, est parfaitement loyale et mesurée".¹⁰⁸

Spears eventually managed to transmit his letter of protest to Helleu through an intermediary, as the Délégué refused on a series of contradictory pretexts to see him before 5.00pm that day.¹⁰⁹ The letter expressed Britain's grave concern and indignation at the French action. It noted that the arrests had been carried out in such a way as would surely revolt public opinion worldwide. Furthermore, it reproached Helleu for having given his word as late as midnight on 10 November, that he would avoid any action liable to disturb the peace. Only hours later, he had proceeded with steps which were almost certain to cause disorder and impede the war effort. Spears left it to Helleu

to imagine the effect which these inadmissibly dictatorial measures, taken against a small and defenceless people, [would] inevitably have upon enlightened public opinion in the great democracies.

¹⁰⁸ Baron de Benoist à Alger, 11 Novembre 1943, No 236, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1005.

¹⁰⁹ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November, E6871/27/89, FO 371/35184. Unlike Spears, Wadsworth managed to see Helleu at 6.00pm on 11 November. He expressed his concern about the French action and its probable effect on neighbouring Arab countries. Helleu saw no basis for concern "unless others fished in troubled waters". From this and further conversation, Wadsworth established that Helleu was referring to the British, who he was convinced were trying to oust the French from the Levant. This fear and an imperialistic desire to retain a hold on the Levant, Wadsworth reported, "constitutes ... [the] two basic motives prompting present French action". Wadsworth to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, pp 1018-1019.

"Your language entirely approved", the Foreign Office commented.¹¹⁰

Not so by Helleu, who decided that the letter had been phrased "en termes violents et discourtois", such that he regarded it as "nulle et non avenue".¹¹¹ In an "acid reply" he informed Spears accordingly, commenting that his honour "se passe des leçons", and alleging that Spears's version of events was inexact.¹¹² Indeed, Helleu took great pains to emphasise to Algiers that rumours that he had formally assured Spears that he would do nothing to cause disorder were being spread, merely to cast him in "le mauvais rôle", as the villain of the piece. He categorically denied ever having given such an assurance to Spears but claimed that what he had actually stressed to him was

que je n'admettais pas d'avoir été placé devant le fait accompli et que ce ne serait certainement pas par moi si l'ordre était troublé ... J'insiste encore une fois sur ce fait.¹¹³

Helleu evidently felt very strongly about the matter as he asked Baron de Benoist to lodge a complaint with Casey about the note. De Benoist protested that Spears's letter had been "couched in objectionable terms", but Casey replied that on the contrary, it had been "formal" and "restrained". Once again, Casey did his utmost to impress upon de Benoist

¹¹⁰ Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943; Foreign Office to Spears, 12 November 1943; both in E6867/27/89, FO 371/35184; see also Spears, *op cit*, pp 235-36.

¹¹¹ Helleu à Alger, 11 Novembre 1943, No 331-32, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

¹¹² Wadsworth to Hull, 11 November 1943, FRUS, 1943, Vol IV, p 1018; Helleu à Spears, 11 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468; Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, E6904/27/89, FO 371/35184.

¹¹³ Helleu à Alger, 12 Novembre 1943, No 343, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1575.

Britain's assurances of goodwill. This time however, de Benoist formed a less favourable impression: Casey seemed to be "un homme fasciné par Spears" and his ability to exert any real influence over matters, was therefore drastically reduced. He reported that even one of the Minister of State's own staff had commented: "Casey, en face de Spears, c'est l'histoire du lapin devant le serpent"¹¹⁴, a verdict with which the Foreign Office would have been inclined to agree.

Helleu himself subsequently wrote at length to Casey in much the same vein as his letter to Algiers. He claimed that he had merely informed Spears that he could not tolerate being faced with a fait accompli. The letter continued:

Je voulais seulement indiquer au Général Spears que j'ignorais point la campagne d'excitation contre la France à laquelle se livraient ses agents; je comprends qu'il puisse être commode pour le Général Spears de me placer dans le rôle de parjure, mais je dois vous exprimer ma profonde surprise de voir un Ministre de Gouvernement de Sa Majesté employer semblable procédé envers le représentant d'une puissance amie et alliée.¹¹⁵

Helleu claimed not to have consulted Spears before deciding upon the arrests because of his perpetually unfriendly attitude towards the French, which countless representations in London had failed to improve. He drew Casey's attention to what he deemed a great irony: Spears had criticised French measures as liable to disturb public order, yet radio stations in Cairo and Jerusalem "fassent chorus avec les émissions allemands" and were transmitting false information which could only agitate public opinion and provoke trouble.

¹¹⁴ Casey to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, E6928/27/89, FO 371/35185; Baron de Benoist à Alger, 13 Novembre 1943, No 238, Guerre 1939-45, Alger CFLN, Vol 1312.

¹¹⁵ Helleu à Casey, 13 Novembre 1943, Papiers Massigli, Vol 1468.

This seemed to Helleu "difficilement conciliable avec la préoccupation si souvent manifesté du côté britannique de tout subordonner à l'effort de guerre". France had every right, he asserted, to resort to measures which Britain herself had readily employed and would doubtless use again in similar circumstances.¹¹⁶ Helleu evidently sought to make as much as he possibly could of the note of protest from Spears to deflect attention from his own actions. Meanwhile, diplomatic relations with Spears were conveniently reduced to a state of limbo during the next few days.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*